

Knowledge, Recollection, and the Forms in *Republic VII*

Michael T. Ferejohn

I

Not only Platonic epistemology, but also more generally epistemology itself as a distinct field of study, can plausibly be viewed as an outgrowth of a rather pragmatically motivated type of investigation often conducted by the character of Socrates in Plato's earlier dialogues.¹ Notoriously, Socrates' conversations in these works are centered almost exclusively on the practical issues of identifying, embracing, and promulgating the best possible, i.e., the most virtuous, form of human life. The immediate problem he faces, however, is that he perceives no shortage of people in Athens who profess themselves, or are reputed among others, to possess sufficient expertise to speak authoritatively on such matters. One of Socrates' chief concerns, then, is to figure out how to distinguish effectively between the genuine expert in ethical matters – the authentically wise person whose advice should be followed – and various false claimants to this position.

In approaching this task, Socrates quite naturally proceeds by attempting to formulate necessary conditions, or *tests*, for the possession of genuine expertise. In the first instance he is principally concerned with distinguishing between genuine experts and mere pretenders in ethical matters. However, it appears that he sees this distinction as applying to other fields as well, since in some passages he clearly takes up the more general issue of what conditions a genuine expert would have to satisfy in any field whatsoever.²

As it happens, these early Platonic texts record hardly any visible progress in this endeavor. Socrates evidently can do little more than insist that a genuine expert would be able to adequately defend and explain not just the views he

espouses, but his entire manner of life,³ in the rough and tumble of Socratic elenctic interrogation. But this test of “elenctic survival,” the ability to avoid being caught up in contradictions or other sorts of “incongruencies” is essentially negative in character, and in any case is too dependent upon the competence of whoever happens to be conducting the interrogation. However, as Plato moves through this earlier stage, into the *Meno*, and towards his middle period, the topic undergoes two important transformations. In the first place, the issue is now “depersonalized”. Whereas in the *Euthyphro* or the *Ion* it seems to be important in itself for Socrates to show that his interlocutor is either a fraud or a fool (depending on whether he is merely deceiving others, or himself as well, in professing wisdom), in other settings he poses the issue of testing expertise in a more impersonal manner, by asking what conditions *anyone* would have to satisfy to be counted a genuine expert. Often he does this by resorting to the use of the first person plural. For example, at *Laches* 186a–b he includes himself (along with his two principal interlocutors) among those who must be tested for expertise in the matter of identifying and imparting courage, even though he himself never claims to have any expertise whatsoever in this field.

The second, equally significant, transformation of this Socratic “proto-epistemology” occurs in the *Meno* itself. In such dialogues as the *Ion* and *Laches* Socrates had been exploring the issue of what chronic characteristics an alleged expert must possess in order to be certified as genuine, where the idea seems to be that once certified, the expert’s deliverances could generally be counted as authoritative.⁴ By contrast, in the last part of the *Meno* Socrates appears to be more narrowly focused on the question of what conditions must obtain in order for a person to be said to possess knowledge – as opposed to mere true belief – *on a given occasion*. This “episodic” perspective is especially evident at 97a–d. There, recalling Meno’s earlier agreement that virtue – considered as a chronic psychological condition – should be classified as “a sort of wisdom” (88d), and therefore as a kind of knowledge, Socrates then brings in the additional datum that virtue, whatever it is, must be *useful*. He then challenges his own earlier identification of virtue with a species of knowledge by pointing out that if you were simply interested in getting from one place to another, it would not make any difference, from a purely *practical* point of view, whether you consulted someone who really *knew* the way to the desired destination or someone who merely had an ill-founded opinion on the subject that happened to be true.

This Platonic movement from the chronic to the episodic perspectives on knowledge, however, is both incomplete and temporary. For even in the *Meno* passage just discussed, after arguing that there is no *practical* difference between knowledge and mere true belief (again, considered episodically), Socrates immediately goes on to make a *conceptual* distinction between the two by invoking the image of the self-moving statues of Daedalus. He likens them to mere true belief the grounds that, insofar as they are not “fastened” (*dedemena*) they are worth little because they do not “remain” (*paramenei*) but instead tend to “run

away” (*apodidraskēi*). On the other hand, he continues, genuine knowledge would be analogous to such a statue that *was* “fastened,” and would therefore have a much greater value.

In a moment we will need to consider what exactly is this metaphorical “tying up” that is supposed to transform true belief into knowledge. However, the important point to notice immediately is that by making the distinction between cognitive items that “remain” and others that “run away” in order to characterize the superior reliability of knowledge over belief, Plato has quietly reverted to thinking in terms of chronic conditions of the knowing subject rather than identifying the conditions under which someone holding a given true belief *on a particular occasion* can be classified as a case of knowledge. What’s more, as we shall see, when he returns in the middle books of the *Republic* to this task of making a conceptual distinction between knowledge and mere true belief, he again does so by identifying a certain standing condition of the knowing subject (namely, familiarity with the Forms) that is achieved by means of a long and difficult educational process.

Nonetheless, this temporary engagement in the *Meno* with the episodic conception of knowledge does provide Plato with an opportunity to formulate for the first time what has since become the “traditional” conception of knowledge as the possession of true belief together with the right sort of justification. In the passage immediately following his introduction of the automatic statues, he makes the following intriguing remark concerning the epistemological analogue to the “fastening” of the statues.

[Mere] true beliefs are not worth much until one fastens them with *accounts of causes* [*aitias logismō*] But this process, dear Meno, is recollection [*anamnēsis*], as we have agreed in our previous discussion. (98a)

I characterize this remark as intriguing, not as especially illuminating. For even though it certainly brings to mind much recent discussion concerning the nature of knowledge and its difference from true belief, Plato himself does nothing in the *Meno*, or anywhere else in his early works, to make clear exactly what he means in this passage by an “account of the cause.”⁵ So even though Plato here puts his finger on what eventually turned out to be an insight of signal importance in the history of epistemology, that the ability to explain *why* a proposition is true is a necessary condition for knowing that it is, he evidently lacks the theoretical resources at this point to say what exactly this condition amounts to because he had not yet thought through the issue of what constitutes an adequate explanation.

