

Is Plato's Epistemology About Knowledge?

Jessica Moss

Penultimate Draft. Final version in *What the Ancients Offer to Contemporary Epistemology*, S. Hetherington and N. Smith eds, Routledge, 2020.

ABSTRACT:

Plato's epistemology centers around something he calls *epistêmê*, often translated 'knowledge.' But is Plato really talking about knowledge, or something quite different? I propose that we answer the question by looking to what Plato takes to be axiomatic and uncontroversial about *epistêmê*: that it is *unerring cognition of what is*. I suggest that the differences between his views about *epistêmê* and modern views about knowledge stem from different ways of developing this core notion.

1. What is *epistêmê*?

Throughout the dialogues, Plato contrasts something he calls *epistêmê* with something he calls *doxa*.¹ *Epistêmê* is the superior condition, something to which we should aspire. What is *epistêmê* though – what sort of thing does Plato have in mind?

The answer may seem obvious: *epistêmê* is knowledge. This is clear from the ways Plato characterizes *epistêmê*, which are so like the ways we now characterize knowledge, and from the contrasts that he draws between it and *doxa*, which are so like the contrasts we now draw between knowledge and belief. Among the most striking similarities, *epistêmê* is:

- more valuable than *doxa* (*Meno* 97d, *Republic* 476e)
- harder to achieve than *doxa* (*Meno* 85c-d)
- never false, while *doxa* often is (*Gorgias* 454d, *Theaetetus* 187b)
- acquired by supplementing true *doxa* with an account or reason (*Theaetetus* 201d)

It is no surprise then that the standard translation of *epistêmê* is 'knowledge,' nor that contemporary epistemologists tend to look on Plato as the founder of their discipline, and even as the author of one of the dominant theories of knowledge, as justified true belief.²

The fact is however that quite a lot of what Plato says about *epistêmê* is very hard to reconcile with what we say now about knowledge. For example, *epistêmê*:

- requires a reasoning out of the cause or explanation (*aitias logismos*, *Meno* 98a)
- entails the ability to give a definition, or verbal account (*Phaedo* 76b, *Rep.* 534b, etc.)
- is extremely rare (esp. *Republic* V: only philosophers have it)
- cannot be transmitted by testimony (*Theaetetus* 201c, *Meno passim*, *Rep.* 518b-c)
- is more than well-grounded true belief (*Meno* 85c-d)³
- can only be had of things that are themselves stable (*Philebus* 59a-b)
- is of Forms by contrast with perceptibles (*Republic* V-VII, *Timaeus*, *Philebus*)⁴

These would all be very strange features to attribute to knowledge. Is that what Plato was nonetheless doing? Or do we now have reason to think that he was not in fact talking about knowledge at all, but something else?

The last several decades have seen a flourishing of the latter view. Impressed especially by Plato's claim that *epistêmê* involves a grasp of causes or explanations, a number of scholars have argued that what Plato is discussing is not knowledge, but instead *understanding*. *Epistêmê* is understanding why something is the way it is, not merely knowing that it is so. Once we recognize this, the argument goes, we can see why Plato characterized *epistêmê* in what would otherwise be mysterious ways: for example understanding, unlike knowledge, plausibly cannot be transmitted by testimony; understanding, unlike knowledge, can only be had of things which admit of genuine explanation, which on Plato's theory restricts it to Forms.⁵

Nor is understanding the only rival to knowledge in this arena. Others have argued that Plato has in mind "logically certain knowledge,"⁶ or "craft-expertise".⁷ If we look back at Plato scholarship from the late 19th and early 20th century, we find the word *epistêmê* often translated as 'Science.'⁸ The implication is that it is the precursor of medieval and early modern *Scientia*, a grasp of deep, necessary, essence-grounded ultimate truths.⁹ If this right, we can see Plato as very closely anticipating Aristotle, who explicitly and elaborately characterizes *epistêmê* not as ordinary knowledge, but as, a deductively valid system grounded in necessary truths about natures or essences. Or perhaps Plato's *epistêmê* is something *sui generis*, not one of our familiar epistemological notions at all.

These suggestions are all worth taking very seriously. Each of the proposed candidates offers a good account of many features Plato attributes to *epistêmê*, and considering their claims can free us from

the narrow project of trying to explain those features on the assumption that Plato thought of *epistêmê* very much as we nowadays think of knowledge.

Suppose however that we are convinced that Plato's *epistêmê* is very similar to one of these candidates – understanding, for example. Are we thereby licensed in concluding that he is *not* talking about knowledge? Some have urged a different claim: perhaps Plato is indeed talking about knowledge, but somehow construing it in a way that makes it strongly resemble understanding. After all, they urge, knowledge is so obviously salient an epistemic category, and the resemblances between *epistêmê* and knowledge are so strong, that it would be rash to abandon the identification on the basis of a few differences.¹⁰

In other words, our evidence at this point seems compatible with two quite different hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: *Epistêmê* is not knowledge, but instead something else: understanding, Science, logically certain knowledge, craft expertise, or perhaps something *sui generis*.

Hypothesis 2: *Epistêmê* is knowledge, but Plato thought of knowledge very differently from how we think of it now.

For example when Plato says that *epistêmê* requires the ability to give an explanation, a claim most people would deny about knowledge, does this show that he is not talking about knowledge but instead (e.g.) understanding? Or is it instead evidence that he thinks of knowledge quite differently from how we think of it now: as (e.g.) a kind of understanding? (Or, perhaps instead, as *requiring* understanding?)¹¹

It will help to have some terminology here. Let us distinguish between a philosopher's *target phenomenon* on the one hand – the object or concept they are aiming to discuss – and their substantive theory of it on the other.¹² When philosophers nowadays disagree about whether knowledge can be analyzed in a given way, or whether it can be analyzed at all, they certainly take themselves to be arguing about one and the same thing, knowledge. They take themselves to be offering rival theories of the same phenomenon. Our question thus becomes: do the differences between Plato's epistemological views and our own show that he is not aiming to give an account of knowledge at all – his target phenomenon is something else (Hypothesis 1)? Or do they show instead only that his substantive theory of knowledge differs from ours (Hypothesis 2)? When we deny that his claims about *epistêmê* apply to knowledge, are we disagreeing with Plato, or talking past him – changing the subject?

