Plato’s Epistemology: Being and Seeming
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Introduction: What is Plato’s Epistemology About?

That correct doxa is something different from epistêmê is something I do not at all seem to be conjecturing, but, if I were going to claim that I knew anything – and there are few things I would claim that about – this one, at any rate, I would include among the things that I know. (Meno 98b)¹

Throughout the dialogues Plato contrasts a superior kind of cognition with an inferior one, often calling the superior kind epistêmê and the inferior kind doxa.² He studies the nature of each and the differences between them, he argues for the superiority of epistêmê, and he discusses how to achieve it.

What is Plato doing when he does all this – what kind of project is he undertaking?

The answer will seem obvious: epistemology. That is, Plato is engaged in the same kind of investigation philosophers engage in nowadays when they study knowledge and belief. Indeed, Plato had a large part in inventing the whole field of epistemology, and gave us some of the problems and views still central to it today.³

One major presupposition of this answer, sometimes made explicit, is that Plato’s epistêmê and doxa are obviously to be identified with the main players in contemporary epistemology (both folk and philosophical): knowledge and belief. Indeed our word ‘epistemology’ wears this lineage on its sleeve: the study of knowledge is the study of that very thing Plato discussed, epistêmê.

Another major presupposition, shared even by some who doubt that Plato’s epistemic categories should be straightforwardly identified with our knowledge and belief, is that Plato’s concerns in studying epistêmê and doxa are broadly similar to the concerns prominent in epistemology nowadays.⁴ He is

¹ ὃτι δὲ ἐστὶν τι άλλοιον ὀρθὴ δόξα καὶ ἐπιστήμη, οὐ πάνυ μοι δοκῶ τοῦτο εἰκάζειν, ἄλλ᾽ ἐπερ τι άλλο φαίην ἄν εἰδέναι….τοῦτο θείην ἄν ἄν οἶδα. Translations throughout are my own unless otherwise noted.
² Or he contrasts gnôsis, phronêsis, sophia, noêsis, or nous with doxa, or contrasts these with pistis. In treating these groups of terms as synonyms I follow many others: see for example Crombie, 1962, vol. 2, 35; Moline 1981, 191; Snell 1924, 87 ff. I will try to show that we can very fruitfully see Plato as using varying terminology to capture a single well-unified epistemic contrast; for convenience I choose ‘epistêmê’ and ‘doxa’ to label the superior and inferior kinds. (See further discussion below and in chapter 1.2). I will note where the differences in terminology seem significant, such as at Rep. 511d-e.
³ Plato is often credited with inventing the “classical analysis of knowledge” as (roughly) justified true belief: see for example Gettier 1963 and Armstrong 1973, 87-8.
⁴ This assumption is very widely shared but usually implicit, testified to only by the way scholars go about assessing Plato’s project and the questions they do not ask about it. It is however sometimes made explicit. Fine argues for translating epistêmê as ‘knowledge’ on the ground that his translation “makes it clear that Plato is engaged in a familiar epistemological enterprise” (2004, 71). See also Everson, who argues that even if Plato’s epistêmê is not best conceived of as knowledge, and even though his focus is different from that of much contemporary epistemology, he is nonetheless doing epistemology in ways that can be mapped onto how we do it now: “The Platonic and Aristotelian concern with describing and
studying epistemology as an enterprise in its own right. That is to say, his project is to make sense of epistemically salient features of, and differences between, various phenomena: for example, that some of our convictions are the product of reasoning while others are not, that some are stable in the face of argument while others are not, or that some can be transmitted to others through speech while others cannot. His goal is to carve epistemic nature at its joints. To put it apparently tautologically, his aims in doing epistemology are primarily epistemological.

The main task of this book is to challenge both presuppositions, and to offer a very different account of Plato’s epistemology instead.

I will argue that Plato’s epistêmê is very different knowledge as understood by contemporary epistemology, and his doxa very different from our belief. I will not try to show that these differences entail non-identity; that question depends on how one individuates concepts. I do hope to show however that the differences are radical enough and fundamental enough that it is not fruitful to study epistêmê and doxa by beginning from the assumption that they are knowledge and belief; we should not use our theories of knowledge and belief to guide or constrain our interpretations of epistêmê and doxa.

I will also argue that to understand what epistêmê and doxa are – to make sense of how Plato fundamentally conceives them, and thus why he attributes to them the properties he does – we have to recognize that his overarching epistemological project is very different from ours. It is not primarily driven by purely epistemological concerns. Instead, his epistemological project is driven by metaphysical and ethical views: views about what there is, and how one should live. Thus the epistemic properties and distinctions that are salient to him are so primarily because of their relation to metaphysical and ethical properties and distinctions, not for purely epistemic reasons.