Somewhat paradoxically, one thinker who apparently was deeply influenced by Plato’s suggestion of *Meno* 98a was his own best student in the Academy. For even though Aristotle himself shows little interest in mathematical research, in his *Analytics* he nonetheless develops and refines this Platonic insight by bring-

ing together observed features of contemporary geometrical method with a theory of deduction of his own invention to develop a “foundationalist” conception of epistemic justification, or what he calls “demonstration” (*apodeixis*), as a truth-preserving (and hence, necessity-preserving) sequence of syllogistic inferences grounded exclusively upon the appropriate sort of “first principles” (*archai*).⁶ It is thus something of an historical curiosity that his teacher, who evidently *was* an avid and accomplished geometer, looks in an entirely different direction when he himself returns to the issue of distinguishing knowledge and belief in the *Republic*. That direction is the metaphysics of Forms.

II

Plato is rightly regarded as a highly systematic philosopher, and the *Republic* is rightly regarded as one of his most systematic works. This is because the dialogue touches on topics in nearly every area of philosophy, yet it remains from beginning to end a work in ethics. More specifically, the work presents us with a sustained attempt to do two things: (1) elucidate the nature of justice as a condition of the human soul and (2) demonstrate that justice, so understood, is beneficial to its possessor.

This is certainly not to deny that other philosophical topics have genuine independent interest for Plato, but his treatments of them are always eventually brought to bear on this central concern with ethics. The example of this most familiar to general readers of the *Republic* is perhaps in the area of the political theory, where Plato’s extensive theorizing on the characteristics of the best form of political state is undertaken for the sake of identifying the nature of justice in a human soul. However, the point applies equally to more technical and esoteric parts of philosophy as well. For although the *Republic* can undoubtedly stand on its own as a classical sourcebook in both epistemology and metaphysics, Plato’s forays into these areas are never undertaken simply for their own sake. Rather, the metaphysical doctrines of the dialogue are specifically designed to provide an ontological underpinning for the epistemology, and inasmuch as Plato’s foremost epistemological concern in the work is with knowledge of objective *value*, his work in both of these areas is ultimately done in the service of his central ethical project. Plato’s subordination of metaphysics to epistemology will be our chief concern here.

Some features of Plato’s metaphysically-based epistemology are relatively easy to discern and also relatively unproblematic, in particular those pertaining to the highest reaches in the field of epistemic states posited by the theory. Plato’s ethics and political theory both require the real possibility of an exceptionally reliable human capacity to make correct ethical judgments, which can then be utilized in the proper sort of governance of a well-functioning political state or a well-developed ethical person. Plato’s pivotal idea is that if such ethical judgments are

not to be “fleeting” in the manner of Daedalus’ statues⁷ they must have as their objects entities with natures that are sufficiently fixed, stable, and determinate. Now since Plato believes both that such knowledge is possible, and that the sensible world is utterly lacking in this sort of entity, he is led to postulate the existence of such stable entities “elsewhere”: in a place “separated” from the world presented by the senses.⁸ It thus appears that Plato’s best-known philosophical invention, the Theory of Forms, was designed specifically for this epistemological purpose. In *Republic* VI and VII, he deploys two complementary expository devices, the Divided Line diagram, and the allegory of the Cave, to describe an epistemic ascent, made possible by the long and arduous educational process mentioned earlier, culminating in a condition wherein one enjoys direct acquaintance with the Forms, the highest sort of knowledge. First, near the end of Book VI he invites his interlocutor, Glaucon, to imagine a diagram of a line that is first bisected into unequal segments, each of which is then also bisected unequally in the same proportions. Socrates asserts that this diagram may be taken to represent a fourfold classification of hierarchically ordered sorts of cognition, each with its appropriate type of object. The initial, major division in the diagram is meant to represent the distinction between knowledge (*epistémē*), which has as its proper objects intelligible entities (*noēta*), and opinion (*doxa*), which has as its objects visible things (*horata*), and the unequal proportions are intended to represent different degrees of “clarity” (*saphêneia*), which has now evidently replaced the *Meno*’s criterion of “being fastened” (*dedemenon*) as what distinguishes knowledge from lesser types of true belief.

The purpose of the diagram, however, is not simply to classify these kinds of cognition, but also to indicate how it might be possible to move from the lower to the higher states it represents. Socrates begins his exposition by focusing on the lower two sections, which together comprise the realm of opinion. Here he trades on the fact that Glaucon is already conversant with the distinction within the sensible realm between such two-dimensional entities as shadows, reflections, etc., which he refers to collectively as “images” (*eikones*), and the three-dimensional physical objects of which such things are representations. On this basis, Socrates then introduces the two higher sections of the line, with which Glaucon is not familiar, by means of a simple analogy: “as the opinable is to the knowable so is the likeness to that of which it is a likeness” (510a).

The point of the analogy is evidently that by fixing on the relation between a “likeness” and what it represents as it applies within the visible realm, one can gain at least a glimmering of the central tenet of Plato’s theory, namely that the entire visible realm itself is but a collection of likenesses of a higher order of “intelligible” entities.

At the beginning of *Republic* VII, Socrates then goes on to offer a second and more dramatic presentation of the same theory. He describes an imaginary situation in which a number of people are imprisoned within a subterranean cavern. They are shackled in a sitting position so that their entire field of vision

is limited to the cavern wall in front of them. Above and behind them (and therefore outside their sight), stands a low wall, and beyond that a walkway across which carved likenesses of various sorts of natural objects are conveyed back and forth in such a manner that they, but not their bearers, protrude over the top of the wall, “in the style of the puppeteers” (514b).⁹ Finally, at the rear of the cavern is a fire that projects shadows of these artifacts upon the front wall, so that these shadows are the only “entities” ever perceived by the prisoners. At 515a Glaucon immediately remarks upon the strangeness of the image, whereupon Socrates replies that they are “like us” (*homoious hēmin*). We shall return to this later.

