

“Plato’s *Doxa*”

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1. What is *Doxa*?

Plato is often regarded as a founding father of modern epistemology, the first to develop theories of knowledge and belief. Recent work has complicated this picture by showing that *epistēmē*, the superior kind in his epistemology, is strikingly different from contemporary epistemology’s knowledge, and perhaps has more in common with what we now call understanding.¹ What about the inferior kind in Plato’s epistemology, however – *doxa*? As one can see from standard translations, explicit discussions, and tacit assumptions, it is widely held that here Plato really is talking about just what we talk about now: belief.

The aim of this paper is to show that Plato’s *doxa* is very different from belief. It is a special kind of phenomenon, something which has no clear counterpart in contemporary epistemology, but which Plato thought absolutely central both to epistemology and to ethics: *cognition of what seems*.²

Three important notes before I begin.

First, this is not a paper about the meaning of the word ‘*doxa*’ in Plato. I am not trying to capture every use of that word, nor am I confining my attention to contexts in which Plato uses that word. I aim to show that we can find in his writings a developed theory of a specific kind of cognition, something which he usually refers to as *doxa* – although he sometimes refers to it using other terms (such as ‘*pistis*’ at *Gorgias* 454d or *Timaeus* 29c), and although he occasionally uses ‘*doxa*’ to refer to other phenomena, including, arguably, belief (see section 9).

Second, I will focus on Plato’s account of *doxa* in the so-called middle dialogues, especially the *Republic*, *Phaedo*, and *Timaeus*, for it is here that I think the account most developed, although it has clear roots in the earlier dialogues, and survives in some form in the later.³

Finally, although I want to show that Plato thinks of *doxa* very differently from how people nowadays think of belief, I will not try to show that *doxa* is *not* belief. I can imagine an interesting argument that the phenomenon I will describe is belief, conceived very differently from how we conceive it today. I do hope however to show that the differences are radical enough and fundamental enough that it is not fruitful to study Plato’s *doxa* by beginning from the assumption that it is belief. We should not use our theories and intuitions about belief to guide or constrain our interpretations of *doxa*. If we do, we not only create problems for Plato’s texts where there are none, we also miss out on features of his epistemology that are revealing, compelling, and very different from our own.

2. No *doxa* of Forms?

¹ For example Nehamas 1985, Schwab 2016. In forthcoming work, I argue that while *epistēmē* has much in common with understanding, it is best understood as something *sui generis*: a deep grasp of ultimate reality.

² I intend ‘cognition’ as a generic term, along the lines of thought or awareness. As will become clear, I intend the phrase ‘cognition of what seems’ to be read *de re*, not *de dicto*: *doxa* is thought about things that are in fact mere seemings or appearances, but not under that description.

³ I adopt the standard ordering of Plato’s works, but am not committed to it: for my purposes, the major division is between dialogues which embrace a distinction between Forms and perceptibles and dialogues which do not.

The account of *doxa* I will offer takes its inspiration from a series of texts from the middle dialogues. In these dialogues, Plato divides reality into two realms: the intelligible realm of Being – the Forms – and the perceptible realm of Becoming, ordinary things that come to be and pass away. Corresponding to this ontological division is an epistemological one. Plato consistently associates the realm of Forms with the best epistemic kind, *epistēmē* (or *gnōsis*, *noēsis*, *phronēsis*), usually translated ‘knowledge.’⁴ As to the inferior, perceptible realm, he associates it with an inferior kind, *doxa*. For example:

Those who contemplate the many [perceptible] beautifuls...have *doxa*...while those who contemplate the things that are always the same in every way [viz., the Forms] have knowledge but do not have *doxa*. (*Rep.* 479d-e)⁵

Doxa is about becoming, knowledge is about being. (*Rep.* 534a)

Whenever the soul is fixed on that on which truth and being shine, it understands and knows it, ...but whenever it [is fixed on] that which is mixed with darkness, that which comes to be and passes away, it has *doxa* and is weak-sighted, shifting its *doxai* up and down. (*Rep.* 508d)

What is that which always is, having no becoming, and what is that which is always becoming, never being? The former is grasped by knowledge with an account, always being the same; the latter in turn is the object of *doxa* through *doxa* with unreasoned perception. (*Timaeus* 27d-28a)

Doxa is set over what is between being and not-being (*Rep.* 478e); it is about becoming (*Rep.* 534a), or becoming is its object (*Tim.* 28a); *doxa* grasps the perceptible realm (*Tim.* 37b, 52a); the inferior realm can be referred to interchangeably as the visible or as the object of *doxa* (*Rep.* 509d with 510a).

Looking at these passages for the first time, one might well think that Plato’s claim is simple and stark: there is no *doxa* about Forms; all *doxa* is about perceptibles. Likewise – although this claim is not my focus here – there is no knowledge about perceptibles.

That is what is often called the ‘Two Worlds’ interpretation of Plato’s epistemology, but the name does not get to the heart of the issue. Nearly everyone agrees that according to these dialogues there *are* two worlds; there is controversy however about whether each world is the sole and exclusive object of its own correlated kind of cognition. I will therefore refer to the interpretation instead as the Distinct Objects interpretation. (I will reserve ‘Two Worlds’ for the metaphysical theory, referring to the *Republic* and other middle dialogues as the Two Worlds dialogues without meaning to beg the epistemological question.)

These days, most Plato scholars will tell you that this stark Distinct Objects view is not what Plato had in mind. He did not mean to restrict *doxa* utterly to perceptibles; instead his claim was a much subtler one. Perhaps he meant that *doxa* bears a special relation to perceptibles, but can also grasp Forms

⁴ For the purposes of this paper I will treat *epistēmē* and these other terms as interchangeable, as Plato often does (for discussion see Moline 1981, 191). I will also use ‘knowledge’ as a translation, without meaning to take a stand on whether what Plato has in mind is closest to our contemporary notion of knowledge or rather to something else, e.g. understanding.

⁵ Translations throughout are my own unless otherwise noted.

in a deficient way.⁶ Or he meant that the power of *doxa* puts us into cognitive contact only with perceptibles, but on that basis generates judgments or conceptions which are also about Forms.⁷ Or, most radically, in saying that *doxa* is of something different from Being he meant only to be saying that *doxa* can be false as well as true.⁸ These readings also apply *mutatis mutandis* to the relation between knowledge and Forms. I will call them Overlap interpretations, since their common claim is that there can be some overlap between the objects of *doxa* and *epistēmē*.

Overlap interpretations were almost unheard of before Fine's influential 1978 paper. Nowadays, despite a few important exceptions, they are the norm in analytic Plato scholarship.⁹ The alternative is regarded as "outrageous" (Baltzly 1997, 240), "deeply paradoxical, at best" (Smith 2012, 57). This is especially so where *doxa* is concerned: even a few scholars who think Plato really did restrict knowledge to Forms nonetheless deny that he restricted *doxa* to perceptibles.¹⁰ Why are scholars so confident that Plato must have countenanced *doxa* of Forms?

Certainly there are textual considerations that count strongly in favor of that view. In a much-cited passage of the *Republic* (506a-c), Socrates states almost explicitly that he has *doxa* about the Form of the Good; less noticed passage of the *Phaedo* describes philosophers' thoughts about Forms as *doxa* (66b-67b).¹¹ Moreover, the view that *doxa* cannot share knowledge's objects seems to be in stark tension with passages in the *Meno* and *Theaetetus* which strongly suggest an Overlap view: if knowledge results from correct *doxa* with the addition of an account (*Theaet.* 201c) or of reasoning (*Meno* 98a), then presumably whatever the resulting knowledge is about, the original *doxa* was about too.¹² (I leave aside here the textual evidence for knowledge of perceptibles, although it has surely contributed to the view that the Distinct Objects interpretation should be off the table.)¹³

The fact that a few passages seem to conflict with a given interpretation of Plato, however, cannot in itself be a decisive reason to reject that interpretation. Plato's texts are full of tensions. Moreover, he is often loose with terminology, in epistemic contexts as in others.¹⁴ The decision to identify certain passages as clear statements of his canonical view, and others as loose, anomalous, or in need of careful interpretation, must always be a philosophically loaded one.

History bears witness that this is so in the present case. A look back at two millennia of Plato scholarship shows that until about 1968 the situation was precisely the reverse of what it is today. The

⁶ For example, *doxa* cognizes perceptibles on its own but can also apprehend Forms with assistance from knowledge (Kamtekar 2009, 142-3); *doxa* is "naturally adapted" to perceptibles but can in a deficient way grasp Forms (Vogt 2012, 55); *doxa* is "normatively tasked" for perceptibles but can with the aid of perceptibles also cognize Forms (Harte 2017).

⁷ Smith 2000 and 2012, Szaif 2007.

⁸ Gosling 1968, Fine 1978 and 1990.

⁹ In addition to those cited in the previous footnotes, see among many others Annas 1981, Stokes 1992, Baltzly 1997, Butler 1997, Taylor 2008. For exceptions see for example Kahn 1996, Gonzalez 1997, Gerson 2006 and 2009, and Sedley 2007.

¹⁰ See Vogt 2012 and Schwab 2016.

¹¹ I discuss both passages in section 11.

¹² See for example Fine 1990.