The difference matters both for our understanding of Plato and our understanding of ourselves. If Hypothesis 1 is correct then we waste our time trying to make sense of Plato's epistemology on the assumption that he is doing something very like what we are doing now in studying knowledge. Moreover, we also get things wrong when we think of knowledge as something so obviously central to epistemological inquiry that it must have been the focus of such inquiry from the start. (More positively, perhaps we learn or are confirmed in thinking that there should be other central topics in epistemology – for instance, understanding.) If Hypothesis 2 is correct, on the other hand, we can carry on thinking of Plato as the direct ancestor of modern theories of knowledge, but in asking why his substantive theory differs from modern ones, we can learn why he went the way he did. We can also hope to learn something new about knowledge: from the fact that it itself can be understood in radically different ways, perhaps we can get a better understanding of what it is, and of the motivation for our own particular theories of it.

An analogy: if Ancient medical writers discuss a condition that seems to have a good deal in common with what we call cancer, but also to diverge from it in important ways, we want to know whether they are really discussing cancer, or some other phenomenon. If they are indeed discussing cancer, we can hope to learn something about why they understand it the way they do: perhaps the differences hang on idiosyncrasies of their methodology, or of their physical theory. We may however also hope to learn something about cancer itself: possibly they noticed something important that we, constrained by our own framework, have not. Certainly we may hope to learn something about our own framework, simply by seeing what is distinctive in our views and considering what led us to them.

Now that we have clarified the question and seen its importance, however, we might think that the project of answering it is hopeless.

First, how do we identify Plato's target phenomenon? For any given claim that he makes about *epistêmê*, how do we know how to disentangle what constitutes evidence about the identity of target phenomenon from what constitutes substantive theory? Proponents of the view that *epistêmê* is knowledge sometimes suggest that we can consult ordinary linguistic usage, but this turns out to be highly problematic.¹³ The question seems infected with vagueness to a damning degree.

Second, how do we fix standards for what would count as identity with knowledge? Contemporaneous philosophers can reveal that they are aiming at a common target through their

responses to one another (“I disagree with your theory of knowledge”), but Plato cannot do that for us. Thus it seems we would need some criteria for judging how similar his theories have to be to ours to count as being about the same thing. If it emerges that Plato is not concerned with justification, does that show decisively that he is not talking about knowledge? What about certainty? What about safety? The worry is that in order to answer these questions we would need to come up with a general definition of knowledge – but that is as vexed a task as modern philosophy has to offer.

My aim in this paper is to show that the project is feasible, and to begin to carry it out. There is a good strategy for identifying Plato’s target phenomenon (section 2), and it shows that Plato’s most basic characterization of *epistêmê* is this: *an unerring grasp of reality* (sections 3-4). This has some claim – although not an indisputable one – to be a characterization of the very thing epistemologists are aiming to discuss nowadays under the name of knowledge (sections 5-6). Recognizing why he nonetheless has very different epistemological views than we do turns out to lend strong support to a version of one Hypothesis 2 (section 6). If we accept that claim, we learn something important about our own theories of knowledge: a genealogy that offers a new theory of what they have evolved from, and what it is what they are trying to capture (section 7).

2. A strategy

It would be enormously helpful if Plato had written something like this: “Here are the claims I take to be absolutely uncontroversial about *epistêmê*, core commitments that anyone who counts as theorizing about it must accept. I take these to be such obvious features that I see no need to argue for them. If you accept these claims but disagree with me about others, we have genuine disagreements. If you reject them, we are merely talking about different things.” Call such core claims *axioms*. (If you are a believer in conceptual truths and think that Plato was too, call them conceptual truths, and take them to delineate Plato’s concept of *epistêmê*. I will avoid this terminology because we can get what we need through less contentious tools.) If suitably detailed, these axioms would have a good claim to identify his target phenomenon. Focusing only on the axioms, then, we could ask whether they are plausibly aiming to pick out knowledge.¹⁴

Plato never does exactly that – but he does in fact do something serviceably close.

In the absence of explicit statements, there is another way to identify a philosopher’s axioms about something: look for claims they take as fixed and uncontroversial between rival theories of that thing. Very plausibly, they take these as too obvious to require argument, and thus as too obvious to be

disputed even by those who hold substantive theories very different from their own. For example: in a disagreement about well-being, a hedonist will assume as common ground between herself and her desire-satisfaction-theorist opponent that well-being is a state we recognize as preferable to its opposite, and may try to use that assumption in an argument against him.¹⁵ She takes this as an axiom about well-being.

Now, as it happens, Plato gives us very clear signs of what he takes to be fixed and uncontroversial between rival theories of *epistêmê*. In two different dialogues, the *Republic* and *Theaetetus* – dialogues in which Socrates himself seems to be working with quite different views of *epistêmê* and in which he argues against others who hold yet further different views – he presents certain features of *epistêmê* as beyond dispute, and thus as constraints on the various views. These features, I suggest, are our clues to Plato’s target phenomenon. The fact that they are repeated in many other contexts bolsters that interpretation. (Indeed, I argue elsewhere, they very plausibly exhaust his list of axioms, with all *epistêmê*’s other features explained by these, often in combination with substantive metaphysical or psychological claims.)¹⁶

3. Axioms in the *Theaetetus*

The *Theaetetus*’ project is to define *epistêmê*. The dialogue considers and rejects three candidate accounts: that *epistêmê* is perception, it is true *doxa*, and that it is true *doxa* with a *logos*. My interest here is not in the specific accounts, but instead in a claim about constraints on any such account that emerges early on.

