

Knowledge and Opinion from *The Republic* of Plato

(476e) SOCRATES. Come now, consider what we shall say to him. Or do you incline we shall thus interrogate him? Telling him, that if he knows any thing, no one envies him for it, but we shall gladly see him possessed of some knowledge; but only tell us this, does the man who has knowledge, know something or nothing? Do you now answer me for him?

GLAUCO. I will answer that he knows something.

SOC. Whether something which really exists, or which does not?

GLA. What does really exist: for how can that be known which has no real existence?

SOC. We have then examined this sufficiently, though we might have considered it more fully; that what really is, may be really known; but what does not at all exist, cannot at all be known.

GLA. We have examined it most sufficiently.

SOC. Be it so. But if there be any thing of such a kind, as both to be and not to be, must it not lie between that which perfectly is, and that which is not at all?

GLA. Between them.

SOC. As to what really is, then, is there not knowledge? and as to that which is not at all, is there not of necessity ignorance? And for that which is between these, we must seek for something between ignorance and science, if there be any such thing.

GLA. By all means.

SOC. Do we say then that opinion is any thing?

GLA. Why not?

SOC. Whether is it a different power from science, or the same?

GLA. Different.

SOC. Is opinion then conversant about one thing, and science about another, by virtue of the same power, or each of them by virtue of a power of its own?

GLA. This last.

SOC. Is not the power of science conversant about what really exists, to know that it is? Or rather it seems to me to be necessary to distinguish in this manner.

GLA. How?

SOC. We shall say, that powers are a certain species of real existences, by which we can both do whatever we can do, and every being else whatever it can do. Thus, I say, that seeing and hearing are among these powers, if you understand what I mean to call a species.

GLA. I understand.

SOC. Hear then what appears to me concerning them. For I do not see any colour of a power, nor figure, nor any of such qualities, as of many other things, with reference to which I distinguish some things with myself, that they are different from one another. But as to power, I regard that alone about which it is conversant, and what it effects; and on this account I have called each of these a power. And the power which is conversant about and effects one and the

same thing, I call the same power, but that conversant about and effecting a different thing, I call a different power: but what say you? In what manner do you call it?

GLA. Just so.

SOC. But come again, excellent Glauco, whether do you say that science is itself a certain power, or to what class do you refer it?

GLA. I refer it to this class of power, as it is of all powers the most strong.

SOC. But what now? Shall we refer opinion to power, or to some other species?

GLA. By no means to power; for that by which we form opinions is nothing else but opinion.

SOC. But you owned some time since, that science and opinion were not the same.

GLA. How can ever any one who possesses intellect reduce under one, that which is infallible, and that which is not infallible?

SOC. You say right. And it is plain that we have allowed opinion to be a different thing from science.

GLA. We have.

SOC. Each of them then has naturally a different power over a different thing.

GLA. Of necessity.

SOC. Science has a power over being itself, in knowing real existence, how it exists.

GLA. Yes.

SOC. But we say that opinion opines.

GLA. Yes.

SOC. Whether does it know the same thing which science knows? And shall that which is known, and that which is opined, be the same? Or is this impossible?

GLA. Impossible from what we have allowed: since they are naturally powers of different things, and both of them are powers, opinion and science, and each of them different from the other, as we have said; from these things it cannot be, that what is opined is the same with that which is known.

SOC. If then being itself be known, must it not be different from the being which is perceived by opinion?

GLA. Different.

SOC. Does he then who opines, opine that which has no existence? Or is it impossible to opine that which doth not exist at all? Consider now, does not the man who opines, refer his opinion to somewhat? Or is it possible to opine, and yet opine nothing at all?

GLA. Impossible.

SOC. But whoever opines, opines some one thing.

GLA. Yes.

SOC. But surely that which does not exist, cannot be called any one thing, but most properly nothing at all.

GLA. Certainly so.

SOC. But we necessarily referred ignorance to that which does not exist, but knowledge to real existence.

GLA. Right.