¹³ Very briefly: *Rep.* 520c is thought to mention *epistēmē* of perceptibles; the whole argument that philosophers should rule is thought to presuppose that their *epistēmē* apply to perceptibles. See for example Annas 1981 and Smith 2000.

¹⁴ At one point Socrates even comments on his looseness explicitly: in noting that what he has labeled '*dianoia*' is often called '*epistēmē*,' he says that there will be "no dispute about names" (οὐ περὶ ὀνόματος ἀμφισβήτησις) when such important investigations are at hand (*Rep.* 533d-e).

view that *doxa* is restricted to perceptibles was orthodox, indeed almost entirely unquestioned. (I give some examples below, but there is far more than I can include here.) Older interpreters are usually simply silent on the passages that Overlappers find so significant, or they give readings consistent with the Distinct Objects interpretation without seeming to notice that there is any need to argue against an alternative.¹⁵ When they do notice passages that seem to conflict with the Distinct Objects reading, they find ways to read those passages on which the conflict disappears.¹⁶

Why is the situation so different now? To repeat, the discovery of textual problems for the Distinct Objects view is not enough to explain the widespread rejection of that view. Why were the implications of these passages only noticed so recently, despite thousands of years of detailed commentary? And why are they now so widely taken as decisive, mandating creative readings of the passages traditionally taken to entail Distinct Objects, rather than the other way around? More generally, how did a view that was attributed to Plato almost without question for two millennia come to be viewed as “outrageous”?

3. Belief

I propose that what ultimately drives resistance to the Distinct Objects interpretation of *doxa* is the view that that interpretation is wildly uncharitable – that Plato simply *must* have recognized *doxa* of Forms. And I propose that what underlies this view is the assumption that *doxa* is belief. I will defend these claims in two ways: first, by showing that the assumption that *doxa* is belief does indeed guide many who oppose Distinct Objects, and second, by showing that the traditional acceptance of Distinct Objects was paired with innocence of that assumption – that is, with views of *doxa* as something quite different from ordinary belief.

First, consider some typical arguments from Overlappers:

Now even before looking at the argument [of *Republic V*] we find it *prima facie* odd that an object of belief can never be an object of knowledge. For a start, it violates our intuition that the same thing can be first believed and then known, that coming to know is not changing the subject. (Annas 1980, 194; cf. Fine 1990, 85)

From the point of view of contemporary ethics, and from the point of view of ordinary talk about our ethical lives, it seems obvious that we have beliefs about the good... Surprisingly, Plato scholars have been content with an interpretation of the *Republic* according to which Plato cannot allow for beliefs about the good [*viz.*, an interpretation on which there is no *doxa* about the Form of the Good]. (Vogt 2012, 51)

[On the traditional reading of *Republic V*], knowledge and belief cannot have the same objects. But this seems puzzling... [I]ntuitively, it is possible for one person to have knowledge of the very same thing that another person believes; indeed, in

¹⁵ For example, a look at major English-language commentaries from an older era (Jowett and Campbell 1894, Bosanquet 1895, Adam 1902, Cornford 1941) shows straightforward Distinct Objects interpretations of *Rep.* 476e-80a, and no comments indicating any worries for that interpretation at 506c or 520c. I have found one exception: Murphy (1951, at 123-4), argues that there must be *doxa* of Forms, using the same kind of arguments we find in Vogt 2012 (see section 11).

¹⁶ See for example the NeoPlatonist commentators on the *Phaedo* 66b-67b, discussed in section 11, or ancient interpretations of the *Theaetetus* not as endorsing *epistêmê* of perceptibles but instead as showing “what *epistêmê* is *not* about” (Anonymous Commentary 2.34-39; see discussion in Sedley 1996).

modern epistemological discussions it is assumed that knowledge entails belief so that whatever a person knows that same person will also believe. (Harte 2017, 142)

These authors not only translate *doxa* as ‘belief’ but also assume that we can use our theories and intuitions about belief to guide our interpretation of *doxa*.

To be more precise, they take it as unproblematic that *doxa* is belief in either or both of two senses current in English: (1) the generic condition of judging or taking-to-be-true; (2) *mere* belief, or opinion: belief that falls short of knowledge.¹⁷ Some of these arguments treat *doxa* as belief in the first sense (as in the last line of the quotation from Harte), others as belief in the second sense (Vogt 2012 argues that this is Plato’s sole notion of *doxa* until the *Theaetetus*); some scholars make the ambiguity explicit (see Fine 2010, 325). For our purposes here the difference is insignificant, because belief in either sense is clearly not the kind of thing to be restricted in its objects. Perhaps we can get our minds around the idea of things that cannot be known, or understood, but how could there be something about which one cannot have beliefs? If you have even just only heard of Forms, or quarks, or the factors of 8,000, you can have beliefs about them. About Forms, one might for example believe that they do not exist, or that they are very hard to understand. Moreover, if we could have no beliefs about Forms then how could we discuss them when we do not yet have knowledge of them?¹⁸ It is not just that Plato said or implied at a few points that there is *doxa* of Forms; instead, this is precisely what we should expect him to hold. If *doxa* is belief – whether opinion or generic judgment – then there can and indeed must be *doxa* of Forms, and it is uncharitable to think Plato thought otherwise.

Clearly then the assumption that *doxa* is belief plays a part in motivating Overlap interpretations. But, one might protest, that is no count against such interpretations, for the assumption is unimpeachable: *of course doxa* is belief! I have not seen such an argument made explicit in writing, but the thought is something like this: not only are there plenty of striking similarities between Plato’s *doxa* and belief as nowadays understood (for example, both can be true or false; both can be subjectively uncertain), but more generally belief is so obviously central to epistemology, so clearly the salient contrast to knowledge, that anyone who does epistemology must be concerned with it – and the obvious candidate for it in Plato’s system is *doxa*.

I agree that Plato recognized and often referred to something very like our modern concept of belief. Along with his predecessors and contemporaries, he often uses various verbs (*hégēsthai*, *oiesthai*, *nomizein* and *hupolambanein*) in contexts where we would translate ‘believe’ or ‘think,’ evoking belief in either the sense of generic judgment or deficient opinion. Arguably he sometimes uses *doxa* and its cognate verb, *dokein*, in this way too. But, I want to show, belief is not what he was interested in theorizing in his discussions of *doxa*. (Nor indeed for the most part otherwise.)¹⁹

The fact is that most of Plato’s discussions of *doxa* invite a very different interpretation. More concretely, although the fact is now evidently much forgotten, they have been given a very different

¹⁷ I leave aside the question of whether ‘*doxa*’ on this interpretation – or for that matter the English word ‘belief’ – is simply ambiguous between these two senses, or always means the latter but sometimes connotes the former through implicature.

¹⁸ See especially Vogt 2012.

¹⁹ In later dialogues, the *Theaetetus*, *Philebus*, and *Sophist*, we arguably do find him developing the notion of generic judgment, and using ‘*doxa*’ to name it, but as many have recognized, this is a different notion from the one he has treated as *doxa* up until that point (see section 9). As to opinion, it is natural for us to take many of Plato’s uses of *doxa* as referring to this, but I will argue that he has something more specific in mind.

interpretation – not just by a few people, but by nearly everyone during nearly all of the history of Plato scholarship.

4. Alternative interpretations

First, there was a long and pervasive tradition on which *doxa* is cognition of perceptibles. Two representative examples:

- The author of the *Didaskalikos*, the vastly influential “handbook” of Platonism from the 2nd century CE, defines *doxa* as “the interweaving of memory and perception,” explicitly confining it to objects one has previously perceived (*Didaskalikos* 4.5).
- Proclus, commenting on Plato’s *Timaeus* in the 5th century CE, defines *doxa* as “cognition (*gnôsis*) of perceptibles,” arguing that *doxa*’s function is to discern the whole perceptible object unifying various proper perceptibles (*In Tim.* 2.249.2-27 commenting on *Tim.* 28a).²⁰

Second, there was another long and pervasive tradition on which *doxa* is what we might call *atheoretical* cognition – cognition which can make generalizations about perceptibles but does not go beyond these to contemplate imperceptible universals or causes. I will discuss this further below; a representative example here: Two representative examples:

- Two books published in 1962 argue that, in the contexts where Plato associates *doxa* with the perceptible realm, he has in mind “empirical cognition,” or “empirical knowledge” (Sprute 1962 and Gulley 1962)

Finally, there is a view of *doxa* as a response to how things *seem*. An example:²¹

- Cornford, commenting on the *Republic*, says that “*Doxa* and its cognates denote our apprehension of anything that ‘seems’: (1) what seems to *exist*, sensible appearances, phenomena (2) what seems *true*, opinions, beliefs, whether really true or false; (3) what seems *right*, legal and deliberative decisions, and the ‘many conventional notions’ of current morality (479d...)” (Cornford 1941, 181).

Leaving aside for the moment the merits of these views, I want simply to point out that on any of them, the Distinct Objects view is far from the outrageous non-starter it is so widely taken to be today. Indeed, such views render the restriction of *doxa* to perceptibles not only palatable but almost analytic. If *doxa* is cognition of perceptibles, or cognition that stops short of the abstract, there is, very clearly, no *doxa* of Forms. Cornford means his view to have the same implication: *doxa* is of things that are merely apparent, and therefore not of the real things, Forms. It is no coincidence that all these views go hand in hand with an embrace of Distinct Objects: indeed, they seem tailored to make sense of it. This then bolsters the hypothesis I put forth above: the turning of the tide against Distinct Objects is largely to be explained by the view that *doxa* is belief.²²

²⁰ Both Proclus and the *Didaskalikos* author clearly take inspiration from the *Theaetetus* 184b-187a, which arguably suggests this account of *doxa*.