Two caveats before I begin. First, this is a book primarily about the epistemology of the dialogues generally characterized as belonging to Plato’s middle period: the dialogues which distinguish “Two Worlds,” a perceptible realm of ordinary things and an intelligible realm Forms. It is here that the metaphysical concerns that (I shall argue) underlie Plato’s epistemology are most stark and most developed, and so it is here that the epistemological distinctions are clearest too. I will argue however that the epistemology that is at its most developed in these dialogues is at work in the Socratic dialogues too, and survives to some extent in the Theaetetus, and I will touch on these dialogues throughout.

Second, although I will speak throughout about epistêmê and doxa, this is not a book about the meaning of those words. I think that Plato is loose with his epistemic (as well as other vocabulary), sometimes using several words synonymously while at other times distinguishing their meanings, and often using a single word ambiguously. My project is thus not to trace his use of ‘epistêmê’ and ‘doxa’ throughout the dialogues. I instead want to show that throughout the dialogues he has a strongly unified,
consistent theory about the essential features of and contrasts between the best kind of cognition, and a kind that is its salient inferior counterpart – that he is concerned with one central epistemic division, despite describing it with varying terminology, and despite sometimes using that same terminology to describe more marginal epistemic phenomena. I will not defend this approach at the outset, but instead will aim to vindicate it through my investigations.

1. *Epistêmê* and *doxa* vs. knowledge and belief
Let us begin then with a look at the assumption that Plato’s *epistêmê* and *doxa* – or more precisely, the salient superior and inferior kinds in his epistemology, which he presents under various labels (see the previous paragraph, with footnote 2) – map on closely to contemporary notions of knowledge and belief.

It is of course a major simplification to speak of the contemporary notions of knowledge and belief, since there is plenty of disagreement among contemporary epistemologists. Nonetheless we can easily identify certain views that are widely shared about knowledge and belief, and track whether Plato’s views converge with them or diverge. For example: almost everyone nowadays agrees that knowledge is factive and belief is not; therefore it would constitute a major convergence if we saw Plato countenancing false *doxa* but refusing to countenance false *epistêmê* – as indeed we will. Or: most people nowadays agree that one can know that something is so without knowing why, so it would constitute a major divergence if we saw Plato insisting that *epistêmê* requires the ability to give an explanation – as indeed we will.

Certainly there are some striking convergences that make it easy to equate Plato’s central epistemic distinction with ours. Here are some claims we see him making, with representative citations:

* *Epistêmê* but not *doxa* is infallible or unerring, always true (*Republic* 477e, *Gorgias* 454d, *Theaetetus* 187b)

* *Epistêmê* is more valuable than *doxa* (*Meno* 97d)

* *Epistêmê* but not *doxa* confers epistemic authority (*Euthyphro* 5a)

* *Epistêmê* is the aim of or norm on *doxa*: people who have mere *doxa* often think they have *epistêmê*, and want to have it (*Rep.* 476d-e)

* *Epistêmê* – according to some dialogues, although not others – is built up from true *doxa* in combination with some extra ingredient, which is at the least analogous to contemporary epistemology’s justification, warrant, or the like: an account (*logos*, *Theaet.* 201c) or a calculation of the cause (*Meno* 98a)\(^6\)

In all these ways, Plato’s *epistêmê* and *doxa* align naturally with contemporary epistemology’s knowledge and belief. It is then no surprise to see ‘knowledge’ and ‘belief’ as standard translations, along with many scholarly discussions of Plato’s theory of knowledge, or of his thoughts about belief, and many claims that he is the father of epistemology and the originator of some of modern epistemology’s most important views.

I suspect however that there is a deeper and more general reason behind this assimilation of Plato’s views to ours, going beyond specific similarities. This is a thought that never gets an explicit defense because it seems so obvious: Plato is clearly doing something in the neighborhood of epistemology, and what people think about when they are engaged in that kind of project are, obviously,\(^6\) Below we will see that in other places Plato seems to reject this theory: *epistêmê* is not a kind of *doxa*; to have *epistêmê* about something is incompatible with having *doxa* about it.
knowledge and belief. Compare: Plato was clearly doing something in the neighborhood of astronomy (he had some thoughts about the things you see in the sky at night, their natures and movements and the differences between them), and the things people think about when they are engaged in that kind of project are stars and planets and moons. Either because knowledge and belief are natural kinds, or because it is in human nature to develop concepts of them, it is obvious that they would have been the subject of Plato’s philosophical attention as much as they are now of ours.