With the initial elements of the allegory in place, Socrates first garners Glaucon’s agreement that these prisoners would naturally believe that these shadows were the only real (and therefore the most real) entities (515b–c), and then introduces a new phase of the allegory. He now asks Glaucon to imagine that for some unspecified reason one of the prisoners is released from his bonds, compelled to stand, look about, and see the situation in the cave as it really is, and then dragged forcefully up a steep and difficult ascent out of the cave and into the world above. After some initial period of habituation, he comes to apprehend first reflections of men and other things, then those things themselves, after that the stars and the moon, and finally the sun itself.¹⁰ Socrates and Glaucon then agree that during this sequence of revelations the protagonist would first come to understand that the shadows that he had regarded as the most real things were in fact merely representations of things that are *more* real, namely the artifacts conveyed along the wall, and eventually that these things themselves were but representations of even greater realities, namely the “men and other things” residing in the upper realm (515d–e). Now insofar as the division between the cave and the upper realm in this story no doubt corresponds to the main distinction between the realms of opinion and knowledge in the Divided Line diagram, we can plausibly regard the allegory as reinforcing the Divided Line passage in depicting an epistemic ascent from mere opinion of sensible things to knowledge of intelligible realities, which are, of course, the Forms.

III

While the epistemological function of the Forms is relatively clear in the case of the highest sort of cognition introduced by these passages in the *Republic*,¹¹ it is not nearly so obvious what role, if any, they play in the occurrence of lower-level cognitive states within Plato’s overall epistemology. Perhaps most conspicuously, there is the question of whether, in holding that the Forms are eminently suitable objects of knowledge, Plato means thereby to deny that there can be knowledge of sensible objects as well.¹² This restriction certainly seems to be suggested by the most straightforward and natural reading of an argument given at

the end of *Republic* V (at 477–9), which seems to rely on a principle that different capacities (*dunameis*) (including epistemic capacities such as knowledge and belief) must have different sorts of objects. On the other hand, if one keeps in mind my earlier observation that the epistemology of the *Republic* is subordinated to its paramount ethical concerns, this interpretation becomes problematic. For if Plato's ultimate purpose in positing the Forms is so that he can argue that knowledge of them can be *applied* to make highly reliable ethical judgments, then since these judgments presumably pertain to issues and circumstances in the sensible world, someone who had come to know the Forms should consequently have a much more reliable basis for judging things *in the sensible world* than someone who had never made the ascent. Indeed, Plato seems to suggest as much at *Republic* 520c, where Socrates remarks that when the prisoner who had been released later returned to cave he would be able to discern the shadows therein "immeasurably better" (*muriô beltion*) than those who had remained shackled. Now if Plato still maintains in the *Republic*, as he had in the *Meno*, that what distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief is a higher degree of reliability, it is hard to imagine why he would deny that such application of Form-knowledge to the sensible world is itself a type of knowledge.¹³

IV

This issue of ascertaining what role the Forms play in judgments concerning sensible things *after* one has completed the epistemic ascent of *Republic* VI and VII has been much discussed in the recent literature, and I shall not have more to say about it here. Instead, I want to focus on yet another question about the epistemological function of the Forms that has received much less attention, namely whether the Forms figure in any way at all in judgments concerning sensible things formed by people who have *not* made the ascent described in *Republic* VI and VII (and in almost all cases, never will). Here there can be no question about whether such imperfect judgments might qualify as knowledge; they clearly should be classified as cases of mere opinion, even if they turned out to be true. But on the other hand, the simple fact that none of these beliefs rises to the exceptionally high level of reliability required for knowledge in Plato's system doesn't by itself entail that he regards them all as *equally* defective. He could still believe it possible to rank them as better and worse according to their accuracy, reasonableness, or other some positive epistemic value. If he does, it may be because he thinks the superiority of some of these beliefs over others is connected in some way with the existence of the Forms.

David Bostock has offered perhaps the clearest articulation of the view that the Forms are involved in pre-philosophical cognition, in his book on Plato's *Phaedo*.¹⁴ In discussing an argument for the Forms advanced by Socrates at *Phaedo* 74–6, Bostock suggests that Plato works with a two-level theory of

knowledge. On the one hand, there is the fully conscious knowledge of the Forms represented by the top section of the Divided Line diagram and the upper world in the Cave allegory. This, according to Bostock, is “proper philosophic knowledge of [Forms],” which “involves the ability to give an account.”¹⁵ As I suggested above, virtually no interpreter disagrees with this. However, Bostock argues further that Plato also recognizes a lower grade of knowledge as well: “ordinary humdrum knowledge which *everyone* has, simply as a result of being reminded: there is no special limitation to philosophers in this claim.”¹⁶

Bostock’s phrase “being reminded” here explicitly links the issue of whether the Forms have any epistemic role to play in pre-philosophical cognition with another component of Plato’s metaphysically-based epistemology that has so far remained in the background, the doctrine of “recollection” (*anamnēsis*). This doctrine first appears in the *Meno*¹⁷ as a reaction to a Meno’s complaint at 80d that Socrates’ attempt to learn the nature of virtue, indeed attempting to learn anything at all, is a futile enterprise. Conceiving of inquiry as an attempt to find something, namely the answer to the question one is pursuing, Meno argues that either we already know what we are seeking, in which case our search cannot discover it (and no learning occurs), or we do not know what we are seeking, in which case we will not recognize it even if we happen to come upon it (so that, again, no learning occurs).

Socrates first agrees at 80d–e that this is indeed a formidable epistemological quandary, and then proceeds to respond to it obliquely by means of a well-known pedagogical experiment. He commandeers one of Meno’s young household slaves, determines that the boy has had no previous mathematical training whatsoever, then presents him with a moderately difficult geometrical problem. The boy first impetuously makes a couple of uneducated guesses, which Socrates quickly refutes. He then presents the boy with a diagram of the problem and leads him through a series of questions about it, and at the end of which the boy is able to give the correct answer to Socrates’ initial question. Socrates then declares that since he himself did nothing except pose questions to the boy, he could not have given him the answer,¹⁸ and concludes that the answer must have been “within” the boy even before the experiment began, and that his own questioning simply caused him to remember an answer he already possessed.