²¹ See also Cornford 1933, 1937. Vogt endorses the view in her 2012, at 11-12. Some even translate *doxa* as ‘seeming’: see for example Bosanquet 1895 and Rowett 2018.

²² Why would this happen? Here is a hypothesis: certain discussions of *doxa* later in Plato are easily read as being about belief (see section 9); philosophers steeped in modern epistemology naturally took those discussions as canonical, and read others in their light.

5. A project

At this point the most I have established is a claim about intellectual history: there is a strong correlation between the tendency to read Plato as holding an Overlap epistemology and the tendency to view *doxa* as belief; conversely, there is a strong correlation between the tendency to read him as holding a Distinct Objects epistemology and the tendency to view *doxa* as something essentially tied to perception or seeming. I have not shown that we *should* embrace the latter, older set of views. Indeed, adherents of the current orthodoxy might be wholly unmoved. They might think: older interpreters got attached to the Distinct Objects interpretation of Plato because they did not notice that there are other ways to read the passages that seem to support it. This led them to minimize or distort the evidence against it. It also led them to inventive but implausible interpretations of *doxa*, and prevented them from understanding that *doxa* is belief. What we have in the new era is not anachronism, but real progress.

In the rest of this paper I argue that the older set of views deserves to be put back firmly on the table, for there is a plausible, textually grounded, and philosophically compelling account of *doxa* with much in common with these older accounts. I take my slogan from Cornford, although my proposed account is closely related to the other older accounts as well: on the account I develop, *doxa* is *cognition of what seems*.

I do not aim to show decisively that this is the correct reading of Plato's *doxa*, nor that the view of *doxa* as belief must be wrong. I aim instead to show that this alternative account is both viable and compelling, and must be reckoned with: the current orthodoxy does not deserve to stand unquestioned.

To succeed in this project, I will need to accomplish three things.

First, I will need to show that the alternative account of *doxa* is not *ad hoc*, designed simply to accommodate a stark Distinct Objects interpretation, but instead securely grounded in Plato's texts. This is my project in sections 6-10.

Second, I will need to address the obstacles to the account: the apparent textual evidence that Plato does recognize *doxa* of Forms, and along with it the philosophical argument that he should. Most proponents of accounts of *doxa* similar to the one I propose were writing before these objections were articulated (neither Proclus nor Cornford got to read Fine!); now that these objections have been so forcefully put forth, any revival of the view depends on showing how it can be defended against them. That is the task of section 11.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I will need to show that my proposed account of *doxa* is a compelling one to attribute to Plato. We already understand why a philosopher would devote extensive attention to belief; if we are to take the alternative account seriously, we need to be shown that Plato had good reason to be interested in cognition of what seems – indeed to make such cognition the central inferior kind in his epistemology. Making this argument in full is a larger project, but I make a start, first by showing *that* Plato is much interested in cognition of what seems (section 12), and closing with a brief argument that such a notion is a very fitting focus for his epistemology (section 13).

6. *Doxa* and seeming

What is Plato's *doxa*? Let us begin with the word itself. '*Doxa*' is the noun formed from the verb '*dokein*', standardly translated 'to seem'. On one prominent use, a thing's *doxa* is the way it seems to others: a person's *doxa* for example is her reputation. *Dokein* with the dative means 'it seems to...', and so a person's *doxa* in a second sense – the sense contrasted with knowledge – is how things seem *to* her. Traditionally the former is called the objective and the latter the subjective sense of *doxa* (see for example Bosanquet 1895, 209 and Havelock 1963, 250-51). To avoid unwanted connotations I will characterize

the former sense as the object-sense, or as referring to “what seems.” As we will see, depending on context ‘what seems’ may refer to a substantive independent entity, like a façade or image, or may simply function as a way of picking out how someone perceives or thinks things to be.

Given this etymology, it is built into the meaning of the word that *doxa* is a response to what seems. This might be of little significance: perhaps Plato does not intend this connotation, or perhaps he construes seeming so neutrally that by “what seems to *S*” he understands nothing more than “what *S* thinks is the case,” so that *doxa* is after all simply generic belief. Indeed, I will suggest that this is what Plato has in mind when, in the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*, he uses ‘*doxa*’ to name the condition of silently asserting something to oneself (see section 9). First however I will show that throughout the dialogues we also find a much more metaphysically loaded notion of what *merely* seems, by contrast with what is true or real, and a correspondingly loaded notion of *doxa* as a response to such appearances.

7. What seems

Seeming is a contrast notion: it is one half of an antithesis, defined in opposition to being, and *dokein* and *einai* are frequently presented in Greek texts as a contrasting pair. For example: “He wished not to *seem* the best, but to *be* so” (Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes* 592-4, quoted at *Rep.* 362a). Although seeming and being can converge – things often seem just as they are – there is always a conceptual distinction between the two.²³

In these contexts, the claim that *x* seems has two implications: (1) it is easy to form an impression of *x* as being a certain way – *x* strikes us that way vividly or manifestly; (2) this does not entail anything about how things really are.

In some contexts, the contrast between seeming and being is sharpened into an opposition: how things seem is a very deceptive guide to how they are; a thing’s appearance is a façade that is not only ontologically distinct but also qualitatively very different from its being. We find significant instances of this use of *dokein* and cognates in the works of some of Plato’s influential predecessors. Parmenides contrasts “the unshaken heart of persuasive truth” with “the things that seem” (B1.28-32). Xenophanes concurs: we can never have knowledge about the gods or other obscure subjects, for “seeming is wrought over all (δοκός δ’ ἐπὶ πᾶσι τέτυκται)” (B34). Most dramatically, the poet Simonides says that “seeming fights against truth (τὸ δοκεῖν καὶ τὰν ἀλάθειαν βιάται)” (fr. 76).

Plato himself makes extensive use of this notion of seeming throughout the dialogues. In the *Republic*, where the contrast between really being just and merely seeming so pervades the first part of the dialogue, he even quotes the line we just saw from Simonides:

[Someone raised on popular culture will think that] my *being* just, if I do not also seem so, is no benefit...but a godlike life is promised to the unjust person who has prepared a seeming (*doxa*). Surely, if “seeming,” as the wise show me, “even fights against truth,” and is lord of happiness...I must draw a shadow-painting of virtue around myself in a circle as a front and a façade... (*Rep.* 365b-c)

The *Republic* also emphasizes this contrast between being and seeming in other domains: the arguments turn on contrasts between real friends who seem beneficial and seeming friends who seem

²³ We also find an antithesis between *doxa* and truth, *alêtheia*. Since for the Greeks in general and Plato in particular there is a very close conceptual connection between being and truth – close enough that the two words are often used almost synonymously – what I say about the antithesis with being will apply also to the antithesis with truth.

beneficial (334c-335a), between what seems to be to the ruler's advantage and what really is (340c), between seeming to persuade people and really persuading them (357a), and between seeming good and being so (361b, and 505d). In all these cases, Plato appeals to variations on *doxa* and *dokein* to express that something can seem to be some way whether or not it really is: not all seeming friends are real friends, not all seemingly just people are really just. Moreover, Plato's pessimism in the *Republic* often implies the stronger thesis we see in Simonides and others: things tend to seem to be quite different from how they really are.

The contrast between seeming and being is frequent in other dialogues too. To take a few representative examples among many, consider the *Apology's* discussion of those who seem or are reputed to be wise, but are not (21c), the *Gorgias'* contrast between the seeming good condition of body or soul and the real thing (464a), or the *Sophist's* claim that false images are a matter of "appearing and seeming but not being" (236e)

Plato thus joins his predecessors and contemporaries in making prominent use of a notion of seeming on which what seems is sharply contrasted with what really is.

8. Subjective seeming

Moreover, Plato also joins his predecessors and contemporaries in making prominent use of a corresponding notion of *doxa* as the subjective correlate of what seems. If your attention is confined to how things seem – if you are attending to reputations, facades, images, or appearances – you will as a result come to have *doxa* rather than knowledge.

This correlation is manifest in Gorgias's *Helen*, where orators make "what is incredible and unclear appear (φαίνεσθαι) to the eyes of *doxa*" (*Helen* 13, cf. 10): it is *doxa*, not knowledge, that takes in deceptive appearances. In Parmenides too, *doxai* are about the things that seem, rather than about truth (B1.28-32). In Plato, the correlation comes out particularly clearly in his discussion of rhetoric and sophistry, arts that he characterizes as both (a) concerned with what seems rather than what is, and (b) producing *doxa* rather than *epistêmê*.²⁴ Consider especially a passage which moves without argument between the two characterizations:

[Phaedrus]: It's necessary for the person who intends to be an orator to learn (a) not what *is* just but what *seems* so to the many who will pass judgment, nor what is really good or fine but which things will seem so. For persuasion [is produced] from these things, and not from the truth... – [Socrates]: The orator, not knowing good and bad, undertakes to persuade a city in the same condition... and (b) having studied the *doxai* of the many, persuades them to do bad things instead of good ones... (*Phdr.* 260a-c; cf. *Phdr.* 261c-d and *Sophist* 234c-d)

Plato takes the claim that (a) the orator presents what seems just (or good or fine) to entail the claim that (b) the orator is concerned with the audience's *doxai*. I suggest that he is taking it as obvious that a subjective *doxa* is the result of accepting how things seem.