The first section of the dialogue is devoted to Theaetetus’ proposed definition of *epistêmê* as perception. As is widely recognized, both in developing the account and then in refuting it, Socrates treats two claims about *epistêmê* as given, never offering any argument for them nor allowing any challenge to them, but simply assuming that his rivals accept them.¹⁷

We see this first in his equation of Theaetetus’ proposal with Protagorean relativism – the thesis that all perceptions are true for the perceiver. Why does Socrates equate the two theses? Here is the argument:

[On Protagoras’ account], in matters of hot things and all things like that, as each person perceives things, so they *are* for that person... Perception therefore is always of *what is*

(*tou ontos*), and without falsehood (*apseudes*), as befits *epistêmê*.¹⁸ (152c, emphases mine.)

We can make sense of the argument as follows:

- (1) ASSUMPTION: *Epistêmê* is always of what is and without falsehood.
- (2) Therefore if perception is *epistêmê*, perception must always be of what is and without falsehood.
- (3) Therefore if perception is *epistêmê*, when our perceptions conflict my perceptions are nonetheless true-and-of-what-is for me, yours true-and-of-what-is is for you – that is, Protagorean relativism holds.

ASSUMPTION is never explicitly stated, let alone defended, but clearly plays a crucial role. Given the context – Socrates is drawing out the consequences of Theaetetus’ own account of *epistêmê* – he must be assuming that Theaetetus will accept it. This becomes particularly clear when the claim resurfaces in Socrates’ eventual refutation of Theaetetus’ account. First Socrates gives an argument that perception does not grasp being (184b-186e).¹⁹ The argument is very difficult, and there is much interpretative contention over the meaning of ‘being’ (*ousia*). What is important for my purposes here however is neutral between all interpretations: whatever being is, Socrates assumes that *epistêmê* must grasp it. For having established that perception does not grasp being, he proceeds as follows:

Perception has no share in grasping truth, since it has no [share in grasping] being (*ousia*), and therefore neither [has it any share in] *epistêmê*. And therefore perception is not the same as *epistêmê*.²⁰ (186e)

Socrates is appealing again to ASSUMPTION, and again assuming that Theaetetus accepts it. That is, he is arguing:

- (4) Perception is *not* of what is and without falsehood (it grasps neither being nor truth).
- (5) Therefore (by ASSUMPTION and (2)), perception is not *epistêmê*.

Throughout the discussion, then, while assessing a radical theory of *epistêmê*, Socrates holds fixed these claims about it, assuming that even proponents of the radical theory accept them: whatever *epistêmê* is, it must be *of what is* and *never-false*. My suggestion is that these claims reveal what Plato takes to be axioms about *epistêmê* in this dialogue.

Now I will argue that the same axioms are at play in a dialogue with a very different approach to *epistêmê*.

4. Axioms in the *Republic*

In the *Republic*, just as in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates engages in a dispute about *epistêmê*; here too, he appeals to certain features of *epistêmê* as common ground between himself and his opponent. Moreover, the features he appeals to are the very same ones we saw at issue in the *Theaetetus*' ASSUMPTION.

I have in mind the famous epistemological argument of *Republic* V. Socrates is arguing that philosophers should rule in the ideal city because only they have *epistêmê*. He recognizes these claims as wildly controversial, and brings in an imaginary interlocutor to represent popular wisdom: a “sightlover,” an aesthete who considers himself to have *epistêmê* about beauty. Socrates and the sightlover disagree over central questions: whether the sightlover has or lacks *epistêmê*, and whether *epistêmê* comes not from familiarity with perceptible things like beautiful sights and sounds or instead from the study of intelligible Forms. Despite these disagreements, however, Socrates is careful to start from premises that are acceptable to his opponents: the plan is to “soothe and persuade him gently, hiding from him that he is unhealthy [in mind]” (476e).²¹ Here is how he begins the conversation:

Does the one who has *gnôsis* have it of something or nothing?²² ... – He has *gnôsis* of something. – Something that *is* (*on*) or that is not? – Something that is. For how could what is not be the object of *gnôsis*? – Do we then maintain this sufficiently, even if we examine it in many ways, that that which completely *is* is completely an object of *gnôsis* (*gnôston*), and what is in no way is in every way not an object of *gnôsis*? – Most sufficiently...- *Gnôsis* is over what is...*Epistêmê* is by nature over what is, to have *gnôsis* of what is as it is. (*Rep.* 476d-477b)

Socrates is claiming that *epistêmê*'s object is “what is”.²³ He is also claiming that his interlocutors will accept this claim, despite their disagreement with him about other features of *epistêmê*. Moreover, he gives no substantive argument for the claim. Plato just has Glaucon exclaim that its denial would be absurd – “How could what is not be the object?” – in sharp contrast with the detailed multi-step arguments he goes on to offer to show that *epistêmê* has a different object from *doxa*, and also that what is (*to on*) is to be identified with the Forms. Why are Socrates and Glaucon so confident that the claim is both true and uncontroversial? The explanation, I submit, is just what we saw above in the *Theaetetus*: they take it to be an axiom. If the sight-lover thinks he has *epistêmê*, he presumably takes himself to be in

touch with what is. (We will return below to consider how he might plausibly be thought to interpret this claim.)

As the discussion continues, we find another feature of *epistêmê* treated as common ground between proponents of opposing views: that it is unerring or infallible (*anamartêton*). Socrates asks Glaucon if *epistêmê* is different from opinion; Glaucon replies that it is different, and incontestably so at that:

For how, he said, could *anyone with any sense (tis noun echôn)* posit that that the *unerring (anamartêton)* is the same thing as the not-unerring? – Well said, I replied. (477e-8a)

Anyone with any sense at all – perhaps something like, any competent speaker of the language, or anyone with sane views – agrees that *epistêmê* is unerring (and also that *doxa* is erring, and is thus committed to distinguishing the two). No argument is provided to persuade the sight-lover; he is expected simply to agree.²⁴

Republic V pits Socrates against an opponent with a radically different view of *epistêmê* from his own. Simplifying a bit, Plato is showing us a dispute between someone who thinks that all *epistêmê* is *a priori* and someone who thinks it is all empirical. But he makes clear that there are two claims about *epistêmê* acknowledged by both parties to the debate, and which one side can therefore use as premises in an argument against the other – two axioms. These are that *epistêmê* has as its object *what is*, and that it is *unerring*.