This background assumption makes it easy to fall into a kind of dogmatism: Plato must be thinking about knowledge and belief, and therefore any difficulties we encounter in fitting his views to our own must stem from oddities in his substantive theories. That Plato had various astronomical views we now think false is no reason to doubt that he was talking about anything other than the very stars and planets we study now; that he had various epistemological views we now think false should likewise be no reason to doubt that he was talking about anything other than knowledge and belief.

The fact is however that quite a number of Plato’s epistemological views are so hard to construe as views about knowledge and belief that one might reasonably wonder if the effort is worthwhile. Here are some other claims we see in certain contexts, again with representative citations:

* Epistêmê requires reasoning out explanations (Meno 98a)

* Epistêmê requires the ability to define or give an account of its object (Meno 71a-b, Phaedo 76b, Rep. 534b)

* Epistêmê cannot be transmitted by testimony, but requires direct acquaintance with its object (Theaetetus 201c, perhaps Meno 81c, 97a-b) 7

  * Doxa excludes epistêmê, rather than being an ingredient or condition of it (Rep. V-VII throughout, Timaeus 27d-28) 8

  * Epistêmê and doxa are “powers” of the soul, along the lines of sight or hearing (Rep. 477d-e, Charm. 167e-168d)

  * Epistêmê and doxa are distinct powers, each with their own distinct exercise and object (Rep. 477d-478e, Charm. 167e-168a)

  * In the dialogues that distinguish an imperceptible realm of Being (the Forms) from a perceptible realm of Becoming, epistêmê is of the former and doxa of the latter (Rep. 479d-e, 534a; Tim. 27d-28a, 52a) 9

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7 It is the one who has been to Larisa himself who has epistêmê of the road (Meno 97a-b); before birth the soul has epistêmê of things in virtue of the fact that it “saw” them (Meno 81c.). The idea shows up also in Plato’s denials that epistêmê can be transmitted through testimony, even the reliable testimony of someone who has epistêmê themselves: conventional teaching cannot give us epistêmê, which can only be got through recollection of the things we directly encountered (Meno); even a jury “justly persuaded” of the truth about some crime will not thereby get epistêmê, which is available only to someone who was there and saw what happened (Theaet. 201b).

8 At Meno 98a and Theaet. 201c Plato seems to reject this claim; I discuss this tension in chapter 7.

9 The way I have put these last two claims is controversial, although I think very natural. I will defend it at length in the remainder of the book.
When we focus on these features of epistêmê and doxa, they start to look radically different from contemporary knowledge and belief. Should we then question the identification? Or is it so obviously correct as to be beyond doubt?

One need only step back from recent analytic Plato scholarship to see that it is not. In fact, the identification of Plato’s epistêmê and doxa with knowledge and belief, standard as it has become, is only a recent development, and has already faced forceful criticism.

If we look back before the 1960s, we find that a very common English translation of epistêmê is ‘Science.’ This translation picks up on a philosophical tradition that begins with the widespread use of epistêmê in Plato’s time to denote what we would call sciences: specialized bodies of knowledge held by experts in particular areas. Aristotle elevated this use of epistêmê into a very specific theory: his epistêmai are deductively valid systems grounded in necessary truths about natures or essences. The Aristotelian notion gets preserved and developed in the medievals’ scientia, and via this route in the early moderns’ Scientia, Science, or knowledge: a grasp of the deep, ultimate truths, which are necessary and essential. When scholars in the 19th or early 20th century translated Plato’s epistêmê as ‘Science’ they were taking him to belong to this tradition – indeed, presumably, to have founded it.

As for doxa, older interpreters tended to translate not as ‘belief’ but as ‘opinion,’ or sometimes ‘seeming.’ Moreover, there is a tradition dating back to ancient times on which doxa is something much narrower than belief as regarded nowadays: something very closely tied to perception, sometimes described as assent to perceptual appearance, sometimes described as empirical cognition.

Recent scholarship presents alternatives as well. Despite the widespread tendency to treat epistêmê as knowledge, a number of scholars have argued that it should be construed as something else: as “logically certain knowledge”, or as expertise, or as what is now called understanding – a deep, systematic, explanatory grasp. Despite the almost universal equation of doxa with belief, a few recent accounts have argued for other interpretations: as inherently deficient cognition, or cognition of particular tokens rather than universal types.