We find a similar move with the same implication in *Republic* VII:

Whoever is not able to define the Form of the Good by *logos*... (a) being zealous to examine it *not in accordance with doxa but in accordance with being* ... you will say that the person like that does not know the good itself nor any other good. But

²⁴ In addition to the passages quoted below, for claim (a) see among others *Gorgias* 459b-c, 464a-b, *Sophist* 233c, and *Rep.* 602b; for claim (b), see also *Theaetetus* 201a.

if he should in a way lay hold of some image, you will say (b) he *lays hold of it by doxa, not epistêmê*, and spends this present life dreaming and sleeping. (*Rep.* 534b-c, emphases mine)

In its first occurrence, in (a), *doxa* is contrasted with being, and so we should take it in the object sense: what seems. In its second occurrence, in (b), the contrast is instead with *epistêmê*, so we now have *doxa* in the subjective sense. Investigating things in accordance with what seems rather than with being gives one *doxa* rather than *epistêmê*; a focus on what seems in the world produces being-seemed-to in the mind.

These unargued moves from claims of type (a) to claims of type (b) suggest that Plato is working with an implicit theory of *doxa* as a response to what seems, where what seems is opposed to reality. I want now to show how this makes sense of his characterizations of *doxa*.

9. Two senses of ‘*doxa*’

First, a clarification. Plato’s dialogues show two very different uses of ‘*doxa*’. For the most part he sharply contrasts *doxa* with *epistêmê*, characterizing *doxa* as both inferior to and incompatible with *epistêmê*: someone who gains knowledge about some subject thereby ceases to have *doxa* of it. (See for example the contrast between sightlovers’ *doxa* and philosophers’ knowledge in *Republic* V, or between rival theories of virtue as true *doxa* or knowledge in the *Meno*). These are the uses that have invited the translation ‘opinion’. At other times, he uses ‘*doxa*’ in a much more neutral way, evidently to function like contemporary epistemology’s generic notion of belief: generic taking-to-be-true, of which knowledge is a special species. We see this especially clearly in the later dialogues’ account of *doxa* as silently assertion (*Theaetetus* 189e-190a; cf. *Sophist* 263e-264a, *Philebus* 38b-39a), and in the *Theaetetus*’ suggestion that knowledge itself is a kind of *doxa*. Many interpreters have taken Plato to be here articulating a theory of *doxa* as “judgement,” or “truth-claim” – something close to the modern notion of belief; some add – to my mind rightly – that this is a departure from his earlier notion of *doxa*.²⁵

Thus Plato’s use of *doxa* is ambiguous. On our account, however, the ambiguity is not arbitrary, because the notion of seeming is similarly ambiguous. As we have seen already, Plato often thinks of seemings as *mere* seemings. But *dokein*, just like our ‘seem,’ can also be quite neutral, and “it seems to me” can simply mean “This is my impression, this is how things appear to me,” with emphasis not on any contrast with reality, but instead on the subjectivity of the report. This latter use fits very well with the use of *doxa* to mean judgment or generic belief.²⁶ If ‘seems’ is ambiguous, and if *doxa* is by definition of what seems, then ‘*doxa*’ will be ambiguous too.²⁷

With that said, I will for the remainder of the paper set aside the notion of generic judgment and concentrate on the notion Plato most often picks out with ‘*doxa*’: deficient cognition, now understood as a

²⁵ See for example Vogt 2012, 84, and Sprute 1962.

²⁶ There are other explanations for why Plato would choose ‘*doxa*’ as his label for this kind of cognition. Perhaps he is picking up on the older root of *dokein* in *dechesthai*, to accept: one considers a proposition, and then it becomes one’s *doxa* once one accepts or approves it. I am grateful to Alex Mourelatos and Paul Woodruff for discussion of this point.

²⁷ It is of course confusing to use these words in both ways, especially within the same dialogue. Plato shows signs of trying out new vocabulary to disambiguate: perhaps he introduces ‘*phantasia*’ in the *Sophist* to pick out responses to mere-seemings opening room for new usage on which ‘*doxa*’ would unambiguously denote generic judgment. (For a similar argument see Grönroos 2013, although he argues that ‘*doxa*’ now comes to denote not generic judgment, but a superior species thereof, namely a grasp of essences.) Moss and Schwab (2019) argue that Aristotle resolves the ambiguity in a different direction, keeping ‘*doxa*’ for the inferior kind of cognition and introducing a new term, ‘*hupolêpsis*,’ for generic belief.

response to what seems in the pejorative sense. I want now to show that it follows from this notion that *doxa* is only of perceptibles, never of Forms. Showing this will vindicate the traditional Distinct Objects reading, and it will also help us better understand Plato's notion of *doxa*.

10. Perceptibles seem, Forms do not

We saw above that Plato takes seeming and being as contrast notions, two sides of an antithesis. I want now to show that his Two Worlds metaphysics inflates this distinction: what seems – the perceptible realm – is not what Is, and what Is – the intelligible realm of Forms – does not seem. In other words, following Parmenides, Plato draws a sharp line between an ontologically inferior realm that is manifest to us through perception, and an ontologically superior realm that is hidden, accessible only through intellect.

Plato only describes the perceptible realm using words for seeming or appearance on a few occasions: it is “the region that appears through sight” at *Rep.* 517b; it is a *phantasma*, deceptive appearance, at *Tim.* 52c. But the idea is pervasive in the Two Worlds dialogues. The perceptible realm foists itself on our attention, inviting our trust and making us take it as real, but in truth it is only an image and shadow of the Forms.²⁸ I defend this claim more carefully elsewhere,²⁹ but the point should be fairly uncontroversial: on Plat's view, perceptibles are not what Is, but they *seem* real. It is no wonder then that Plato refers to this realm interchangeably as the perceptible and as the object of *doxa* (see *Rep.* 509d with 510a).

As to the Forms, we can access them only through a radical questioning and criticizing of everything that is readily apparent and manifest. Therefore, so long as we remain with how things seem to us – that is, at the level of *doxa* – we cannot even be thinking about them.

We can detect Plato making just this argument in a passage that, while much-discussed, has been underappreciated for what it shows about the contrast between *doxa* and *epistêmê*, and the transition between the two. I have in mind the famous summoners passage of *Republic VII*.

Socrates is discussing the education that will “draw the soul away from Becoming toward Being” (521d), or, as he describes it at the end of the discussion, will lift the soul out of *doxa* toward *epistêmê* (533e-534a). This education will begin by exploiting the contradictory nature of certain perceptions. When sight reports that the same finger is big (compared to a smaller one) and small (compared to a bigger one), or touch reports that the same thing is hard and soft (compared to different things),

The soul is puzzled about what at all the sense means by ‘the hard’... So it is likely that it is in these kind of cases that the soul first attempts, summoning reasoning and thought (*noêsis*), to investigate whether each of the things announced [e.g. hard and soft, or big and small] is one or two... And is it not from this [experience] that *it first occurs to us to ask what at all the Big is* (τί οὖν ποτ' ἐστὶ), *and the Small?* (*Rep.* 524a-c, emphasis mine)

If turning our attention from Becoming to Being means moving from *doxa* toward *epistêmê*, then *doxa* must be the state that we are in before we notice contradictions in our perceptions, and that we begin to leave behind when we do notice these. Before the transition, we trust the reports of our senses, not thinking to question them, and therefore not thinking to use any other means of investigation. This is the condition illustrated by Cave-prisoners and sightlovers, of going with how things *seem*: a perceptible

²⁸ See especially the Cave allegory, and *Phaedo* 82d-83e.

²⁹ See my MS, *Plato's Epistemology: Being and Seeming*.

object strikes us as having a certain quality (a finger as big, a spectacle as beautiful), and so we simply accept that it does. We go with how things seem; we have *doxa*.

What the summoners passage shows is that so long as we remain at this level, we are not even having thoughts about Forms. For it is *only* when we stop trusting the reports of the senses that we start even to ask questions about Being: to ask “what at all the Big *is*.” It is not that at the earlier stage we had false or inadequate views about what the Big is, it is that we had no views at all: we had not even formulated the question. Our cognitions were not “set over” the Being of bigness at all – they were about the particular sizes of particular perceptible things. Thus our questions and thoughts about Being are not about how things seem, but instead investigations into what underlies or transcends what seems. Thinking about Being requires moving past what seems; therefore, *doxa* is never of Being.