The first claim is clearly equivalent to the *Theaetetus*' claim that *epistêmê* is of what is.²⁵ The second looks like a close variant on the *Theaetetus*' claim that *epistêmê* is without falsehood (although as we will discuss below perhaps a stronger version).²⁶ In other words, Socrates' refutation of the sight-lovers rests on the *Theaetetus*' ASSUMPTION, or a close cousin thereof. Plato presents ASSUMPTION as common ground between Socrates of the *Theaetetus*, Socrates of the *Republic*, Theaetetus, and the *Republic*'s sight-lovers.²⁷ Very plausibly, he does so not because he thinks there is something special uniting the views of these specific characters, but because he thinks of ASSUMPTION as common ground between proponents of any theory of *epistêmê*. The claim that *epistêmê* is unerring, and the claim that it is of what is, function for Plato as axioms.

This impression is bolstered by the frequent appearance of both claims in various contexts throughout the dialogues. I do not have room for an extensive survey here, but a few examples will illustrate: *epistêmê* is of what is (or ‘being’) at *Phaedrus* 247c, *Philebus* 59d, *Republic* 534a and *Timaeus* 27d²⁸; it is always true at *Gorgias* 454d and *Theaetetus* 187b; it is unerring at *Republic* 340e.

Does Plato hold other axioms about *epistêmê*? To demonstrate that he does not would take far more work than I have room for here, but I will offer as a promissory note the following claim: it is easy to see his other characterizations of *epistêmê* as following from our two axioms, often in combination with substantive metaphysical or psychological views. (Two representative examples: that *epistêmê* is stable follows from its unerringness; that it requires a grasp of explanations follows from an account of the nature of *what is* as causally structured. For more discussion see section 6.)

For present purposes, then, I ask the reader to suppose that the two claims in ASSUMPTION exhaust Plato’s axioms about *epistêmê*. The other features, including those that seem obviously to distinguish *epistêmê* from knowledge as we understand it, are parts of Plato’s substantive theory (or theories). Let us consider what this entails for our main question.

5. Is *epistêmê* knowledge? First pass.

Epistêmê is something that is unerring and of what is. To avoid undue vagueness, let us replace ‘something’ with ‘cognition,’ a term neutral enough to cover the *Theaetetus*’ notion that *epistêmê* “grasps” what is, the *Republic*’s notion that *epistêmê* is “set over” being, or that being is its object. Thus Plato characterizes his target phenomenon as follows: *unerring cognition of what is*.

Now to our question: does this show that he is talking about the very thing we talk about when we talk about knowledge? Or to put it another way: can we see contemporary epistemology’s analyses and discussions of knowledge as attempts to get at *this* phenomenon, unerring cognition of what is?

There looks to be a strong case that the answer is yes. I will lay out that case, but then argue that it is not so strong as it appears.

First, one might suppose that ‘what is’ refers to *the facts, whatever is the case*. This would render “*Epistêmê* is of what is” an attempt to formulate the idea that knowledge is always true, where truth is correspondence to the facts. Plato would be saying that knowledge is factive. (Or suppose that ‘what is’ refers to propositional truths, as Fine does (1990), with the same result.)

Next, one might interpret ‘unerring’ as getting at the idea that knowledge is not simply true in the way that beliefs can be, but somehow brings with it a stronger connection to the truth, one which elevates it above true belief.²⁹ This is an idea that contemporary epistemologists express in various ways, and in varying strengths: knowledge is never the product of epistemic luck, or it must be formed by a reliable method, or it is infallible, or it is “safe,” i.e. counterfactually robust. We could interpret Plato either as advancing a very strong version of this view, something like infallibilism, or simply as trying to get at the general intuition that knowledge has a specially robust relation to the truth. (We could then interpret the *Theaetetus*’ “without falsehood” either as a variant of this claim, or as a restatement of the claim that knowledge is factive.)

Finally, one might take ‘cognition’ to mean belief, or taking-to-be-true. We could then interpret Plato as getting at the idea that knowledge is in the same genus as, although epistemically superior to, states like mere opinion, guesses, and the like – the idea epistemologists nowadays get at by analyzing knowledge as a special kind of true belief.

These are not merely claims that most philosophers today would accept about knowledge; they are very plausibly ones we take as axiomatic. If someone is giving you an account of some mental phenomenon that is sometimes false, it would be charitable of you to suppose that whatever she is trying to explain, it is not knowledge. Likewise if she says that someone in this condition tends to get things right but only through luck: philosophers do of course argue for particular, substantive versions of the sense in which, and means by which, knowledge connects us specially well to truth (warrant, safety, security, etc.), but the fact that it somehow does so is taken for granted.

Thus, *if* we interpret Plato’s axioms this way, we can very plausibly take “unerring, always-true cognition of what is” as a definition of *knowledge*. No matter how strange some of Plato’s views about *epistêmê* sound to our ears, they would nonetheless clearly be views about knowledge.

This would be an important result, for it would let us evaluate our disagreements with Plato as genuine disagreements, and thus open up interesting questions about both his views and our own. For example, if we are moved by the idea that talk of safety, security and the like are attempts to get at the idea which Plato expresses by saying that knowledge is unerring, we might look at how he fleshes out that claim, and consider revising some of our own accounts accordingly. This might lead to an argument in

favor of some very strong view like infallibilism – or, alternately, an opportunity to articulate arguments about what is wrong with such views.

Before we go too far with this kind of project, however, we need to face an important complication. The project was premised on interpreting ‘what is’ as referring to the facts, or to propositional truths. Plato surely sometimes uses these words in just this sense. As is widely recognized, however, he often works with a much more metaphysically inflated notion of being, on which not everything that is the case counts as *what is*. In the next section I will argue that if we are to make sense of Plato’s characterizations of *epistêmê* throughout the dialogues – and in particular of the features which differ from those we now attribute to knowledge – we have to interpret the claim that *epistêmê* is of “what is” as referring to being in this special sense. Recognizing how this works may cast doubt on the conclusion that *epistêmê* is knowledge.

