

Knowledge before Belief in the History of Philosophy

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Commentary on “Knowledge before Belief,” by Phillips, Buckwalter, Cushman, Friedman, Martin, Turri, Santos and Knobe, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 44, 2021

PENULTIMATE DRAFT

To show that representations of knowledge are more basic than representations of belief, Phillips et al. draw on evidence from various branches of psychology, cognitive science, and experimental philosophy. My aim is to add support from a very different source: the history of philosophy. For it turns out that Western philosophy - according, at least, to its first major historian, Aristotle - developed theories of knowledge long before it developed theories of belief.

My evidence is drawn from Aristotle’s criticism of his Presocratic predecessors’ theories of cognition, in his main psychological treatise. I will show that in this discussion (*De Anima* III.3), Aristotle:

- (1) argues that the Presocratics had a theory of knowledge;
- (2) argues that they had no theory of cognitive error - i.e. no account of false belief; and finally,
- (3) introduces as a philosophical innovation a genus of which knowledge, false opinion, and true opinion are all species: belief.

Aristotle’s Claim 1: the Ancients had a theory of knowledge

According to Aristotle, his Presocratic predecessors (“the Ancients”) held that one of the defining features of soul (*psuchê*) is the capacity for what he calls *gnôsis*.¹ The word is sometimes translated as ‘knowledge,’ and sometimes as ‘cognition’. Here the ambiguity is significant. For Aristotle’s criticisms amount to the thesis that the Presocratics attempted to give a general account of cognitive activity, but failed precisely because they construed it all as knowledge.

On Aristotle’s own view there are two broad species of cognition: perception and thought (*to noein, to dianoeisthai*.) He accuses the Presocratics of conflating the two. Perception is their model for all cognition. Moreover, they construe perception as physical contact between the mind and worldly objects in which the mind comes to resemble the objects. Therefore, on their view, all cognition is true (*DA* 427a21-b3).² Thus Aristotle construes the *gnôsis* of the Ancients as *truth-ensuring contact with reality*.

I submit that this clearly counts as a theory of what we would call knowledge. *Gnôsis* on this account is factive, and, because it involves direct contact and special fit between mind and

¹ *De Anima* (*DA*) 404b9, 404b27-28; cf. 427a17-21. He often uses the verbal forms *gignôskein*, and *gnôrizein*.

² For a quick reconstruction of the argument see below under Claim 2; Lee 2005 offers a detailed reconstruction.

object, it is more than just true belief.³ Aristotle is arguing that his predecessors' theory of cognition is a theory of knowledge.

Aristotle's Claim 2: the Ancients had no theory of false belief

Precisely because they construed cognition as they do, Aristotle goes on to argue, his predecessors cannot make sense of cognitive error (427a28-b6). His claim seems to be: if thought is a matter of the mind being made to resemble its object, then if you are thinking at all, you are thinking veridically.⁴ Indeed, some of the Ancients simply deny that false belief exists, arguing that "everything that appears is true" (427b3; cf. *Metaphysics* IV.5, which explicitly equates this slogan with the relativist claim that all opinions are true).

Aristotle is aware that many Presocratics believed in cognitive error. His claim is that they failed to offer a theory of it, or even a theory on which it is possible. In constructing their epistemologies they developed accounts of knowledge, and got stuck there. The clear implication is that it takes a more sophisticated philosopher to develop a theory of false belief.⁵

Aristotle's Claim 3: the Ancients had no theory of belief in general

To account for cognitive error as well as knowledge, Aristotle thinks, we need to recognize a broader category to which both belong. This is precisely what he does in the next part of the discussion, using new technical vocabulary to introduce a new concept.

Thinking, he argues, is composed of two components: *phantasia* (quasi-perceptual appearance), and *hupolêpsis*. *Hupolêpsis* is a genus with several species, some factive and some anti-factive: theoretical knowledge (*epistêmê*), practical knowledge (*phronêsis*), true opinion (true *doxa*), and "the opposites of these" - that is, their false counterparts (427b79-11 and 24-26). Although he does not define *hupolêpsis*, he argues that it presupposes conviction, and suggests that it consists in taking something to be true or false (428a20-428b4). In other words - as many have recognized, and as I argue in detail elsewhere (Moss and Schwab 2019) - *hupolêpsis* is what modern epistemology calls belief. It is generic taking-to-be-true, which can be true or false, and which when the right conditions are fulfilled constitutes knowledge.

Aristotle does not explicitly accuse the Presocratics of lacking a theory of belief. But he does take their inability to account for cognitive error to show the need for a new theory of thought, one which crucially includes a component so theoretically novel that it requires a neologism ('*hupolêpsis*'). The implication is that his predecessors lacked a theory of belief, and that he is the first to develop one.⁶

³ For example, lucky guesses would not count. Presocratic *gnôsis/noêsis* also meets the other criteria suggested by Phillips et al.: it is not modality specific (the various forms of sensory perception all count), and others can have it of things you don't, just as others can touch things you aren't touching.

⁴ He goes on to say that if they wanted to account for error they would have to construe it as contact with the unlike, but that this account is untenable (427b4-6).

⁵ The same view is implied in Plato's criticism of Parmenides in the *Sophist*.

⁶ See Moss and Schwab 2019 for an argument that Plato began to develop such a theory only late and inconclusively, in the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*; '*doxa*,' which is often taken to mean belief in both Plato and Aristotle, for the most part means mere opinion.

Thus according to Aristotle, in the development of Western philosophy theories of knowledge preceded theories of belief. I leave to another occasion the question of whether Aristotle is right.⁷ A very brief defense: Plato argues that accounting for false belief is a difficult task, and is himself slow to offer anything like an account of generic belief. At any rate, *if* Aristotle is right, his account offers further support for Phillips et al.'s contention. It comes more easily or naturally to humans to construct a philosophical theory of knowledge than one of belief.

Works cited

Aristotle, *De Anima*, ed. W. D. Ross (1961), Oxford

M. Lee (2005), *Epistemology after Protagoras: responses to relativism in Plato, Aristotle, and Democritus*, Oxford.

J. Moss and W. Schwab (2019), "The Birth of Belief," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 57: 1-32.

⁷ For assessment of Aristotle's treatment of Presocratic epistemology, see Lee 2005.