Perhaps the best way to bring out the idea is by way of a contrast between the radical questioning of perception in the summoning cases, and the more moderate questioning that can take one from passively accepting perceptual appearances to a reflective judgment about perceptible objects. Consider the reasoned *doxa* about the true size of a distant object, which Plato considers at *Republic* 602e-603a. Although this *doxa* is contrasted with one that simply accepts appearances, it does not really transcend perception. When we ask whether a particular object is the size it appears to be from a distance, we are still taking the perceptible world to be the whole world, and taking perception to be our ultimate authority. (The assumption is that if we were to see the object under better conditions, we could see how it really is.) The questioning involved in the summoners passage, by contrast, doubts whether the truth about smallness can be found at all in the perceptible world (“Are bigness and smallness really always mixed up together as my senses report?”), thereby leaving behind what seems; in the process, it brings the mind to think about Being (“Is there instead one thing, the Small Itself, in every way different from the Big? What is that thing?”). Thus this kind of questioning, but not the first, counts as moving beyond how things seem, and as turning one’s mind toward Being. These two steps go together: so long as we remain at the level of what seems we are not thinking about Being. Being does not seem.³⁰

Thus if we understand *doxa* as the subjective correlate of what seems, we can make sense of Plato’s evident Distinct Objects view of *doxa*. Perceptibles seem, and so we have *doxa* of them; Forms do not seem, and so there is no *doxa* of Forms.

Despite these arguments, many will still object that Plato simply must, and indeed plainly does, acknowledge *doxa* of Forms. I turn to those objections now.

11. Objections: *Doxa* of Forms?

I argued above that much of the widespread insistence on *doxa* of Forms is motivated by the assumption that *doxa* is ordinary belief, coupled with the view that it is clearly possible to have beliefs about Forms. I hope to have undermined that motivation by showing that *doxa* is instead something much more specific, a response to what seems. Nonetheless, the spirit of the objection may still stand, as follows:

³⁰ What about when Plato says that the Forms *appear* to be many although they are each one (*Rep.* 476a), or that the Form of Beauty “glitters most vividly” through sight (*Phdr.* 250d)? I submit that this vocabulary is loose: Plato’s idea is not that the Form itself directly appears to us, but that it does so indirectly, through its perceptible images. (We can say “You just showed up on the screen” when what is really on the screen is your image: people themselves cannot appear on screens, but can only do so via their images.) Another objection: in the *Phaedo* sticks and stones appear equal to some and unequal to others, while the Equal themselves (the Form) never appeared unequal (74b-c); does this mean that the Form always appears equal? Plato makes only the negative claim, that the Form has never appeared deceptively. Sticks and stones can be one way and appear another, precisely because they are things capable of appearing; the Form, he strongly suggests, is not.

Plato certainly seems to present people who lack knowledge as nonetheless having thoughts about Forms.³¹ Consider among many other examples one that is central to this debate, and to which we will return below, Socrates' thoughts about the Form of the Good (506b ff.). These are clearly not *epistêmê*: Socrates explicitly denies that he or his interlocutors have knowledge of the Forms (see for example 506c, 533a). Therefore – the objection goes – these thoughts must be *doxa*, for there is nothing else that they could be.³² Moreover, Plato calls them that, almost explicitly.

This line of argument turns out to rest on a false dichotomy: Plato does in fact recognize a category between knowledge and *doxa*. There is something he describes as “between *doxa* and *nous*” (511d), or “clearer than *doxa*, darker than *epistêmê*” (533d).³³ This is something he calls *dianoia* (“thought,” on a standard translation): the thinking exemplified by mathematicians, which uses perceptible things as images of intelligibles, and relies on hypotheses (510b-e). *Dianoia* has been largely neglected in the Distinct Objects debate. It plays a major role in the Line and Cave epistemologies, however, and is, I shall argue, well suited to play precisely the role that the objectors' arguments attribute to *doxa*.

In making this argument I am following the lead not only of a few recent scholars,³⁴ but also of the NeoPlatonists. These philosophers, who endorsed a stark Distinct Objects epistemology, elevated *dianoia* to a major role on which it fills several gaps left between *doxa* and *epistêmê*. In particular, they assigned it the task we are concerned with here: accounting for thoughts which are directed toward Forms without yet fully grasping them. For example, Olympiodorus, commenting on *Phaedo* 65e, says that the person who comes close but not all the way to knowing the truth is “using the activity of *dianoia*” (διανοητική ἐνέργεια), while the person who achieves the truth is using the activity of *noêsis* (νοητὰ ἐνέργεια) (*In Platonis Phaedonem*, 5.4).

To be clear, my aim is not to insist that Plato intended *dianoia* to play this role, nor that he had a worked out account of how it could do so. I am not confident that he noticed the problem of how to account for beliefs about Forms that fall short of knowledge; neither am I confident that he conceived of *dianoia* as being broad enough in its content to be able to solve the problem. Nonetheless, the fact that he included *dianoia* in his epistemology shows at the least that he has the resources to solve the problem without appealing to *doxa*. For *dianoia* is in the right genus: it is something superior to *doxa*, and about Forms (I shall show), but inferior to a full grasp of Forms.

To make my case, I begin with a brief review of Plato's notion of *dianoia*. *Republic V*'s simple distinction between *doxa* and *epistêmê* is refined in the Line image, which distinguishes two conditions set over the visible realm, namely *eikasia* and *pistis*, and two set over the intelligible, namely *dianoia* and *nous* (or *noêsis*) (511d-e). *Nous* is the highest level, in which we fully grasp and can give an account of all the Forms (511d). *Dianoia* is the penultimate level. It is like *nous* in being set over intelligibles (511d; cf. 510b), but while in *dianoia* we have our thoughts “for the sake of” intelligibles (510d), and are seeking to grasp those intelligibles (to “see” them, 510e-511a), we are not yet able to grasp them directly,

³¹ Some deny this. Only when we have fully, correctly grasped the Forms do we count as having thoughts about the Forms themselves at all. For variants on this view see Gerson (2009, 41) and Woolf (2013). What I go on to say about *dianoia* will show that Plato does in fact recognize deficient thoughts that are nonetheless in a robust sense about Forms.

³² For this widespread argument see for especially Vogt 2012 53; compare Baltzly 1997, 266.

³³ The switch from *epistêmê* to *nous* is dismissed as a terminological variant at 533e: clearly in each of these quotations the contrast is between *dianoia* and the very highest epistemic condition.

³⁴ For arguments in line with mine here, see Gallop 1965, Gonzalez 1996, 273, note 50, and Gerson 2006, 182-9.

but are “forced to investigate from hypotheses, using [perceptibles] as images” (510b), as geometers do when they draw visible rectangles as aids to investigate “the rectangle itself” (510c-d). Geometry and the other sciences that form the bulk of this education, although often called *epistēmai*, are more properly called *dianoia* because they are “clearer than *doxa* but darker than *epistēmē*” (533d), and this again because they rely on hypotheses (533b-c).

All these characterizations attribute two crucial features to *dianoia*: (i) it is superior to *doxa* but inferior to the best epistemic condition, namely the full grasp of Forms, and (ii) unlike *doxa* it is set over some part of the intelligible realm. There are important questions about how to understand each of these points; the latter in particular – the question of *dianoia*’s objects – has been the subject of much controversy.³⁵ Without taking much of a stand on these questions, however, we can see that Plato offers in *dianoia* the resources we need to explain deficient cognition of Forms.

First, we have the idea that there is a kind of cognition that is superior to *doxa* precisely insofar as it regards perceptibles as mere images of intelligibles rather than as ultimate reality. Sightlovers do not acknowledge the Beautiful Itself, but consider perceptible beautifuls the last word; mathematicians by contrast are aware that there is such a thing as the rectangle itself, and they use perceptible rectangles as mere images of it. In the language of the summoners passage, they have got past a focus on the shapes of particular rectangles, and can ask the question “what at all the rectangle Is.” That is why Plato counts *dianoia* but not *doxa* as being set over intelligibles (511d-e): in *dianoia*, but not in *doxa*, one recognizes the existence and importance of intelligibles, and as a corollary recognizes the limitations of perceptibles. This confirms our account of *doxa* above: it is essentially limited to perceptibles; its defining limitation is its inability to get beyond them by recognizing them as mere images of the intelligible.

Second, we have the resources to explain cases like Socrates’ thoughts about the Good – thoughts about Forms which are inferior to knowledge – for in *dianoia* one is very plausibly thinking *about* the intelligible objects one does not yet fully grasp. Geometers make their claims “for the sake of” the Square itself (510d). More generally, all mathematicians

grasp what is to some extent, for we see that while they dream about what Is (περὶ τὸ ὄν), it is impossible for them to see it waking, so long as they use hypotheses that they leave untouched, not being able to give an account of them. (533b-c)

In exercising *dianoia*, geometers are not directly grasping what Is, but unlike people with mere *doxa* they “grasp it to some extent;” they are at least dreaming *about* it. In *dianoia* then we count as having thoughts *about* things whose existence we recognize, but whose nature we do not yet fully grasp – precisely the condition Socrates and his interlocutors are in when discussing the Forms.

Indeed, Plato characterizes deficient thoughts about Forms in terms strikingly similar to those he uses to describe mathematical *dianoia* – namely as relying on hypotheses and on the use of ordinary perceptibles taken as images. We see this in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates refers to his views about Forms as hypotheses (100a-b). We see it extensively in the *Republic*’s use of the Sun, Line and Cave images to illustrate views about Forms and their relation to perceptibles. Here Plato even explicitly emphasizes the reliance on images: when Glaucon asks what goes on at the highest epistemic level, Socrates replies,

³⁵ Aristotle argues that Plato believes in mathematical, “different from perceptibles things by their being eternal and unchanging, and different from Forms by their being many of the same kind” (*Met.* 987b14–18; see also 1028b19–21; cf. Adam 1902, comment *ad Rep.* 510-511). There are many other accounts: for example, *dianoia* is set over images of Forms like the *logoi* (discussions, accounts) of the kind Socrates and his interlocutors give (Gallop 1965), or over visible objects that are used as images of Forms (Smith 1996).