6. Being

Plato often uses ‘what is,’ or ‘being,’ to refer to an ontologically superior subclass of all the things that there are in the ordinary sense: things that *really* or *fundamentally* or *ultimately* are, by contrast with things that are in a derivative sense, or to a lesser degree. I will use the simplifying label ‘Robust Being’ to mark the notion I have in mind. I thereby bracket many important questions (for example: Is Plato’s theory of Robust Being unified across the dialogues? Is the contrast between Robust Being and ontological status of lesser things a matter of degree, or of kind?) I want simply to establish the relatively uncontroversial point that he does have some such notion of being, and then to show that this notion is the epistemically relevant one: when he says that *epistêmê* is of “what is,” it is this sense he has in mind.

In the early dialogues, Plato frequently contrasts what something *is* with some lesser aspect of it: he contrasts what virtue is with the many instances of virtue (*Meno* 72b-c), or contrasts the being of piety with its affections (*Euthyphro* 11a). *Being* or what *is* here is what we would call essence: to say that being god-loved is not the being of piety is not to say that it does not *exist*, nor that it is not *true* of piety, nor to deny that piety *is* (copula) god-loved; the claim instead is that this does not constitute piety’s essence. In other words, Being here is Robust.

Moreover, it is this Robust Being that these dialogues correlate with *epistêmê*. This is manifest in Socrates’ famous definitional requirement: if you have *epistêmê* of piety, you must be able to say what it *is* (*ti esti*) or its being (*ousia*) – where this is different from being able to point out instances or accidents

of piety (*Euth.* 6d, 11a). If you have *epistêmê* of virtue, you must be able to say what it is, where this is different from listing various virtues, or from saying what virtue is *like* (*Meno.* 71b). *Epistêmê* about x amounts to – or at least requires, as a primary and essential component – *epistêmê* of what x *is* in this robust sense, namely x’s essence.

In the middle dialogues, with their distinction between the realm of Forms and the perceptible realm, Plato contrasts what *is* with what *becomes*. The eternal, stable Forms *are*; perceptible things come to be, change, and pass away (*Rep.* 479a-b, *Tim.* 27d-28a); being *is* more than becoming, or it more *really* is (*ontôs*, *Tim.* 28a), or more fully (*pantelôs*, *Rep.* 477a)³⁰. Indeed, what becomes is only “between being and not being.” Thus here too, there are many things that (in the neutral sense) are, are the case, or are true – the whole perceptible realm, all of its properties and all the facts about it – which Plato will refuse to recognize as *what is*; the kind of being that is contrasted with becoming is Robust Being.

In these dialogues too, when Plato associates *epistêmê* with “what is,” he clearly has in mind Robust Being. In the *Timaeus*, for example:

What is that which always is, and which has no becoming, and what is that which is always becoming, and never *is*? The former is grasped by *noêsis*³¹ with a reasoned account (*logos*), since it is always in accordance with the same things; the latter in turn is opined (*doxaston*) through *doxa* with unreasoned perception, since it comes to be and passes away, but never really is. (*Timaeus* 27d-28a)

The *Republic* draws the same association. *Epistêmê* results from attending to Being by contrast with Becoming; the latter is the province of *doxa* (*Rep.* 508d, 534a). In *Republic* V’s famous argument discussed above, ‘what is’ again turns out to be Robust: *epistêmê* is of what is, where this turns out to refer to the Forms; perceptibles are the object of *doxa* rather than *epistêmê* because they are “between being and not-being.”

In all these contexts, then, Plato thinks that *epistêmê* is of “what is” in the sense of Robust Being – the ontologically superior items, by contrast with something existent but ontologically inferior.³²

This is certainly a far cry from what we had in mind when we thought that the “of what is” clause might be meant to capture the view that knowledge is of what is the case, or of the facts, or of true propositions.

Moreover, I will now briefly argue, this difference is crucial to understanding Plato's characterizations of *epistêmê* – and especially those that diverge from our contemporary characterizations of knowledge.

If *epistêmê* is of what is, and it turns out that essences, Forms, or other ultimate realities are the things that *are*, then *epistêmê* is cognition of these ultimate realities, and these alone – as on a traditional and widespread reading of Plato it indeed is.³³ This means that *epistêmê* will be quite different from ordinary knowledge, and bear striking resemblances to other conditions. Like *a priori* knowledge, it will have no truck with the contingent empirical realm. Like Science, it will be specially about ultimate realities. (Contrast knowledge as we think of it now: one can have knowledge about all sorts of things – accidents as well as essences, perceptibles as well as Forms, ontologically inferior items as well as ontologically superior ones. If '*x is F*' is a true proposition, then one can in principle know it, no matter what kind of thing *x* is.) Moreover, like understanding, it will have an explanatory structure: *epistêmê* involves or depends on or amounts to grasping the underlying causes of everything, in a way that knowledge as we now think of it clearly does not.³⁴ Put concisely, on this view, *epistêmê* will be quite different from knowledge as we nowadays conceive it, for it will be *a deep grasp of ultimate realities*.

7. Is *epistêmê* knowledge? Second pass.

At this point the evidence seems to leave us undecided between two of the hypotheses we considered at the start. We can rule out Hypothesis 2, on which *epistêmê* is very much like knowledge as nowadays conceived: what we have seen is not that *epistêmê* merely requires a deep grasp of ultimate realities, as a logically independent condition, but that *epistêmê* itself *consists* in such a grasp. This leaves us however with two options:

Hypothesis 1: *Epistêmê* is not knowledge, but instead something else.

On this hypothesis, Plato's axioms resemble claims we take as axiomatic about knowledge, but once we understand how he interprets them we recognize that the resemblance is only superficial. His target phenomenon is not knowledge but something else – and now we have a specification of what that something else is: a deep grasp of ultimate realities. (Does this mean that it is indeed Science, understanding, or one of the others – that is, is one of these best understood as a deep grasp of truths? Or

does it instead resemble them in some ways, while being *sui generis*? I leave that question for those who would like to pursue Hypothesis 1.)