SOC. Neither therefore does he opine being, nor yet that which is not.

GLA. He does not.

SOC. Opinion then is neither knowledge, nor is it ignorance.

GLA. It appears it is not.

SOC. Does it then exceed these, either knowledge in perspicuity, or ignorance in obscurity?

GLA. It does neither.

SOC. But does opinion seem to you to be more obscure than knowledge, but more perspicuous than ignorance?

GLA. By much.

SOC. But does it lie between them both then?

GLA. It does.

SOC. Opinion then is in the middle of these two.

GLA. Entirely so.

SOC. And have we not already said, that if any thing appeared of such a kind, as at the same time to be, and yet not to be, such a thing would lie between that which has really an existence, and that which does not at all exist, and that neither science nor ignorance would be conversant about it, but that which appeared to be between ignorance and science?

GLA. Right.

SOC. And now that which we call opinion, has appeared to be between them.

GLA. It has appeared.

SOC. It yet remains for us, as it seems, to discover that which participates of both these, of being, and of non-being, and which with propriety can be called neither of them perfectly, that if it appear to be that which is opined, we may justly call it so, assigning to the extremes what is extreme, and to the middle what is in the middle. Shall we not do thus?

GLA. Thus.

SOC. These things being determined, let this worthy man, I will say, tell and answer me, he who reckons that beauty, and a certain idea of beauty there is none, always the same, and in the same respects; but this lover of beautiful objects reckons there are many beautiful things, but can never endure to be told that there is one beautiful, and one just, and so of others. Of all these many things, excellent man! Shall we say to him, is there any which will not appear deformed, and of those just which will not appear unjust, of those holy which will not appear profane?

GLA. No; but of necessity the beautiful things themselves must in some respects appear even deformed, and others in like manner.

SOC. But what? Many things which are double, or twofold, do they less really appear to be halves than doubles?

GLA. No less.

SOC. And things great and small, light and heavy, shall they be denominated what we call them, any more than the opposite?

GLA. No; but each of them always participates of both.

SOC. Whether then is each of these many things that which it is said to be, or is

it not?

GLA. It is like their riddles at feasts, and the riddle of children about the eunuch's striking the bat, puzzling one another in what manner and how far he strikes it. For all these things have a double meaning, and it is impossible to know accurately that they are, or are not, that they are both, or neither of the two.

SOC. How can you do with them then? Or have you a better class for them than a medium between being and non-being? For nothing seems more obscure than non-being in respect of having no being at all, nor more perspicuous than being in respect of real being.

GLA. Most true.

SOC. We have then discovered, it seems, that most of the maxims of the multitude concerning the beautiful, and those other things, roll somehow between being and non-being.

GLA. We have accurately discovered it.

SOC. But we formerly agreed, that if any such thing should appear, it ought to be called that which is opined, and not what is known; and that which fluctuates between the two is to be perceived by the power between the two.

GLA. We agreed.

SOC. Those then who contemplate many beautiful things, but who never perceive beauty itself, nor are able to follow another leading them to it; and many just things, but never justice itself, and all other things in like manner, we will say that they opine all things, but know none of the things which they opine.

GLA. Of necessity.

SOC. But what now? Those who perceive each of the things themselves, always existing in the same manner, and in the same respect, shall we not say that they know, and do not opine?

GLA. Of necessity this likewise.

SOC. And shall we not say, that these embrace and love the things of which they have knowledge, and the others the things of which they have opinion? Or do we not remember, that we said they beheld and loved fine sounds and colours, and such things, but that beauty itself they do not admit of as any real being?

GLA. We remember.

SOC. Shall we then act wrong in calling them lovers of opinion, rather than philosophers? And yet they will be greatly enraged at us if we call them so.

GLA. Not, if they be persuaded by me; for it is not lawful to be enraged at the truth.

SOC. *Those then who admire every thing which has a real being, are to be called philosophers*, and not lovers of opinion.

GLA. By all means.

Republic 476e-480a, translated by Thomas Taylor (adapted)