Bostock’s view is that Plato in fact recognizes two grades of recollection of the Forms. On the one hand, there is the fully explicit and complete sort of recollection that is achieved by a long and arduous educational process described in *Republic* VI and VII. This is reserved to philosophers alone. But on the other hand, according to Bostock, Plato also believes that virtually all humans are capable of understanding language “only because they once beheld the [F]orms and can (dimly recollect) them.”¹⁹

This latter claim of Bostock’s, that Plato recognizes a lower and “dimmer” grade of recollection of the Forms available to virtually everyone, has since been challenged by a number of writers. One of these, Dominic Scott, conducts a

careful examination of every passage where Plato mentions the doctrine of recollection and concludes, unlike Bostock, that taken together they are most plausibly interpreted as implying that Platonic recollection is not undergone by people generally, but only by a very few as the result of the kind of intense philosophical training described in the middle parts of the *Republic*.²⁰

As a technical philological matter, it seems that Scott holds the high ground. It does indeed appear that in all three dialogues that explicitly mention recollection (the *Meno*, *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*), Plato consistently reserves his technical expression *anamnēsis* for the process of coming to a fully conscious acquaintance with the Forms,²¹ and is not willing to extend and dilute its use to “ordinary humdrum knowledge” as Bostock suggests. At the same time, however, Scott evidently believes that his resolution of this scholarly question about Platonic terminological patterns also closes the deeper and more philosophical question mentioned above, namely whether the Forms are involved in any way in pre-philosophical cognition.²² Scott’s conflation of these two questions is evident from the following characterization of the difference between his own position and Bostock’s:

Consider the status of [pre-philosophical] opinions that arise with perception. [On Bostock’s interpretation] these represent the results of partial recollection and the movement from them to the final goal [sc. philosophical knowledge] is in some sense continuous. They are starting points to be built upon, parts of an overall picture that has to be filled in. On [my interpretation], however, things are very different. . . . [these opinions] are messages to deceive us and are to be scraped away. We discard them, not build on them. There is a radical discontinuity as we become aware of the deception.²³

Scott here represents Bostock as holding that Plato believes low-level (dim or partial) recollection of Forms to be involved in the formation of (at least some) pre-philosophical opinions concerning sensible things, whereas, as we saw, Scott himself argues that Platonic recollection only comes into play in the course of advanced philosophical training. However, Scott suggests further that the two lines of interpretation take fundamentally different positions on Plato’s view of the relationship between pre-philosophical opinions about the sensible realm, and knowledge of the Forms gained through (full) recollection.

According to Scott’s own view, the relationship is purely contrastive: pre-philosophical opinions are utterly false and deceptive, and contain nothing of truth whatsoever within them. As one achieves philosophical enlightenment, they are simply to be discarded, or as Scott puts it, “scraped away.” The “scraping away” metaphor is part of an analogy Scott uses to present his view. He alludes to an anecdote in Herodotus about a certain Demaratus, a Greek spy who deceived the Persians by inscribing a warning of impending invasion on a wooden tablet, then covering the tablet with wax, which he left blank. Scott introduces a slight alteration to the story, imagining that rather than leaving the wax surface

blank, Demaratus had inscribed upon it another message completely unrelated to the one below. On this version, says Scott, “[We] would now have two messages, one obvious but unreliable, the other true but completely hidden away from view.”²⁴ This, according to Scott, is analogous to the relation between pre-philosophical opinion and philosophical knowledge of Forms in Platonic epistemology, and he consequently labels his interpretation “Demaratian.”

By contrast, Scott calls Bostock’s interpretation “Kantian” on the grounds that it treats (partial or dim) recollection of the Forms as necessary for the acquisition of general concepts (i.e., the mastery of general terms), which in turn is taken to be necessary to make any sense at all of what otherwise would be an unintelligible onslaught of sensory impressions. On this “Kantian” interpretation, according to Scott, Plato sees pre-philosophical opinions not as something to be discarded, but “built upon,” as “parts of an overall picture that has to be filled in.”²⁵

But clearly there are two separable theses at issue here. One is an epistemological thesis (K1) that, according to Plato, the acquisition of general concepts (and the mastery of general terms) achieved by people generally would not be possible had they not previously “beheld the Forms.”²⁶ The other is a philological thesis (K2) that Plato sometimes employs the term “recollect” to describe whatever residual epistemic effects of this past acquaintance with the Forms makes such everyday achievement possible. Scott correctly reports that Bostock believes that both theses are true, and Scott himself plainly thinks they are both false. My contention here is that although Scott succeeds in refuting K2, he does nothing whatever to undermine K1. Moreover, in what follows I will endeavor to provide textual support for K1.

Before we proceed further a couple of preliminary clarifications are required. The first has to do with a superficial difference in the language Scott and Bostock use to present their respective views. Bostock claims that past acquaintance with the Forms is necessary for the basic human ability of “understanding language,”²⁷ which can be glossed as the basic competency to apply general terms more or less correctly.²⁸ On the other hand, unlike Bostock, Scott contends that the formation of “pre-philosophical opinions” about sensible things does not require any past acquaintance with the Forms. Scott does not specify exactly which “pre-philosophical” opinions he has in mind here, but we can plausibly bring these two positions into alignment by supposing that at least some of these opinions involve the application of general concepts to particular sensible objects, as for instance when someone judges that a certain pair of sticks is equal, or that a particular act is an instance of some virtue.