If Hypothesis 1 is correct, then we need to rethink very seriously how contemporary epistemology is related to Plato's. He is not the author of the Justified True Belief theory of knowledge, nor indeed is he focused on developing any theory of knowledge at all. If we are to learn from dialogue with him, it will be in a different way than widely thought: perhaps by investigating whether our own theories have room for (or already somehow include) the notion of a deep grasp of ultimate realities; perhaps by asking why the focus of epistemology now is so different from what it used to be. We cannot however see ourselves as being in genuine dialogue with him about the nature of knowledge. But there is another possibility:

Hypothesis 2: *Epistêmê* is knowledge, but Plato conceived of knowledge very differently from how we conceive it now: as a deep grasp of ultimate realities.

On this hypothesis, Plato's axioms are indeed attempts to express claims we take as axioms about knowledge: his target phenomenon and ours are one and the same; the differences come in at the level of substantive theory. His axioms are general enough and neutral enough that they can be developed in different ways, in conjunction with different metaphysical (and other) views. Plato's theory of *epistêmê* and our theories of knowledge, for all their differences, are theories about the same thing.

I want to make a brief case for Hypothesis 2, and then to draw out its significance.

The case is simple. As we saw above, Plato presents the axioms as shared by thinkers who are outright hostile to Platonic metaphysics: the *Republic*'s sight-lovers, who explicitly deny the existence of Forms (476c), and in the *Theaetetus* the relativist Protagoras. Thus, at the risk of truly egregiously begging the question against Socrates' interlocutors, he cannot be building his ontology into these axioms: they must not make any direct claims about Robust Being.³⁵

Instead, I suggest, he is appealing to a notion we might put like this: *epistêmê* is of *reality*. (Plato's word 'being' (*ousia*) is often aptly translated as 'reality,' and its variants as 'real' or 'really'.)³⁶ If your metaphysics includes a notion of Robust Being, you will hear this as: the person with *epistêmê* is in touch with the ultimate, fundamental beings which are ontologically superior to everything else. If your metaphysics does not include any such notion, you will hear it instead as something less ambitious.

Plausibly the sight-lovers who think they have *epistêmê* of beauty take it as: the person with *epistêmê* is familiar with all the important, relevant items in the relevant domain (e.g. all the varieties of beautiful sights and sound). Presumably the *Theaetetus*' Protagoras takes it as: the person with *epistêmê* is in touch with what really is by contrast with what *merely* seems to be.³⁷

What about a modern-day epistemologist, or ordinary user of the word 'knowledge'? When she thinks that knowledge is of the facts, what is the case, might this be a way of developing this general notion of reality?

I propose that it clearly is: we very plausibly do or can think of knowledge as a (specially good) cognitive relation to reality. It is however a very different interpretation of 'reality' from the others we have canvassed, because it is so divorced from ontology. Our modern-day epistemologist might happen to be a metaphysician who believes in some version of Robust Being, but that is not what she has in mind when she thinks about knowledge as a relation to reality. Instead she is thinking of *the facts*, where this is a totally object-neutral notion: facts about the ultimate beings are facts, but facts about the inferior items are no less so, and indeed there are even full-blown facts regarding things that are utterly non-existent. (Reality includes the fact that there is no tooth fairy; this is something we can know.)

What has happened here? Somehow a shift occurred: we ceased to think of knowledge as a relation to metaphysically privileged objects, and instead began to think of it as a relation to facts. The result is that the notion of knowledge becomes in principle divorced from metaphysics – or, more precisely, essentially independent of it. (This is obviously related to the idea that most philosophers now think of knowledge as an attitude toward propositions, whereas – I am arguing, in line with many others – Plato thought of it primarily as a relation to non-linguistic objects.³⁸ I will not speculate here as to which shift precipitated the other, or whether they are both effects of another cause, although that is a question worth pursuing.)

If Hypothesis 2 is correct, what do we learn about knowledge as it features in our own epistemologies?

First, we get a new view of what knowledge *is*: whatever other views one holds about knowledge, one must recognize it as unerring cognition of reality. We can use this Platonic axiom to guide, constrain, and evaluate contemporary analyses and theories of knowledge. For example, if we think that "knowledge is unerring" is the intuition people are trying to capture when they look for some condition

on knowledge that goes beyond justification – warrant, reliable methods, infallible methods, and the like – this may lead us to favor one or another of these as the most promising, or help us identify where they go wrong.

Second, we get a new view of knowledge's genealogy. Knowledge as we know it turns out to have a surprising ancestor: it is the metaphysically deflated descendant of the notion of a deep grasp of ultimate realities. Finding out where we came from is illuminating – especially if we can enrich the genealogy with an account of how we got here.³⁹ Once we recognize what the philosophical notion of knowledge was designed to do, and how it has evolved, we can consider whether some intuitions or theories about knowledge are mere hangovers from its past and should be rejected. We can also ask whether we are content for things to have evolved as they have, or whether there is instead merit to reopening the older project – Plato's project – of centering epistemological inquiry on the nature of grasping not just the facts, but the deep nature of reality.⁴⁰

WORKS CITED

- Armstrong, D.M. (1973), *Belief, Truth and Knowledge*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
- Barnes, J. (1980), reply to M. Burnyeat, "Socrates and the Jury: Paradoxes in Plato's Distinction between Knowledge and True Belief," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 54: 192-206
- Bosanquet, B. (1895), *A Companion to Plato's Republic For English Readers*, Macmillan and Co, New York/London
- Burnyeat, M. (1980), "Socrates and the Jury: Paradoxes in Plato's Distinction between Knowledge and True Belief," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 54: 173-191
- Cornford, F.M. (1935), *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, New York
- Fine, G. (1990), "Knowledge and Belief in *Republic* V-VII," in S. Everson ed. *Epistemology* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 85-115
- (2004), "Knowledge and True Belief in the *Meno*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 27: 41-81
- forthcoming, "*Epistêmê* and *doxa*, Knowledge and True Belief, in the *Phaedo*," Keeling lecture.
- Gerson, L.P. (2009), *Ancient Epistemology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Hackforth, R. (1958), *Plato's Examination of Pleasure: A Translation of the Philebus, with Introduction and Commentary*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Jowett, B. (1908), *The Republic of Plato*, Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Liddell, H.G., Scott, R. and Jones, H.S. (1843), *Greek-English Lexicon*, Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Moline, J. (1981), *Plato's Theory of Understanding*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison and London
- Moss, J. (work in progress), *Being and Seeming: Plato's Epistemology*