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11 LSJ in the 19th century cites Rep. 477b ff. along with the Posterior Analytics as loci for the meaning ‘scientific knowledge, science’ (s.v. epistêmê, A.II.2).
12 Thus only some of what we call sciences, and of what Aristotle in looser moods calls epistêmai (e.g. at EN VI.1) are Aristotelian epistêmai in this strict sense: mathematics counts; medicine does not.
13 For citations and defense of this reading of Spinoza, Leibniz, and Descartes, and a brief recognition of the continuity with Aristotle’s epistêmê, see Carriero 2013.
14 For a recent defense of this line, see Wolterstorff 1996, 220-1: “the medievals were at one with Plato in their understanding of epistêmê” because in the Republic epistêmê is a grasp of “what is fully real…the necessary, eternal, immutable.”
15 Crombie 1926, Cornford 1941, Gulley 1962, Sprute 1962; in Ancient times see especially Alcinous and Proclus, quoted and discussed in chapter 8.
17 Woodruff 1990.
19 Vogt 2012, although she translates doxa as belief and does not in my view go far enough in distinguishing the two. See also Moss and Schwab 2019.
20 Rowett 2018.
I will discuss these interpretations in more detail in chapters 3 and 4. I think there is much that they get right. Most generally, they are focusing appropriately on certain features of Plato’s epistemology, features that cast serious doubt on the identification of its central concepts with contemporary knowledge and belief.

2. The plan
Abandoning that identification in favor of any alternative, however, will raise major questions. There are of course questions about the interpretative adequacy of the alternatives: for example, epistêmê is much more demanding than understanding as nowadays conceived, and restricted to a much narrower domain, so that we might raise the same kind of worries about this interpretation as about the interpretation of epistêmê as knowledge.

More fundamentally, there are questions about why Plato would choose epistêmê and doxa as the star players in his epistemology if they are not in fact knowledge and belief. We know lots of reasons to center epistemology around the study of knowledge and belief; what are the reasons for doing it some other way? Why would Science, for example, or understanding, be so salient to Plato? Why would he choose to devote so much attention to defining one of these? And why would he think that the relevant contrast kind is opinion, or seeming, or empirical cognition?

Most generally, once we take seriously the possibility that Plato’s central epistemological concepts are radically different from ours, we are faced with the task of reassessing his whole project. If he is not studying the same phenomena we are, perhaps that is because he is not asking the same questions. If so, then the evolution of epistemology is not after all much like that of astronomy (different views of the same objects). A closer parallel would be the evolution of ethics, according to a common interpretation. It is often held that Ancient ethics asks a different set of questions from those we ask nowadays, focusing not on moral rightness and moral requirements, but instead on the notion of happiness. A theory developed to address the question “How should one live?” will be badly misunderstood if it is taken to be focused on the question “What makes an action right?”; perhaps Plato’s epistemology is similarly misunderstood when we look at it through the lens of current concerns.

If so, we need to figure out what his actual concerns are. Is he analyzing the epistemic concepts current in his day? Articulating the epistemic ideal, and the corresponding deficiency?21 Introducing new concepts that serve his non-epistemological philosophical purposes in some way? If Plato is not doing epistemology the way we do it nowadays, then we need to figure out what he is he doing when he does epistemology, and what his epistemology is about.

My aim in this book is to answer these questions – to interpret Plato’s whole epistemological project, as well as its central concepts of epistêmê and doxa – by taking as a starting-point what is arguably the most radical difference between his epistemology and ours. I have in mind the last claim in the list of differences above: epistêmê is of being, while doxa is of something distinct from and inferior to being.

This may seem a perverse place to start. The claim comes from an argument in Republic V that is famously difficult, riddled with ambiguities, and the subject of numerous conflicting interpretations; indeed, on some interpretations it is misleading even to state the claim as I have done.22 Surely then, one

21 For this interpretation of Aristotle’s epistemology, see Pasnau 2013.
22 Smith (2000, 2012) argues that while epistêmê is specially correlated with being, and doxa with something inferior, the relation is not the relation of being of or about; cf. Szaif 2007. Fine (1978, 1990) has an interpretation on which the formulation I have given is misleading, since epistêmê’s objects (true
might think, whatever claim Plato is making here is best read in the light of independently established views about his epistemology, rather than used as a foundation. I will try to show however that there are major textual and philosophical gains to be made by taking this claim as a starting-point. Taking “epistêmê is of Being, doxa is of something inferior” as bedrock characterizations, we can construct interpretations of epistêmê and doxa that make sense of all their peculiarities: interpretations that integrate the features Plato attributes to epistêmê and doxa across many dialogues, accommodating their similarities to contemporary knowledge and belief as well as their differences. We can also construct an account of Plato’s entire epistemological project which shows it to be not a muddled or nascent version of our own, but something radically different, very much in keeping with his overall philosophical concerns, and compelling in its own right.