You won't be able to follow me further...for you would no longer be seeing an image of what we are speaking of but the truth itself... (*Rep.* 533a)

The clear implication is that their discussion must rely on images, precisely because they do not yet grasp the Forms.

Perhaps then Plato would straightforwardly classify these deficient thoughts about Forms as *dianoia*, as some have indeed suggested.³⁶ If instead, as is often thought, he restricts *dianoia* to mathematical thinking, then these thoughts are not *dianoia* because they are not about mathematical objects – or, less arbitrarily, because unlike mathematical thought they include explicit aspiration toward a higher, unhypothetical grasp.³⁷ In either case, however, because they recognize and use perceptibles as mere images of intelligibles, they are distinct from and superior to *doxa*.

Note how well this account fits with what Socrates says in the very passage where he is often taken to avow *doxa* of Forms. When asked to state his own *dogma* (a variant of *doxa*) about the Good (506b) he refuses, and offers to provide an analogy instead:

Haven't you observed that *doxai* without knowledge are all shameful?...Let us let go of the what at all the Good itself is for now, for to reach what now seems to me (τοῦ γε δοκοῦντος ἐμοί) is too much for the present attempt. But I am willing to say what appears to be the offspring of the Good and most like it, if you would like... (506c-e)

Socrates goes on to argue that just as the sun is the source of both becoming and vision in the perceptible realm, so the Good is the source of both being and knowledge in the intelligible realm. Commentators often refer to these claims as expressing Socrates' *doxai* about the Good (for example, Fine 1990, Vogt 2012, 53). But the passage just quoted shows that this is wrong: Socrates explicitly refuses to state any *doxai* about the Good, and offers something else instead. How then should we characterize his thoughts? They are clearly about the Good. They are not *epistêmê*, which he denies having, nor are they *doxai* about the Good, which he refuses to offer. They must then be something in between. This points us toward *dianoia*, and indeed they fit the description very well: they make use of undemonstrated hypotheses about the Good (Socrates simply asserts that it is the source of being and *epistêmê*, without argument), and they use a perceptible object as an image – the sun – while clearly being “for the sake of” the imperceptible Good itself.

Readers may protest that this passage of the *Republic* nonetheless provides strong evidence for *doxa* of Forms. Even if the Sun analogy expresses Socrates' *dianoia* or something like it, in declining to state shameful, blind *doxai* about the Form of the Good Socrates clearly implies that he *has* such *doxai*. What are we to make of this?

We could render the passage thoroughly consistent with our theory if we interpreted Socrates' unspoken *doxai* as generalizations about perceptible images of the Good – as we should understand the sightlovers' *doxai* about Beauty, or Thrasymachus' *doxai* about Justice. This is however belied by

³⁶ See note *52 above.

³⁷ See Irwin 1995, 279. Mathematicians are mere dreamers, for they fail to recognize that their hypothesis-based method as a mere image of a higher kind of thinking, one grounded in unhypothetical first principles – that is, dialectic. Socrates explicitly does recognize that higher state, as the lines just quoted from 533a make particularly clear.

Socrates' reference to "what seems to me about *what at all the Good itself is* (αὐτὸ μὲν τί ποτ' ἐστὶ τὰγαθὸν... τοῦ γε δοκοῦντος ἐμοί)," (506d-e, emphasis mine). This 'what at all the *x* is' is the same language he will use in the summoners passage to refer to Being, by contrast with its images. The strong implication is that he has a *doxa* about the Being of the Good – the Form.

I conclude then that in this passage Plato is loosening his terminology. This is however nothing radical for him. The *Republic* is full of references to *epistēmē* that do not fit the theory laid out in the central books: Plato refers to various expertises about perceptibles, possessed by ordinary non-philosopher craftspeople – house-building, carpentry, flute-playing and the like – as *epistēmai* (428b-c, 438d, 601e-602a). Notably these passages are rarely cited as evidence against the Distinct Objects interpretation of the *Republic*: evidently it is obvious even to opponents of that interpretation that these claims are not relevant to the debate. Perhaps Plato is here using *epistēmē* in accordance with convention, as a synonym for *technē*; perhaps he thinks it clear that what counts as *epistēmē* in this context would not in the stricter contexts which consider the existence of Forms and of philosophers.³⁸ I suggest that we read 506d-e as employing similarly loose terminology. Perhaps Plato is relaxing his epistemology and going with convention to use '*doxa*' to refer to any cognition inferior to the best.

A different approach is offered by some NeoPlatonist interpretations of the *Phaedo*.³⁹ Here Socrates uses '*doxa*' and its cognate verb '*doxazein*' (66b, 67b) to refer to the philosophers' view that they will attain the truth only when they escape the prison of the senses and contemplate "the things themselves" with their souls alone (66d-e). This does indeed look to be a thought about Forms. It is certainly not the kind of thought available to a Cave prisoner, for it recognizes that reality and epistemic success lie in a realm beyond the perceptible. I have argued that it is the kind of thought that Plato should characterize as *dianoia*: like Socrates discussing the Form of the Good, these philosophers recognize the existence of Forms and are thinking "for the sake of them" without yet fully grasping them. Two NeoPlatonist commentaries on the *Phaedo* agree with the spirit of this interpretation, while offering an inventive explanation for Plato's use here of '*doxa*':

This is not the *doxa* receiving [its content] from below, but that which is accomplished through *dianoia*. For there are two kinds of *doxa*. (δόξαν οὐ τὴν κάτωθεν δεχομένην, ἀλλὰ τὴν διανοίας οὔσαν ἀποτελεῦτησιν· διττὴ γὰρ ἡ δόξα). (Olympiodorus, *In Platonis Phaedonem* 5.13)

What is this '*doxa*' of the philosophers?⁴⁰ It is not from perception...nor is it about perceptibles...but is like a *dogma* derived from *dianoia* and *epistēmē* (οἷον δόγμα τῆς διανοίας καὶ τῆς ἐπιστήμης). (Damascius, *In Phaedonem*, 1.103)

On this interpretation, Plato has a theory on which there are two kinds of *doxa*: one deriving from perception and "about perceptibles," another derived from *dianoia* and about the intelligible realm. In other words, Plato's word '*doxa*' is ambiguous between two referents. This preserves the spirit of the Distinct Objects reading: the claim would be that in all the passages where he associates *doxa* strongly with perceptibles, Plato has in mind perception-*doxa*; in passages like *Rep.* 506c-e, he has in mind

³⁸ For this contextualist interpretation, see Wedgwood 2018.

³⁹ Fine notes this textual evidence in her 2016, along with the NeoPlatonic responses, taking them to support her Overlap view.

⁴⁰ The commentary here is a series of questions about particular words from Plato's text, indicating that their sense is mysterious.

dianoia-doxa instead. I find this something of a stretch, but that is a matter of interpretative judgment, and I am happy to enlist these NeoPlatonists as allies.

In sum, there are indeed two passages which imply that there are *doxai* of Forms; given all the evidence that *doxa* is restricted to Becoming, however, we should bracket these passages as loose, awkward, or (with the NeoPlatonists) ambiguous. With that done, we can attribute to Plato a consistent theory of *doxa*, as follows. All cognitions lower than full grasp of the Forms must make some use of perceptibles. If one accepts the perceptibles as the last word, then one's mind is set over perceptibles rather than intelligibles, and one has *doxa*. If one instead uses the perceptibles as mere images of hypothesized intelligibles then one's mind is set over intelligibles rather than over perceptibles, and one has *dianoia* (or some un-named kindred condition).

Thus our account of *doxa* is borne out. *Doxa* is a response to what seems, and to that alone. Forms do not directly seem; they seem only through their perceptible images. Thus there is *doxa* only of perceptibles, never of Forms.⁴¹

12. What is *doxa*?

I have argued that Plato's *doxa* is not best understood as ordinary belief, in the sense either of generic judgment or of opinion. It is instead best understood as *cognition of what seems*.

This may strike us a very odd thing to choose as a central category in one's epistemology. It sounds like a technical notion, or an *ad hoc* one, and certainly something marginal to our epistemic lives. Can we get any intuitive grasp on this notion? Can we understand why Plato would choose to devote so much attention to it?

In fact, properly understood, the notion is neither *ad hoc* nor marginal. Throughout the dialogues Plato is particularly concerned to point out and warn against two cognitive deficiencies. Given his epistemology and metaphysics, he holds that these two deficiencies go together, and thus he is concerned with a particular way of thinking that exemplifies both. This way of thinking, moreover, is one he would naturally characterize as cognition of what seems.

The first cognitive deficiency is what Plato calls "dreaming": tending to mistake images for reality.