- Nehamas, A. (1985), “Meno’s Paradox and Socrates as Teacher,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 3: 1–30
- Pasnau, R. (2017), *After Certainty: a history of our epistemic ideals and illusions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Rawls, J. (1971) *A Theory of Justice*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge
- Schwab, W. (2015), “Explanation in Epistemology of the *Meno*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 48: 1-36
- (2016), “Understanding *Epistêmê* in Plato’s *Republic*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 51: 41-85
- Shorey, P. (1930), *Plato: The Republic*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge
- Smith, N.D. (2000), “Plato on Knowledge as a Power,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 38: 145-68
- (2012) “Plato on the Power of Ignorance,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, suppl. vol.: 51-73
- Taylor, A. (1926), *Plato, The Man and His Work*, Methuen and Co., London
- Vlastos, G. (1981), “Degrees of Reality in Plato,” in Vlastos, *Platonic Studies*, 2nd edition, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 73-4
- (1985) “Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 35: 1-31
- White, F.C. (1972), ‘Ὠς ἐπιστήμη οὔσα’: A Passage of Some Elegance in the “Theaetetus,” *Phronesis* 17: 219-226
- Wolterstorff, N. (1996), *John Locke on the Ethics of Belief*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 219-21
- Woodruff, P. (1990) “Plato’s Early Theory of Knowledge,” in S. Everson ed. *Epistemology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 60-84

¹ Or more precisely: he contrasts *epistêmê*, *phronêsis*, *gnôsis*, *sophia*, *noêsis*, or *nous* with *doxa* or with *pistis*. Plato almost always seems to treat the various terms for the superior category as equivalent: for discussion and citations see Moline 1981, 191 note 22.

² For one of many examples see Armstrong 1973, 137, which calls *Meno* 87-8 the “first recorded occurrence” of the “classical analysis of knowledge.”

³ See Burnyeat 1980, 187 for an argument that the slave’s true *doxa* at the end of the discussion is, by modern standards, justified; cf. Schwab 2015, 23.

⁴ This is the traditional although by now highly controversial interpretation; on any interpretation of the middle dialogues it is clear that *epistêmê* has some special access to Forms and some special difficulty with perceptibles.

⁵ For the view that *epistēmē* is understanding see Burnyeat 1980 and Nehamas 1985, among others; for the point about Forms see especially Schwab 2016.

⁶ Vlastos 1985.

⁷ Woodruff 1990.

⁸ See for example Bosanquet 1895, Jowett 1908, Taylor 1926, Shorey 1930, and Hackforth 1958.

⁹ For a recent defense of this line see Wolterstorff 1996, 220-1: “[T]he medievals were at one with Plato in their understanding of *epistēmē*” because in the *Republic* *epistēmē* is a grasp of “what is fully real...the necessary, eternal, immutable;” for a version that begins with Aristotle, see Pasnau 2017, lecture 1.

¹⁰ See especially Fine 2004.

¹¹ There are in fact two quite different versions of Hypothesis 2 discernable in the literature on the relation between *epistēmē* and explanation. On one, Plato thinks of knowledge as intrinsically involving explanation because it is itself a kind of understanding: I take this to be what Burnyeat has in mind when he says that Plato is “elaborating a richer concept of knowledge tantamount to understanding” (1980, 186). On the other, Plato thinks of knowledge more or less as we do now, but he has very strict standards for how it is acquired, which make him attribute to the knower features we would think inessential. For example, he agrees with us that justification is central to knowledge, but thinks that justification can only be conferred through explanation (Fine 2004, 64). I will mostly ignore this distinction in what follows, but the view I wind up provisionally defending is a version of the former.

¹² Compare Fine, forthcoming. She puts the question using terminology from Rawls’ *Theory of Justice*: does Plato share our *concept* of knowledge, while advancing a different *conception*? I justify my choice of terminology below.

¹³ Some claim that ‘*epistēmē*’ in Plato’s time meant knowledge, and Plato shows no signs of trying to introduce a new meaning (see Fine, 2004, 70, and Barnes 1980, 204-5). But in fact it is far from clear that *epistēmē* in Plato’s time and before is used in the same way we use ‘knowledge’ – as opposed to or in addition to, say, professional expertise, or deep understanding (as even a quick look at the entry in LSJ will show). Moreover, Plato is notoriously willing to twist ordinary language beyond popular recognition: consider for example his treatment of justice (*dikaïosunē*) in the *Republic* (*passim*), or of wanting (*to boulesthai*) in the *Gorgias* (467b-468c). Whether he means literally to redefine certain words, or simply to present surprising theories about their application, ordinary usage is often a poor guide to Plato’s.

¹⁴ For example, if Fine is right, he would offer as an axiom that *epistēmē* is “a truth-entailing cognitive condition that goes beyond and is cognitively superior to mere true belief” (forthcoming); or perhaps, if Nehamas and others are right, he would say something like “a deep grasp of explanatory connections.”

¹⁵ She might argue for example that satisfying the desires one has while in a psychotic episode will leave one with a life no rational person would think preferable to its opposite.

¹⁶ Work in progress.

¹⁷ Compare among others Cornford: “If we are to decide whether sensation or perception or belief is to be called knowledge or not, we must assume certain marks that any candidate for the title must possess on Plato’s views” (1935, 29). In the next section, I follow Cornford in taking the *Theaetetus*’ two “marks” to be anticipated in *Republic V*.