The second issue needing clarification has to do with the proper scope of Bostock’s claim about the worth of these “pre-philosophical” opinions. Now, of course, Plato could not possibly hold that *all* pre-philosophical opinions have epistemic value, since it will be obvious to anyone (not least Plato) that the majority of them are false and misguided, and should simply be discarded. But

if this is the interpretation Scott contrasts with his own, he is targeting a straw man. The strongest thesis Bostock *needs* to defend is that Plato thinks that at least *some* pre-philosophical opinions concerning the sensible world are true, even if most of them are mistaken, and that it is possible to rank these opinions according to their accuracy or reasonableness, even if none of them meets the exceptionally high standards for genuine knowledge required by his theory. For if this were the case, it would provide some reason to suspect that past acquaintance with the Forms is in some way involved in at least the most accurate of these opinions.

V

Our proving ground for these two opposing positions regarding K1 will be *Republic* VII, and more specifically Plato's description of the initial predicament of the prisoners in the cave. Admittedly, this would not be appropriate if we were concerned here with K2, since recollection is never mentioned in this passage, or for that matter anywhere else in the *Republic*. However, this consideration is irrelevant now that we have separated the two theses and are concerned only with the question of whether some residual effect of past acquaintance with Forms is involved in pre-philosophical cognition. On the other hand, what *is* crucially relevant for our purposes is Socrates' passing remark mentioned earlier that the prisoners in this situation are "like us" (*homoious hēmin*). For they are portrayed as engaged enthusiastically in issuing various opinions about the things displayed before them, and this can plausibly be taken to represent the "pre-philosophical opinions" with which K1 is concerned.

Let us then examine the places where Plato speaks most directly about the relative value of the opinions formed by prisoners in their original unenlightened condition. The passages of greatest importance occur at the point in the allegory immediately after the prisoner who had been released is made to return to the cave and rejoin his erstwhile peers. As he does, he finds them engaged in making judgments about their environs, including some judgments that involve "naming the things they see" (*onomazein haper horōen*) (515b), which presumably is supposed to represent the classification of objects of experience under the appropriate general concepts. Later on, at 516c–d, these same prisoners are described as engaged in a sort of competition, according "honors and praises"²⁹ to one another, and giving prizes to those who were "most acute" (*oxutata*) at "discerning" (*kathorōnt*) what was being presented to them (*ta parionta*).

Clearly, Plato wants his audience to take away from these passages the idea that all of these contestants are in a state of relative ignorance, especially when compared to his enlightened protagonist. For he has Socrates declare at 520c that the returning prisoner will first experience a brief period of confusion, but then be able to discern the shadows "immeasurably better" (*huriō beltion*) than

the others.³⁰ However, it is crucial for our purposes to determine exactly what sort of mistake is being ascribed to these benighted souls. As it happens, the only belief they hold that Socrates explicitly declares to be false is the *metaphysical* thesis that the shadows they apprehend are the most real entities there are. But clearly the competition Socrates describes at 516c–d does not consist simply of repetitions of the single assertion-type, “Nothing can be more real than *that!*” Rather, the contestants are described as forming judgments about various patterns and interrelations that hold among the shadows they experience. Moreover, a close look at Socrates’ characterization of the details of the contest gives the clear impression that winning is not just a matter of making the luckiest guess. To the contrary, according to Socrates’ account the winner is described as having certain superior cognitive abilities: “[The prizes are given to the one who is] the most acute (*oxutata*) at discerning [the shadows] as [the artifacts] are carried by.”

Again, this does not mean that Plato would regard even the very best among the subterranean contestants as any match for the philosopher-protagonist of the allegory. But it does suggest that he does not put all pre-philosophical opinions on a par, but instead believes that they can be ranked objectively according to their accuracy, plausibility, or other epistemic value. This is not at all what one would expect on Scott’s “Demaratian” interpretation of pre-philosophical cognition.

VI

So far I have argued that Cave passage in *Republic* VII provides substantial evidence that Plato allows a considerable range in epistemic value among pre-philosophical opinions. In terms of the allegory, some unenlightened prisoners are naturally more adept than others at forming true beliefs and making accurate predictions about their shared, limited experience. The question now is whether the truth of such opinions that are true, and the epistemic superiority of some of them over others, is in some way due to the fact that their possessors had once known the Forms (whether or not they ever “recollect” this past acquaintance). One initially plausible line of thought is that some pre-philosophical opinions are more accurate than others because they have a comparatively greater basis in the way things really are. But since the ways things *really* are, according to Plato, is that sensible things are mere representations of the Forms, there is some reason to suspect that past acquaintance with the Forms might be involved in some way in the formation of the superior opinions.

But for the present this is only a suspicion. For Plato’s recognition that pre-philosophical opinions vary in epistemic value by itself doesn’t automatically implicate the Forms in pre-philosophical cognition. This is because there are at least two possible explanations for this difference in pre-philosophical cognitive

abilities. One possible explanation is suggested by the strikingly “Humean” overtones in the final part of Socrates’ description at 516d of the “winning contestant”:

[He will be] the best able to remember such items that are prior [*protera*], posterior [*hustera*], and concomitant [*hama*] among them, and consequently, the most successful at guessing the future.

With its references to discerning and remembering which experiences are “prior, posterior, and concomitant” with respect to others, and to “guessing the future,” this passage certainly gives the impression that Plato supposes that there are salient patterns and regularities inherent within the body of experience presented to the prisoners,³¹ and that even without philosophical training some of them are just “naturally” better than others at detecting these patterns and extrapolating from them to make better predictions about subsequent experience. The key feature of this “Humean” interpretation is that the detectable patterns and regularities in question are *wholly contained* within the experiences themselves, so that no further source information is required to render the experiences understandable and predictable. A scientific analogue to this would be a researcher who was able to detect and predict various correlations within a given body of observational data without having any inkling of the causal mechanisms responsible for producing those regularities. On this account, sense-experience, though limited in perspective, is also inherently intelligible inasmuch as it contains salient patterns and regularities, and differences in epistemic quality among pre-philosophical opinions are explained by native differences in the ability to detect, remember, and extrapolate from these patterns.

