

Knowledge in Plato

The science of knowledge is a huge subject, known in philosophy as epistemology. Plato's theory of knowledge is explored in many dialogues, not least because his understanding of the human self and the life we lead is centred on our consciousness.

Plato saw the human as essentially a knowing entity – something whose identity is defined and shaped by its knowledge. Here is Socrates establishing this in the *First Alcibiades*:

1

SOC. With whom is it that you are at this present time discoursing? Is it not with me?

ALC. It is.

SOC. And am not I discoursing with you?

ALC. You are.

SOC. It is Socrates then who is discoursing and arguing.

ALC. Quite true.

SOC. And Alcibiades is attentive to his arguments.

ALC. He is.

SOC. Is it not by reason that Socrates thus argues in discourse?

ALC. Undoubtedly.

And couple of pages later:

Soc. This therefore was our meaning when we said a little before, that Socrates discoursed with Alcibiades, making use of reason: we meant, it seems, that he directed his words and arguments, not to your outward person, but to Alcibiades himself, that is to the soul.

Knowledge is not external to the self, but is its very substance. This leads to a theory of knowledge that is transformative to the individual and leads to one of the central axioms of "I know, I am, I do". To Plato, knowledge guides our thoughts and thoughts guide our actions. He is aiming at that kind of interior knowledge from which action naturally flows: to really know justice is to be just, and to act justly. But before we start exploring Plato's necessarily complex approach to what knowledge is, we have to define some terms and ask some questions. When we say we know a circle, a political theory, a scientific fact, what do we mean? When we use the term knowledge, what are we aspiring to? Are belief and opinion the same as knowledge i.e. what do we mean when we say we know something? What can we have knowledge of, and how do we acquire it? And how do we know we know: does knowledge have a measure?

As pointed to in the disputed 7th letter of Plato, knowledge of something isn't the same as the thing itself and the type of knowledge generated depends on the something that knows it. Therefore in order to understand the many strands that Plato weaves in his dialogues, we need to examine "knowledge" from three different angles, and look at three different things. These are

the thing known,

the knowledge generated and

the thing that knows.

Taking the last of these, the thing that knows, in both the *First Alcibiades* and the *Meno*, Plato calls this the “soul” or essence of a person as a self-constituting knowing actor; something that knows rationally, and therefore chooses and acts, and something that already contains the object of knowledge or knows those objects in some way. This theory of “learning as reminiscence” (also explored as one of the proofs of the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*), is put forward as an answer to the question of how we can know anything at all, without some kind of pre-existing relation between that thing and ourselves. This is explained in the following extract from the *Meno*:

2

MENO But in what way, Socrates, will you search for a thing of which you are entirely ignorant? For by what mark which may discover it will you look for it when you know none of the marks that distinguish it? Or, if you should not fail of meeting with it, how will you discern it, when met with, to be the very thing you was in search of, and knew nothing of before?

SOC. I apprehend, Meno, what it is you mean. Do you observe how misleading a way of reasoning you introduce? For it follows from hence, that it is impossible for a person to seek, either for that which he knows, or for that of which he is ignorant. For no person would seek to know what he knows, because he has the knowledge of it already, and has no need of seeking for what he has. Nor could any person seek for what he is ignorant of, because he would not know what he was seeking for.

MENO Do you not think then, Socrates, that this way of reasoning is fair and right?

SOC. Not I, for my part.

MENO Can you say in what respect it is wrong?

SOC. I can. For I have heard the sayings of men and women who were wise, and knowing in divine things.

MENO What sayings?

SOC. Such as I think true, as well as beautiful.

MENO But what sayings were they? and by whom were they uttered?

SOC. Those who uttered them were of the priests and priestesses, such as made it their business to be able to give a rational account of those things in which they were employed. The same sayings are delivered also by Pindar, and many other of the poets, as many as are divine. The sayings are these: but do you consider with yourself whether you think them true. These persons then tell us that the soul of man is immortal; that sometimes it ends,[†] which is called dying; and that afterwards it begins again, but never is dissolved; and that for this reason we ought to live, throughout our lives, with all sanctity. . . .