¹⁸ ὡς ἐπιστήμη οὔσα. The *hōs* clause confusingly implies that the equation of perception with *epistēmē* is a premise in the argument rather than its conclusion; for an argument that the clause should be deleted, see White (1972). If we retain the clause, Levett’s translation, “as befits” works best.

¹⁹ Perception cannot grasp or apprehend or hit on or lay hold of being: λαμβάνειν, 185b, τυχεῖν, 186c, ἄψασθαι, 186d, 186e). Plato seems to use these terms interchangeably; I will use ‘grasp’ to cover them all.

²⁰ οὐ μέτεστιν ἀληθείας ἄψασθαι: οὐδὲ γὰρ οὐσίας... οὐδ’ ἄρ’ ἐπιστήμης.

²¹ This is what Fine calls the “dialectical requirement”: given his stated goal, Socrates must argue from premises acceptable to his interlocutors (Fine 1990).

²² ὁ γιγνώσκων γινώσκει τὶ ἢ οὐδέν; Socrates in this argument seems to use *gnōsis* interchangeably with *epistēmē*, and to use *gignōskein* as the verb correlate with both; for the purposes of this paper I will treat the terms as simply equivalent. (See also footnote 1.)

²³ That is what *epistēmē* is “over” (*epi*); that is *epistēmē*’s object (the *gnōston*).

²⁴ This time we get no explicit confirmation that the sight-lovers agree, but by this point in the dialogue we have already seen evidence that it is a view held by someone with no commitment to Socrates’ radical epistemology: Thrasymachus argued that craftspeople only err when their *epistēmē* abandons them (340e).

²⁵ Both dialogues use *to on* (what is) and *ousia* (being) interchangeably. In the absence of strong reason to doubt, it is very natural to take “of what is” to spell out the same relation as “over what is” or “what is is the object (*gnōston*),” especially when we take into account the rephrasing at *Rep.* 534a: “about (*peri*) being.”

²⁶ The *Theaetetus*' *apseudes* is indeed sometimes translated 'infallible,' although the word is commonly used to mean something rather different: truthful, non-deceiving, in reference for example to oracles'.

²⁷ There is no reason to think that Theaetetus and the sight-lovers have the same views of *epistēmē*, although we learn too little about either to be sure. Certainly there is no reason to think the sight-lovers would accept the Protagorean relativism on which all perceptions are true and thus every perceiver an *epistēmôn* (possessor of *epistēmē*), for they think themselves epistemically superior to others on the subject of beauty.

²⁸ The last two use 'noēsis,' but see footnote 1.

²⁹ Note in support of this reading that Plato sometimes, although not always, says that true *doxa* is of "what is" (e.g. *Symposium* 202a, *Republic* 413a, and strongly implied by the *Sophist* and *Theaetetus* discussions of false *doxa* as of "what is not"; in sharp contrast however see *Republic* 478d-e, 508d, 534a, *Timaeus* 27d-28a, and others). On the proposed interpretation, the claim would be that true *doxa* is factive, but inferior to *epistēmē* in that its connection to the truth is somehow shakier.

³⁰ τὸ μὲν παντελῶς ὄν παντελῶς γνωστόν, *Rep.* 477a.

³¹ *Noēsis*, *gnōsis* and *gnōme* show up as apparent synonyms for *epistēmē* throughout the middle books; in our *Republic* V passage, as we saw, Plato uses *gnōston* as the objective correlate of *epistēmē*.

³² What about in the *Theaetetus*, where we saw the axiom? In the final refutation of the hypothesis that *epistēmē* is perception, as we have already seen, Socrates argues that perception does not get at being, and thus cannot be *epistēmē*. There is plenty of dispute over the intended sense of 'being' here, but there are very strong signs that it is something Robust: that once again Plato is picking out some items as ontologically superior, contrasting them with others, and dignifying them with the term 'being'. Consider the claim that "we perceive the hard and hardness...and the soft and softness" through touch, but cannot perceive "the being (*ousia*) and that they are" (*Theaet.* 186b-c). The being of the hard is different from the hard and hardness, just as in the *Meno* what virtue is differs from the many virtues (72b-c), or in the *Republic* what a bed is (the Form) is different from a particular bed (597a). Many interpretations find a robust sense of being here: being is essence, or Forms, or objective reality by contrast with appearance. (Burnyeat's influential view that being here is simply the copula is an exception.)

³³ Among various alternative readings see especially Fine 1990, arguing that *epistēmē* of perceptibles is enabled by *epistēmē* of Forms, and Smith 2000 and 2012, arguing that while *epistēmē* bears a special relation to Forms this is not the relation between a cognitive state and what it is about.

³⁴ For a very clear defense of this position, and an argument that it entails *epistêmê*'s restriction to Forms, see Schwab 2016.

³⁵ I am appealing here to a much-modified version of Fine's "dialectical requirement" (1990). I reckon that Socrates very frequently breaks this requirement in its strictest form, giving revisionist accounts of ordinary terms and appealing to views that his interlocutors find wildly implausible. But that is all at the level of what I'm calling substantive theory, rather than axioms.

³⁶ See Vlastos 1981.

³⁷ Of course he denies any extensional gap between reality and seeming: whatever seems to someone *really is* (for them) – and therefore being-seemed-to, since it puts us in touch with reality, is *epistêmê*.

³⁸ Some argue that this idea was alien to Plato and that this is crucial in understanding our differences (see Gerson 2009). I tend to agree with Fine 2004 that Plato recognized, at least intermittently, knowledge as a propositional attitude; what I would say is that this was not for him a very informative feature of it, for we need to specify the kind of object the propositions concern. We might well say that mathematical or historical knowledge is propositional, but that is not yet what makes each the special thing it is.)

³⁹ For a version of this project largely compatible with my arguments here (although with little focus on Plato), see Pasnau 2017, lectures 1 and 2.

⁴⁰ Thanks for very helpful discussion and comments to: Tim Clarke, Cian Dorr, Gail Fine, Jane Friedman, Juan Pineros, Whitney Schwab, and audiences at Berkeley, CUNY, Penn and Yale.