There is, however, another possible explanation to be considered. On this alternative account, we might think of sense-experience as analogous to a ciphered message that, when considered in isolation, presents no significant patterns or regularities. To all appearances, it is simply a randomly ordered sequence of symbols. In other words, it is such that even if a perfectly astute observer examined it for any length of time, and from however many perspectives, it would still simply not be possible to make any sense of it. The reason for this, of course, is that the key to its intelligibility does not lie within the message itself, but in something altogether external to it, namely the cipher-book. This is essentially the situation with sense-experience according to the alternative explanation we are considering. By itself it is inherently chaotic and disordered, and simply presents no detectable patterns or regularities. On the other hand, if one possesses further information about which sensible objects are representations of which Forms, then it does become possible to make good sense of it. The source of this further information, according to K1, is ultimately the prenatal acquaintance with the Forms.

It may be instructive to put this in terms of Plato’s own allegory. Imagine, for the sake of simplicity, that the items conveyed along the walkway are not statuettes of humans and other animals (as in the original), but simple

geometrical objects, that one of these is, say, a cylinder, and that the “appearances” of this particular object are quite regular – for example, that it is the object of every tenth “presentation.” Now imagine further that our cylinder is presented in a wide variety of attitudes relative to the axis of the fire and wall. Sometimes it is displayed on end, sometimes sideways, etc., so that on one occasion its shadow might be circular, on another rectangular, and so forth. Finally, again for the sake of simplicity, let us suppose that none of the other objects presented is capable of projecting shadows like any of those cast by the cylinder.

Plainly, in this scenario, someone whose informational resources were limited to examination of the shadows alone would not have a basis on which to make what, *ex hypothesi*, is the correct judgment that there is a “natural” classification including every tenth presentation and nothing else. On the other hand, someone who had additional information about how the shadows were actually caused, and more specifically about the range of shadows that could be cast by each kind of object, *would* be able to make this judgment, and on the basis of that to make at least one moderately accurate prediction about future projections (namely that every tenth shadow will fall within a certain range of shapes).

How then are we to decide between these two very different explanations of the difference among pre-philosophical cognition? The “Humean” account is the one most naturally suggested by the language of *Republic* 516c–d, but it is not absolutely required by it. For Plato never says exactly what allows some prisoners to perform better in these competitions than others. In particular, he never specifies whether their advantage consists in their simply being congenitally more adept than others at pattern-recognition, or in possessing additional information that the others do not. And in any case, there are two other considerations that weigh heavily in favor of the alternative, “cipher-book” interpretation.

One of these, which is essentially philosophical in character, is that the “Humean” account would undermine part of Plato’s rationale for positing the Forms in the first place. For if, as the Humean account requires, he believed that sense-experience is a self-contained informational system, and that relative proficiencies in making sense of it is due simply to innate differences in the skill of pattern-recognition, then he has no *principled* way of excluding the possibility that someone might naturally be *so* adept at that skill that his performance in guessing the future would approach that of the philosopher – even granting the latter’s superior perspective. For after all, on that account, all of the information necessary to make correct judgments and predictions are available for public inspection.³² Granted, our hypothetical *idiot savant* would not be privy to the *metaphysical* truth that the objects of his experience and beliefs are not the most real entities. But it is not clear why this ignorance should impede his ability to make accurate judgments and predictions if they are confined to the sensible realm. This point is especially telling in view of that fact, noted above, that Plato’s ultimate purpose in designing his metaphysically-based epistemology is to ground the theoretical possibility of unerring ethical and political judgments, since presumably such judgments will pertain to the sensible realm.

The second consideration in favor of the “cipher-book” analogy is textual. When Socrates first introduces the prisoners at 515a–b he describes them as engaged in “naming the things they see” (*onomazein haper horôen*). As it happens, in *Republic* VII Plato doesn’t bother to take up the question of what such “naming” might involve. However, there is a key passage in the *Phaedo* that bears directly on this topic. At 100c he officially introduces the Forms into discussion by means of a well-known metaphysical principle that has become known as “One-Over-Many”: “If there is anything beautiful besides the Form of Beauty, it so because it participates in [that Form].”

Notice that this principle by itself has no epistemological content. It simply states the conditions under which a sensible thing falls within a certain “natural” classification, quite independently of whether anyone knows, or even *could* know, that it does. As such, it is not to be confused with another principle stated in general form just a few lines later. “the Forms exist, and . . . the other things that participate in them get their names from them” (102b).

Unlike One-Over-Many, this principle, which I shall call “Eponymy,” does have an epistemological component, because it speaks to the question of how it is possible for people generally to apply the correct common name to a given “natural class” of sensible things. Part of this obviously has to do with the things themselves, that they all participate in a single Form, and that they therefore, so to speak, form a “nameworthy” grouping. This is essentially the force of One-Over-Many. However, Eponymy also concerns a certain human achievement. Things don’t simply “get” their names in a vacuum; they are *named* by competent language-users. And according to Eponymy, they are not named arbitrarily, but for a principled reason: because of their common participation in respective Forms. But in order to accomplish this, it would seem that language-users must in some way or other have epistemic access to the facts about participation in Forms. In other words, if some group of sensibles participated in a single Form, but people generally were entirely oblivious to that fact, then Eponymy would seem to entail that they would not be capable the applying the common term associated with that Form.³³ Now since Plato’s description of the unenlightened prisoners in *Republic* VII indicates that he thinks people generally do have the ability to name things with tolerable success, we have reason to believe he thinks they also have such epistemic access. And the most likely explanation of *how* they could have this is the one given by K1, that it is a residual effect of prenatal acquaintance with the Forms.

VII

In defending K1 I have been arguing for the involvement of prenatal acquaintance with the Forms in one particular type of pre-philosophical cognition, that which underlies the basic human capacity to classify and assign names to the

objects of sense-experience. However, I have been careful to qualify my descriptions of this capacity with such phrases as “more or less accurately” so as not to overstate Plato’s estimation of its value. In the Cave allegory, the unenlightened prisoners can apply names with sufficient accuracy to qualify them as competent language-users. Yet since the returning prisoner is described as immeasurably better (*muriô beltion*) than they are at judging things in the cave, it would seem that their level of performance must also allow room for significant improvement. What we need to determine, then, is the respect in which a Platonic philosopher will be better than competent language-users generally in applying names to the objects of sense-experience. I will close by briefly addressing this issue by relating it to an epistemological problem that arises in connection with the Socrates’ method of inquiry in Plato’s earlier dialogues.