Consider how Plato introduces *doxa* in the powers argument of *Republic* V. This text is surely central to our understanding of both *doxa* and *epistêmê*, for it lays the ground for the distinction between them, and thereby for the entirety of the *Republic*'s epistemological discussions. We might thus expect him to introduce them by way of some rough attempt at definition, but he does not. Nor does he begin by citing the characteristics he associates with them in what follows – for example, the infallibility of *epistêmê* and the fallibility of *doxa* (477e). Instead, he introduces his epistemic kinds via exemplars: *doxa* is the way of thinking exemplified by sightlovers, *epistêmê* the way of thinking exemplified by philosophers. To describe sightlover-cognition, moreover, he uses an analogy with dreaming:

⁴¹ Some argue that since perceptibles are images of Forms, in having *doxa* in response to perceptibles we are *ipso facto* having *doxa* about the Forms (see LaFrance 1981, 141-2, Smith 2000, and 2012, and Szaif 2007. In work in progress I argue that Plato was not thinking of this view, and that its main support comes from alleged textual evidence for *doxa* of Forms, support I hope to have undermined. The view is however a compelling one on its own terms, and consistent with the conclusions about the nature of *doxa* I wish to draw here.

The person who acknowledges beautiful things, but neither acknowledges Beauty Itself nor is able to follow when someone tries to guide him to the cognition of it—do you think that he lives dreaming or waking? Consider: isn't dreaming this, if someone whether in sleep or while awake thinks that the likeness is not a likeness but rather the thing itself to which it is like [the original]? – I would certainly say such a person is dreaming. – What about the person who is opposite to these, who thinks that there is some Beauty Itself...? – Very much awake. – Surely then we would correctly say that the thought of the one, since he knows, is knowledge, and that of the other is *doxa*, since he has *doxa* (δοξάζωντος)? (*Rep.* 476c-d, emphasis mine)

There is no further argument to establish that the sightlovers have *doxa*: they have that status *because* they are like dreamers who think they are awake, attending to mere images of Beauty while ignoring the real thing, and mistaking the images for reality.

Clearly Plato takes dreaming to be an important metaphor for *doxa*. He uses it again in describing the next characters he introduces to illustrate *doxa*: Cave-prisoners (who are confined to the realm that symbolizes the *doxaston*, and whom he explicitly labels as having only *doxa* (516d)), are living in a dream (520c); the move from the cave to the real world is “a turning-around of the soul from a kind of night-day to true day” (521c). He uses the metaphor again in distinguishing those the prisoners represent from those who study ultimate reality: someone who examines things in accordance with what seems rather than being only has *doxa*, and thus “spends this present life dreaming” (534c).

This last passage reminds us very explicitly how the idea of *doxa* as dreaming fits with the conception of *doxa* as being-seemed-to. What seems are images and appearances, while reality is non-apparent; thus confining one's attention to what seems while ignoring the underlying realities means mistaking images for reality – that is, dreaming.

That is one handle we can get on the notion of *doxa*, then. *Doxa* is, like delusive dreaming, the mistaking of an image for what is real. This may seem to us a condition of only minor interest or epistemological relevance: today none but a radical skeptic would think we spend much time in this condition. Plato, however, clearly considers it a pervasive condition: the cave-prisoners are “like us” (*Rep.* 515a); the sightlovers and their fellow dreamers are the targets and products of the culturally pervasive poetry, sophistry, and rhetoric that present mere images instead of reality (see for example *Rep.* 600e, 602b). In the final section I will argue that Plato also considers this mistaking of images for reality to be the most *ethically* significant cognitive deficiency, and thus assigns it a central place in his epistemology.

There is a second cognitive deficiency that Plato emphasizes throughout the dialogues, that he characterizes as *doxa*, and that he would naturally describe as a response to what seems. I have in mind what we might call *atheoretical thinking*: confining one's attention to particular phenomena rather than going beyond these to seek hidden, underlying, unifying explanations. This is a category we can make sense of, even though it is not the focus of attention in contemporary epistemology. (If for example you have ever felt frustrated with students who fixate on the particular details of a thought-experiment rather than attempting to draw general conclusions, you are familiar with the phenomenon!)

Plato repeatedly draws attention to this way of thinking, treating those who are stuck in it as epistemically inferior, and sometimes explicitly labeling their thinking as *doxa*. We have already seen one notable instance of this, in the summoners passage (*Rep.* 523a-524d): one leaves the realm of *doxa* behind only when one stop asking if particular perceptible fingers are big or small, and instead asks “what

at all the Big is.” *Doxa* is focused on particular, observable properties of particular objects or events; it has no truck with non-observable things like unifying essences.

We can see just this same mindset in the *Republic*’s exemplars of *doxa*, the sightlovers, who “recognizing beautiful things, neither recognize the Beautiful itself nor, if someone led them toward the cognition of it, would be able to follow” (*Rep.* 476c). The sightlovers “refuse to go beyond isolated observations of this sort [such as that a particular body is beautiful] and admit that Beauty *itself* exists” (Adam 1902, comment *ad loc*); they do not go in for “intellectual abstraction” (Stokes 1992, 106). They confine their thoughts to particular, observable phenomena; presumably they are able to make generalizations about these, but they are unable or unwilling to think beyond these to underlying universal truths.

We find another characterization of the same mindset in a passage with notable echoes of the ascent from the Cave, the *Theaetetus*’ digression about the difference between the philosopher and the lawyer:

It escapes [the philosopher’s] notice if he is human or some other beast; but what at all a human is and what befits such a nature...this he seeks and investigates...Whenever he’s forced to converse about the things at his feet and the things before his eyes he’s laughable... Whenever however he drags someone upward,⁴² and the other is willing to step out from “What injustice did I do to you or you to me?” toward the investigation of justice itself, and injustice, what each of them *is* and how it differs from all other thing...the tables are turned. (*Theaet.* 174b-175d)

The philosopher is concerned with things “upward,” while the lawyer is concerned with “things at his feet and before his eyes,” i.e. the perceptible realm: although Plato uses no explicit epistemic vocabulary here, the *Republic* would say that the one who looks up to the intelligible realm has *epistêmê*, while the one who stays down in the perceptible realm has *doxa*. Moreover, precisely parallel to the summoners passage (524c), the epistemically inferior person confines his attention to questions like whether a particular thing is human, while the person who ascends to knowledge does so by asking “What at all the Human is”. Plato is again contrasting the philosopher’s interest in abstract, universal truths with a kind of thinking stuck at the level of perceptible particulars – *doxa*.

We also see Plato very prominently drawing attention to this same mindset throughout the Socratic dialogues, where Socrates repeatedly attempts to turn his interlocutors away from a certain kind of wrong answer to the question “What is virtue,” or piety, or courage, and toward one that would manifest *epistêmê*. The right kind of answer is an account of the essence, the unifying, universal cause of particular phenomena being as they are; the wrong kind of answer is, once again, fixated on the particular individual phenomena themselves. See for example Socrates’ complaint to Euthyphro: “I did not bid you to teach me one or two of the many pious things, but that form itself, by which all the pious things are pious” (*Euthyphro* 6d); compare his complaint that Meno has offered him a “swarm” of virtues, rather than the one thing that makes them all virtues, at *Meno* 72a-c. The deficient mindset is illustrated with particular clarity by Hippias’s refusal to recognize any such thing as “the beautiful,” above and beyond particular beautiful things, in the *Hippias Major*:

Socrates: Are not all beautiful things beautiful by virtue of *the beautiful*? – Hippias:
Yes, by the beautiful. – Soc: This being something?...Tell me then, what is this,
the beautiful? – Hip: Does the one who asks this want to find out anything but what

⁴² ἐλκύσει ἄνω, a clear echo of the Cave allegory (*Rep.* 515e).

is beautiful? – Soc: I do not think so, but what *the beautiful* is, Hippias. – ...Hip: These do not differ...I will answer what the beautiful is...A beautiful maiden is beautiful.... (*Hippias Major* 287c-288a)⁴³

Hippias claims to have knowledge about beauty, just as Meno claims to have knowledge about virtue, and Euthyphro about piety. In each case Socrates argues that his interlocutor's inability to give the right kind of answer to the 'what is *x*' question – their inability to move past atheoretical concern with particulars – shows that they lack knowledge; the obvious implication is that they have *doxa* instead.

A final example of Plato's interest in this mindset: consider his contrast in the *Gorgias* between *technê* (craft, expertise), and *empeiria* (experience). *Empeiria* is an epistemically inferior condition, possessed by many who purport to have genuine expertise; in this way the distinction is parallel to that between *doxa* and *epistêmê*. Moreover, *empeiria*'s signature deficiency is its inability to give an account of the nature and the cause of the phenomena with which it deals.⁴⁴ It thus shares with *doxa* a limitation to particular perceptible phenomena, by contrast with hidden, universal causes. I suggest then that Plato views *empeiria* as a special species of *doxa*, or a capacity constituted by *doxai*; his denigration of *empeiria* in the *Gorgias* is yet another instance of his concern with atheoretical thought.

Thus Plato is interested in characterizing and warning against the dangers of a mindset that we might call atheoretical thought, he consistently contrasts it with *epistêmê* as an inferior epistemic condition, and he sometimes explicitly labels it as *doxa*. It will be obvious from my arguments in section 10 how this characterization of *doxa* fits with the idea of seeming: the realm of particular, perceptible phenomena is the realm of what seems, by contrast with the realm of hidden universal intelligible Being. Confining one's attention to particular phenomena thus amounts to attending only to what seems.