Here is a brief summary of the claims I will make.

First, Plato’s epistemological projects are motivated by, and must be understood in the context of, his central ethical and metaphysical 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 middle dialogues, and find their most dramatic expression in the Republic’s allegory of the Cave.\(^\text{23}\) 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 can be characterized among other ways as the realm of what seems.

- 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 of seemings is to hinder oneself even from aspiring to live well.

If one comes with this metaphysical and ethical background to epistemological investigations, the distinction one will find most salient and important will be that between cognitive contact with what Is and cognitive contact with what seems. And that is precisely how we should understand the fundamental distinction between Plato’s superior and inferior epistemic kinds. Republic V thus gives us not a muddle or mystery, but an explicit statement of Plato’s central epistemological doctrine. The main claims of this doctrine are these:

- *Epistêmê* and *doxa* are each essentially to be understood as cognition of a certain kind of object, since each is adapted to grasp its special object and indeed inherits its character from its object.\(^\text{24}\) (Chapter 2.)

- *Epistêmê* is in its essence the grasp of being, what *is*. This Plato takes to be a truism, which he develops and inflates with his metaphysics: epistêmê is a grasp of ontologically privileged items, the real, which in the Two Worlds dialogues are the Forms. This explains both the features that make epistêmê resemble contemporary knowledge and those that make it more resemble Science and understanding. Epistêmê is best understood as a deep, clear, precise, explanatory grasp of true reality. (Chapters 3-5.)

\(^\text{23}\) I adopt the standard ordering of Plato’s works, but am not committed to it: for my purposes, as will become clear below, the major division is between dialogues which embrace a full-blown two-level ontology, distinguishing intelligible Forms from sensible particulars, and dialogues which do not.

\(^\text{24}\) In my formulations here I gloss over the distinction between the powers (*dunameis*) of epistêmê and doxa, and their activities; for discussion see especially chapter 2.
- *Doxa* is in its essence a response to what seems. This too Plato takes to be a truism, which he inflates with a metaphysical view on which seemings are ontologically inferior items: images and appearances, a class which in the Two Worlds dialogues includes the entire perceptible realm of Becoming. This explains both the features that make *doxa* resemble contemporary belief and those that make it look like empirical cognition. *Doxa* is best understood as cognition that stays at the level of readily accessible appearances, and therefore ignores the imperceptible entities that are, on Plato’s view, truly real. (Chapters 6-8.)

In sum, just as on Plato’s view the world contains both colors and sounds, and we are equipped with special powers of grasping each, so too on Plato’s view the world contains both being and something inferior, and we are equipped with special powers of grasping each. *Epistêmê* is the power by which we understand what *is*, *doxa* the power by which we form impressions of the ontologically inferior things which *seem* to be. This turns out to explain all the features of *doxa* and *epistêmê*, all the contrasts between them, and the supreme value of *epistêmê*.

My account of Plato’s epistemology draws very much on others’ work: many of the claims I make have been presented already in some version. For example, the idea that Plato’s epistemology is firmly grounded in his metaphysics is stressed by Gerson (2009) and White (1992); my characterization of *epistêmê* has much in common with what we find in Moline (1981), and also in various interpretations of *epistêmê* as explanation-grounded understanding (e.g. Nehamas 1985, Schwab 2016); my characterization of *doxa* is in large part similar to what we find in Sprute (1962) and Gulley (1962); my overall picture is strongly indebted to Cornford (especially 1941). In many cases, however, these authors reach their conclusions through arguments with which I disagree, or through insufficient argument, and so I wish to offer new foundations. Moreover, these conclusions are still hotly contested, or treated as marginal, or in some cases evidently outright forgotten. I aim therefore to offer them new and more systematic defenses, and also to bolster them by showing their place in an overall interpretation of Plato’s epistemology. I also aim to draw out their significance more sharply – in particular, to show just how radical a difference they entail between Plato’s epistemology and today’s.

My account will show that Plato’s central epistemic categories are different enough from ours that it is dangerous to use our own epistemological intuitions and theories in interpreting his. Perhaps one might, after a careful comparison, conclude that Plato is indeed getting at the same phenomena that we track nowadays, albeit by a very different method; that should however be the conclusion of a study of his epistemology, and not a premise.

My account will also show that Plato’s epistemological project is very different from the projects epistemologists undertake nowadays. If Plato’s epistemological theories are different in important ways from ours this should not be surprising, because his epistemological inquiry is driven by questions we would not consider purely and properly epistemological. Instead, it is motivated by metaphysical concerns, and ultimately by ethical ones. Plato’s epistemology is part of his overall inquiry into how one should live.