At *Euthyphro* 4e, a skeptical Socrates wonders whether his interlocutor knows piety so “exactly” (*akribôs*) that he can confidently prosecute his own father for murder on a decidedly questionable set of facts. After Euthyphro brashly answers in the affirmative, Socrates implores him to say “what piety is” – to give the definition of piety – so that Socrates himself can use what Euthyphro says as a “standard” (*paradeigma*) to determine which acts are holy and which not (5c–d, 6d). To be sure, Socrates doesn’t say outright here that having the definition is *necessary* to make such determinations, but the incredulous tone of his earlier question strongly suggests that he believes that it is. The problem this presents is that Socrates seems perfectly willing in numerous passages throughout the early dialogues to rely on his and his interlocutors’ pre-theoretic judgments about the application of the virtue-terms in order to *test* various proposed definitions.³⁴ This has given rise to the charge that Socrates is involved in a vicious epistemic circularity of believing both (1) that one cannot know what are instances of a virtue without knowing the definition and also (2) that one cannot come to know the definition of a virtue without already knowing what are instances of it.³⁵

One proposal for extricating Socrates from this difficulty turns on ascribing to him a tacit distinction between “hard” and “easy” cases.³⁶ On this line of defense, the examples Socrates uses to test proposed definitions are confined to “easy,” or “clear-cut” cases, examples that no reasonable person would dispute. On the other hand, it is argued, he reasonably believes that with a correct definition in hand, he will have the sort of “exact” knowledge needed to effectively adjudicate *all* cases, including the “hard” or controversial ones.

I am not so much concerned here with whether this constitutes a successful exoneration of Socratic method in the early dialogues. I introduce it here because I believe its distinction between hard and easy cases offers us a plausible way of understanding the difference between pre-philosophical opinion and the genuine philosophical knowledge in *Republic* VII. As Plato’s cave-bound prisoners classify and assign names to the objects they experience, they do so in a manner accurate enough to justify describing them as competent users of their shared language. On the present proposal, however, their competence in classification

is restricted to unproblematic and uncontroversial cases. This is essentially the condition in which Socrates finds his interlocutors in the early dialogues. By contrast, in describing his philosophical protagonist in *Republic* VII as “immeasurably better” than the others, Plato means to attribute to him the sort of “exact knowledge” that Socrates had demanded of Euthyphro, the sort that would allow the correct application of names with unerring precision in all possible cases, including the “hard” ones.

Now it might seem that on this interpretation the distance between pre-philosophical opinion and philosophical wisdom is too small. That is, it might be objected that if pre-philosophical opinion provides enough accuracy in naming to make its possessors competent language-users, it cannot be all that inferior to knowledge gained through philosophical training. In other words, it may be wondered why Plato should quibble over a few percentage points in accuracy, especially given the high costs involved in making up the difference.

This way of thinking is engendered by the illusion that “accuracy” in naming is always to be understood in purely quantitative terms. However, this illusion can be dispelled if we recall the key point made earlier: that all of Plato’s diverse philosophical work in the *Republic* is ultimately subordinated to his central ethical project. In the present context, this means that in *Republic* VII Plato is not thinking about the application of just any general term, but more particularly of such *ethical* terms as “just,” “courageous,” and the like. This is crucial. For in the case of ethical terms, “accuracy” consists not in the percentage of correct applications, but in one’s ability to advance beyond applying the term “more or less correctly” to applying it appropriately even to the most unclear or complex cases. Now it is arguably the essential purpose of ethical *theory* to furnish the conceptual means to accomplish this difficult advance, and within the system of the *Republic*, the acquisition of ethical theory is tantamount to coming to know the Forms.

Notes

- 1 I take no position here on whether the philosophical projects of these early works are those of the historical Socrates, or are instead innovations of Plato himself in his early period.
- 2 See for example his interrogation of a renowned rhapsodist through much of the *Ion*.
- 3 See *Laches* 187e–188c together with *Gorgias* 495d–e.
- 4 This perspective is reflected in Socrates’ ironic suggestion at *Laches* 186a–187b that the process of certifying ethical experts might be accomplished by a comparison of professional resumé’s.
- 5 This naturally prompts the further question of whether Plato is *ever* able to complete the thought of *Meno* 98a. In the final section of the *Theaetetus*, which is generally agreed to be a late work, Plato does consider three possible ways of conceiving

of the sort of “account” (*logos*) that could transform mere true belief into knowledge. There are, however, two formidable reasons to resist seeing this as an amplification of his remark at *Meno* 98a. To begin with, the *Theaetetus* ends inconclusively, with Plato indicating serious problems with all three of the possibilities entertained. More importantly, it is not at all clear how any of the three sorts of “accounts” considered, even if it were genuinely Platonic, could plausibly be regarded as “causal.”