If this is right, then Plato's *doxa* turns out to be a close precursor of Aristotle's "experience," *empeiria* (*Metaphysics* I.1, *Posterior Analytics* II.19, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.7-8). *Empeiria* is perception-based cognition that operates on particular things, registering their similarities enough to make generalizations about them and to manipulate them for practical purposes, but without ever recognizing the underlying universals that explain *why* they are as they are. Aristotle contrasts *empeiria* with higher cognitive kinds – *phronêsis*, *technê*, *nous* – which grasp universals and causes (see especially *Met.* 981a24-30). This notion of *empeiria* goes on to play a central role in the debate between Empiricist doctors, who forswear the attempt to discover hidden causes of perceptible phenomena, and Rationalist doctors who engage in just this inquiry (see Galen *On the Sects for Beginners*, chapter 5, and M. Frede 1990).⁴⁵ It also shows up in the closely related debate between Sceptics, who forswear inquiry into non-evident, hidden natures and causes in general, and their dogmatist opponents who build theories about such things (see Sextus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 2.97-129). If I am right, these are all close descendants of Plato's *doxa*.

⁴³ Stokes 1992 also draws attention to the comparison between Hippias and the *Republic*'s sightlovers. Even if the dialogue is apocryphal, the author is clearly meaning to caricature a mindset found among many of Socrates' interlocutors.

⁴⁴ "[Flattery] isn't craft (*technê*), but mere *empeiria*, because it has no account of the nature of whatever things it applies [or to what] it applies them, so that it's unable to state the cause (*aitia*) of each thing" (*Gorg.* 465a; cf. 501a). Flattering knacks like rhetoric have other failings – they are concerned with pleasure rather than the good – but this is their epistemic failing, and as 465a shows it is this failing that constitutes them as mere *empeiriai*.

⁴⁵ See for example Sextus' arguments against "indicative signs" (phenomena that indicate non-evident causes) at *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 2.97-129, or Galen's description of similar arguments by the medical empiricists, at *On the Sects for Beginners* 5.

Although the view has fallen out of favor – and indeed, to judge by current scholarship, largely even out of memory! – there is a long tradition of interpreting Plato’s *doxa* in this way. Here for example is Proclus, commenting on the distinction between *doxa* and *epistēmē* in the *Timaeus*:⁴⁶

The doxastic [power] comprehends the *logoi* of perceptibles, and is the thing that cognizes the beings of these,⁴⁷ and contemplates the *that*, while being ignorant of the cause... For that is also how correct *doxa* differs from *epistēmē*, in that it cognizes the that only, while the latter is also capable of contemplating the cause. (Proclus in *Tim.* 2.248.11-22, comment *ad Tim.* 28a; cf. 2.343.10-11)

On Proclus’ version, *doxa* sounds very like Aristotle’s *empeiria*. Similar views are found in later interpreters who describe *doxa* as atheoretical or empirical cognition, as we saw in section 4.⁴⁸ In recent years the view has largely disappeared, but a new book on Plato’s epistemology proposes an account that we can see as a version of it, on which *doxa* is always of particular concrete tokens while *epistēmē* is of abstract types (Rowett 2018).

On some of these accounts this is Plato’s core or sole notion of *doxa*; on others, his use of ‘*doxa*’ is ambiguous between several notions, including something like generic belief, but this is the notion he has in mind in the contexts that invite the Distinct Objects reading. Indeed this interpretation goes very much hand in hand with the Distinct Objects reading, and owes much of its motivation to it. The main challenge to this interpretation of *doxa* is then to show that it is in fact well-grounded in Plato’s texts, rather than cooked up simply to make sense of the Distinct Objects passages. Many of those who have offered versions of the interpretation have done this well; the main contribution I wish to make is to add, or to bring out more emphatically than usual, that *doxa* has this character precisely *because it is cognition of what seems*.

To put it more metaphorically, and make explicit the connection with the other characterization of *doxa* I drew out above, *doxa* is atheoretical because *doxa* is dreaming. *Doxa* mistakes images for realities, where most gobally this means mistaking the realm of perceptible particulars for the entirety of what there is – which amounts, on Plato’s ontology, to ignoring essences and causes, i.e., to being atheoretical. It is no coincidence that Plato fixates on and unites under one label these two cognitive errors – being stuck with images and being stuck with particular phenomena – for on his view they are they are two descriptions of the same failing: being stuck with what seems.

⁴⁶ Proclus also distinguishes both from *dianoia*, which like *doxa* cognizes perceptibles, but unlike *doxa* grasps their causes as well as what they are.

⁴⁷ As Lautner puts it, this claim means not that *doxa* grasps the “hidden essences” of perceptibles, but rather that unlike perception it grasps “that all the proper perceptibles inhere in one object,” such as the apple underlying the red and sweet (Lautner 2002, 258-9); see for example *In Tim.* 2.249.13-27, discussed briefly above in section 4.

⁴⁸ In addition to those I cited there, see Nettleship’s contrast between the mind of one with *doxa* and “the philosophic mind,” where the latter “constantly looks for principles or laws or unities of which the manifold of our experience is the phenomenon” (1906, 195); Bosanquet’s view is similar (1895, 213); Hackforth describes *doxa* as “the state of mind that cannot rise above perceptibles” (1958, 127); Havelock gives a lengthy account of *doxa* as “the non-abstract state of mind” (1963, 248); even a paper that helped to spark the Overlap movement, Gosling 1968, recognizes this as one strain in Plato’s account of *doxa*: “Sightlovers are inadequate because “they try to answer questions about beauty and the rest by empirical observation. So the δόξα in question is tied to empirical observation, and there is a tendency throughout the *Republic* to echo Parmenides’ division whereby δόξα is the best you can hope for if you concentrate on observation” (Gosling 1968, 127).

I hope to have shown that cognition of what seems is neither an obscure nor an *ad hoc* notion. It is instead a cognitive condition with which Plato is centrally concerned in his epistemology; it is also something perfectly intelligible to us, although far from the center of epistemology today.

The question then arises: why should this particular cognitive condition play such a large role in Plato's epistemology? Why should it, rather than something we find obviously important, like opinion or belief, be the salient inferior condition which he chooses to focus upon, and to contrast with *epistēmē*?

13. Why *doxa*?

Here is a very natural thought for philosophers nowadays to have: when someone does epistemology, and distinguishes an inferior kind from a superior one, where the inferior one has a lesser hold on truth, is a worse guide to action, and should be moved past to achieve the superior, they are talking more or less about belief. For belief is the salient epistemically inferior phenomenon. To focus on something else would be perverse.

That is as it may be – but Plato's epistemological projects are not first and foremost motivated by epistemological concerns, and therefore the epistemic distinctions that are salient to him are not necessarily the ones that are salient when we do epistemology for its own sake. Instead, his epistemological project is driven by metaphysical and ethical views: views about what there is, and how one should live. Making this argument in full is a large project. Here I want simply to show the big picture, and indicate how it makes sense of the account of *doxa* I have presented here.

It is widely acknowledged that Plato's philosophy is largely driven by ethical concerns, and in particular by an overarching ethical question we see at work throughout the dialogues: *how should one live?*⁴⁹ Plato's answer to this question turns out to depend to a large extent on certain of his metaphysical as well as his ethical views. These are views that can be found in inchoate forms in the earlier dialogues, and survive in complicated ways in the late ones, but are most robust, developed, and explicit in the Two Worlds dialogues, and find their most dramatic expression in the *Republic*'s allegory of the Cave. Namely:

- There is a crucial metaphysical distinction between two levels of reality: genuine Being on the one hand, and something inferior and derivative on the other, which *seems* to be ultimate reality but is not.
- There is a crucial ethical distinction stemming from this metaphysical one: to be in contact with Being is to be living well, while to rest content with the inferior level is not only to fail to live well, but to hinder oneself from progress.

On this picture, the chief obstacle to living well is excessive attachment to what merely *seems*. The Cave allegory again provides a clear illustration: the prisoners are pitiable because they are not only stuck in the Cave, but are ignorant of their own plight and thus have no motivation to escape.

If this is the central ethical danger, then when Plato turns his mind to epistemology the condition salient to him as inferior will be the one that keeps us in the Cave: dream-like, atheoretical cognition that mistakes the perceptible phenomena that seem real for reality itself. Given his ethical concerns, this is the epistemic condition that he thinks we must be on our guard against – that we must identify, learn to recognize, and try to avoid. That, I submit, is why chooses as the negative focus of his epistemological inquiries the cognition of what seems.

⁴⁹ For example: *Rep.* 352d, *Gorg.* 500c, *Apol.* 28b

For Plato, the bright line in metaphysics is between what Is and what merely seems to be. The bright line in ethics is between blessed contact with Being and pitiable immersion in what seems. Therefore the bright line in epistemology – the salient division between higher and lower – is the line between accepting what seems as final, and going beyond that to find what Is. If this is what Plato has in mind when he develops his epistemology, then all the textual evidence we have seen only confirms what we should expect: the salient inferior kind in Plato’s epistemology – the kind of cognition he contrasts with knowledge, and often labels *doxa* – is cognition of what seems.⁵⁰

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