- 6 See Ferejohn 1991 and also McKirahan 1992.
- 7 Notice that there seems to be some slippage here between a cognitive state *itself* being fixed and stable in the *Meno*, and a cognitive state having an *object* with a fixed and stable nature in the *Republic*.
- 8 It is not clear whether Plato’s reasons for thinking that sensibles are not suitable objects of knowledge stem from the fact that they are constantly changing their properties through time, or from what seems to be a very different consideration (which has been called the “compresence of opposites”) that any predicate that applies to them can also be shown, with equal plausibility, not to apply. On this, see Irwin 1977b.
- 9 One key piece of information missing from Socrates’ story is how it is determined which objects are conveyed along the walkway, and in what order they are conveyed.
- 10 In *Republic* VI, prior to presenting the diagram of the Line, Socrates employs yet another expository device, a simile in which the sun is likened to the Form of the Good, which occupies a privileged position in Platonic philosophy. On this see Santas 1999: 247–74.
- 11 This is not to deny that there are serious problems in understanding many aspects of the theory of knowledge presented in *Republic* VI–VII. One issue in particular that has exercised scholars greatly is interpreting the final transition in the Divided Line passage wherein one is supposed to advance from one sort of knowledge (*dianoia*), which Plato describes as the soul proceeding from assumptions (*hypothesis*) to a final conclusion (*teleutēn*), to another, higher sort of knowledge (*nous*), in which one somehow is supposed to proceed from assumptions to a first principle (*archēn*).
- 12 The affirmative answer to this question is defended, on different grounds, in Vlastos 1999: 64–92, and Armstrong 1973, and has more recently been challenged in Fine 1999: 215–46.
- 13 Largely on the basis of this sort of consideration, but for other reasons as well. Gail Fine (1999) rejects the usual interpretation of *Republic* 477–9, according to which all relevant occurrences of the verb “to be” are existential and Plato is intending to establish the *metaphysical* thesis that knowledge and belief have different sorts of *objects*. On Fine’s alternative interpretation, the verb is used “veridically” and Plato is arguing for the *epistemological* conclusion that *propositions* that are known must be true, whereas those that are merely believed can be either true or false.
- 14 Bostock 1986, esp. 66–72.
- 15 *Ibid.*: 68.
- 16 Later on, while discussing the *Phaedrus*, Bostock connects this low-level, “ordinary humdrum knowledge” with the general human “ability to understand language” (1986: 70), i.e., with mastering the use of general terms. I shall return to this connection later.

- 17 The doctrine also appears in the *Phaedo*, and later in the *Phaedrus*, but is curiously absent from the *Republic*. Nevertheless, I will suggest below that certain elements of the doctrine are implicit in Books VI and VII of that work.
- 18 Whether Socrates had been providing the boy with substantive information about the problem and its solution by posing leading questions is a separate issue.
- 19 Bostock 1986: 72.
- 20 D. Scott 1999: 93–124.
- 21 This is not to say that recollection only occurs at the *termination* of this process. Even in the *Meno* Socrates is willing to allow that the slave-boy has begun to recollect, while also denying that he yet *knows* the answer (cf. 84a with 85c).
- 22 In similar fashion, Scott summarily dismisses the contention in Bedu-Addo 1991: 27–60, that pre-philosophical knowledge of Forms operates “subconsciously” on the extraneous philological grounds that Plato never *mentions* the subconscious (Scott 1999: 106 n. 11). In fact, Socrates’ diagnosis of the slave-boy in the *Meno*, as possessing the answer even while sincerely denying that he does, commits Plato to the existence of subconscious cognitive states, whether or not he has a general term under which to classify them.
- 23 Scott 1999: 97.
- 24 *Ibid.*: 94.
- 25 *Ibid.*: 97.
- 26 Bostock 1986: 72.
- 27 *Ibid.*: 71.
- 28 The qualification here is crucial, and will be taken up in my closing remarks in Section VII below.
- 29 Evidently these are meant to stand for social esteem and political advancement.
- 30 Plato also notes a radical difference in the motivational structures of the protagonist and the other prisoners, since the former is described repeatedly as having no interest in the “honors, praises, and prizes” mentioned at 516c–d.
- 31 Again (see note 9), Plato never bothers to say what accounts for these regularities. Within the allegory itself, the agency of the bearers of the carved objects may just be a literary device, but the real question is what – other than the Forms – could possibly underlie the patterns and regularities presented by perceptual experience.
- 32 I don’t mean to suggest that this would entirely vitiate the theoretical function of the Forms. It might be argued that they also provide a metaphysical basis for objective values in Plato’s system, and that correct ethical judgement requires knowledge of this basis. If Plato observed an “is/ought” distinction, he might then believe that even complete “factual” knowledge of the sensible realm could not bring ethical knowledge in its train.
- 33 Which particular sounds or written marks are employed in the naming process in a given language is of course a separate issue (with which Plato is concerned through much of the *Cratylus*).
- 34 See for example Socrates’ use of examples at *Laches* 191d–e and *Republic* I. 331c–d.
- 35 The original attribution of this so-called “Socratic fallacy” is found in P. Geach 1966. On different defenses against Geach’s charge, see, e.g., Santas 1972: 17–41; Irwin 1977a: 37–101.
- 36 See Nehamas 1986.

References

- Armstrong, D. M. (1973) *Belief, Truth, and Knowledge*, London: Cambridge University Press.
- Bedu-Addo, J. (1991) "Sense-experience and the argument for recollection in Plato's *Phaedo*," *Phronesis* 36, pp. 27–60.
- Bostock, D. (1986) *Plato's Phaedo*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ferejohn, M. T. (1991) *Origins of Aristotelian Science*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Fine, G. "Knowledge and belief in *Republic* 5–7," in G. Fine (ed.) *Plato I: Metaphysics and Epistemology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Geach, P. (1966) "Plato's *Euthyphro*: an analysis and commentary," *The Monist* 50, pp. 369–82.
- Irwin, T. (1977a) *Plato's Moral Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- (1977b) "The Heracleiticism of Plato," *Philosophical Quarterly* 27, pp. 1–13.
- McKirahan, R. (1992) *Principles and Proofs*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Nehamas, A. (1986) "Socrates' intellectualism," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 2, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, pp. 275–316.
- Santas, G. (1972) "The Socratic fallacy," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 10, pp. 17–41.
- (1999) "The Form of the Good in Plato's *Republic*," in G. Fine (ed.) *Plato I: Metaphysics and Epistemology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Scott, D. (1999) "Platonic recollection," in G. Fine (ed.) *Plato I: Metaphysics and Epistemology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vlastos, G. (1999) "Socrates' disavowal of knowledge," in G. Fine (ed.) *Plato I: Metaphysics and Epistemology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.