The soul then being immortal, having been often born, having beheld the things which are here, the things which are in Hades, and all things, there is nothing of which she has not gained the knowledge. No wonder, therefore, that she is able to recollect, with regard to virtue as well as to other things, what formerly she knew. For all things in nature being linked together in relationship, and the soul having heretofore known all things, nothing hinders but that any person, who has recalled to mind, or, according to the common phrase, who has learnt, one thing only, should of himself recover all his ancient knowledge, and find out again all the rest of things; if he has but courage, and faints not in the midst of his researches. For all inquiry and learning is reminiscence. We therefore ought not to listen to that sophistical way of reasoning aforementioned; for our believing it to be true would make us idle. And, accordingly, the indolent, and such as are averse to taking pains, delight to hear it. But this other way of thinking, which I have just now given you an account of, makes people diligent, sets them at work, and puts them upon inquiry. And as I believe it to be true, I am willing, with your assistance, to inquire into the nature of virtue.

(Meno 80d-81e)

[†] That is, ends its present life, and begins a new life. For as Plato observes justly in his *Phaedo*, life and death succeed each other alternately throughout nature. .

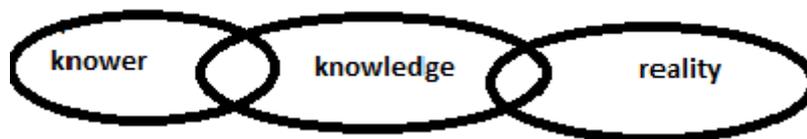
But how does Plato say we reveal this knowledge, what is the process? The following extract from the *Meno* helps show us the difference between belief/opinion and reasoned knowledge. As a right guide for action in any particular moment both serve well but the fallibility of the belief, either as a result of incorrect reasoning or because the basis of it rests almost entirely in perceptions of the senses, means we need to look at something beyond the physical to acquire knowledge of the world around us or the best approximation. In this section Socrates compare the possession of true opinions to the fabled automatons of Dadaelus which were said to have the power of self-movement:

3

SOC. To have in one's possession any of these works of his loose and unfastened, is like to the being master of a runaway slave, a matter of little value, because not permanent: but when fastened and secured, they are things of great value; for indeed they are works of great beauty. But you ask, with what view it is that I speak of these images. I answer, - It is with a view to true opinions. For true opinions also, so long as they abide by us, are valuable goods, and procure for us all good [practical] things: but they are not disposed to abide with us a long time; for they soon slip away out of our souls, and become fugitives. Hence are they of small value to a man, until he has fastened and bound them down, by *deducing them rationally from their cause*. And this, my friend Meno, is reminiscence, as we before agreed. But when they are thus bound and fastened, in the first place they become truly known, and in consequence of this they become stable and abide with us. Now it is on this very account that science is a thing more valuable than right opinion; and in this respect it is they differ, in that the parts of science only are fastened one to another, and bound down together.

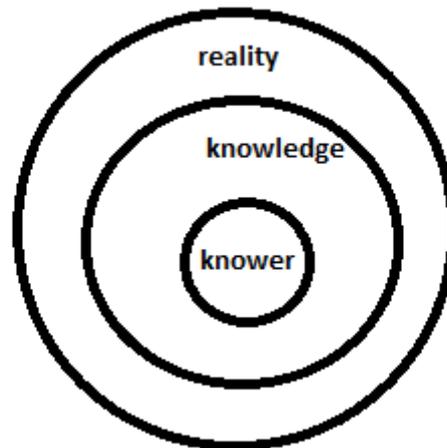
This is also shown in the *Theatetus*, the dialogue which attempts a definition of knowledge. By asking for certain criteria of knowledge to be met Plato shows that when it comes to objects of sense, or physical objects, the best we can do is build up an account of it, and this doesn't bear all the hallmarks of knowledge. As the objects of sense don't have a stable and unchanging reality, necessarily the information we get about them isn't infallible and is therefore not knowledge. It could change at any point, revealing it to be a false belief, rather than knowledge. The dialogue ends by showing that defining knowledge as only a descriptor of physical things, defined by difference, fails.

Therefore in order to understand Plato's epistemology and how "parts of science or knowledge are fastened together" we need to understand his ontology (or science of being), set within the context of his theory of forms. This is why the *Sophist* ends up looking at being, and the genera of being, as the answer to the question "what are the things of which we can have knowledge?"- even if that knowledge is only rational knowledge of something that isn't in itself rational *per se*. If you like instead of thinking about knowledge and the knower as having some connection with reality like this:



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We can think of the reality both informing the knower and the knowledge, *i.e* the knowledge generated is how the knower perceives reality, but that the reality contains both the knowledge generated and the objects known and therefore the objects known have a relationship to the knower:



Plato explores the constitution and composition of a human “soul” in order to understand how this “soul” knows and acts primarily in two dialogues: In the *Republic* from a more epistemological standpoint and in the *Timaeus*, an ontological one. The *Timaeus* presents the soul as composed from a mixture of two types of being: the type of being that always is what it is and the type of being that is always becoming, never is, and moves in and out of existence. *Timaeus* explains these two conditions of being in the following extract:

4

“In the first place, therefore, as it appears to me, it is necessary to define what that is which is always *real being*, but is without generation; and what that is *which is generated indeed*, or *consists in a state of becoming to be*, but which never *really is*. The former of these indeed is apprehended by *intelligence* in conjunction with *reason*, since it always subsists according to *same*. But the latter is perceived by *opinion* in conjunction with *irrational sense*; since it subsists in a state of generation and corruption, and never truly is.”

This directly reflects the divided line from the *Republic* which attempts to explain the different objects of knowledge which can lead to different levels of knowledge (although as we have shown and as we will see the knowledge generated from sensible things is not strictly knowledge). This comes right before the analogy of the Cave, which very carefully lays out the relationships between all the levels of reality, and right after the analogy of the Sun to the good, which attempts to show that the existence of something and our knowledge of that thing have the same cause. These are the ways we know: Sense data, Opinion/belief, Dianoetic/reasoning, Intellect/intuition. Those stable beings that aren't in themselves rational but have an eternal subsistence can be known by reason and this is how we can know objects of sense as they are informed by the same things. Plato's work is about how we can use philosophy to reach the upper limits of knowledge, according to our condition (the *Sophist* contains an example of the dialectic method which we can use to gain knowledge). Let's read the divided line and see if this sheds any light on what knowledge is and what a philosopher does in relation to it.

The Republic, Book 6, The divided line

5

510a

Socrates: As if then you took a line, cut into two unequal parts, and cut over again each section according to the same ratio, both that of the visible species, and that of the intelligible, you will then have clarity and obscurity placed by each other. In the visible species you will have in one section (4) images: but I call images, in the first place, shadows, in the next, the reflections in water, and such as subsist in bodies which are dense, polished and shiny, and everything of this kind, if you understand me.

Glaucon: I do.

Socrates: Suppose now in the other section of the visible (3), put the originals of these images such as the animals around us, and every kind of plant, and manufactured things.

Glaucon: I suppose it.

Socrates: Are you willing then that this section appear to be divided into true and untrue? And that the same proportion, which the object of opinion has to the object of knowledge, the very same proportion has the resemblance to that of which it is the resemblance?

Glaucon: I am, indeed, said he, extremely willing.

b Socrates: But consider now again the section of the intelligible, how it was divided.

Glaucon: How?

Socrates: That with respect to one part of it (2), the soul uses the former sections as images; and is obliged to investigate from hypotheses, not proceeding to the beginning, but to the conclusion; and the other part (1), again, is that where the soul proceeds from hypothesis to an unhypothetical principle, and without those images about it, by the species themselves, makes its way through them.

Glaucon: I have not, said he, sufficiently understood you in these things.

c Socrates: But again, for you will more easily understand me, these things having been premised. For I think you are not ignorant, that experts in geometry, and computations, and such like, after they have laid down hypotheses of the odd and the even, and figures, and three species of angles, and other things the sisters of these, according to each method, they then proceed upon these things as known, having laid down all these as hypotheses, and do not give any further reason about them, neither to themselves nor
d others, as being things obvious to all. But, beginning from these, they directly discuss the rest, and with full consent end at that which their inquiry pursued.

Glaucon: I know this perfectly well.

510e Socrates: And do you not likewise know, that when they use the visible species, and reason about them, their dianoëtic¹ power is not employed about these species, but about those of which they are the resemblances, employing their reasonings about the square itself, and the diameter itself, and not about that which they actually draw? These very things which they are forming and drawing, of which shadows and reflections are images, they now in turn use as their images and aiming to see those very things which they could not otherwise see except by their dianoëtic part.

Glaucon: You say true.

511a Socrates: This then I called a species of the intelligible; but observed that the soul was obliged to use hypotheses in the investigation of it, not going back to the principle, as not being able to ascend higher than hypotheses, but made use of images formed from things below, to lead to those above, as perspicuous, as objects of opinion, and distinct from the things themselves.

b Glaucon: I understand that you speak of things pertaining to the geometrical, and other sister arts.

Socrates: Understand now, that by the other section of the intelligible, I mean that which reason itself attains, making hypotheses by its own reasoning power, not as principles, but really hypotheses, as steps and handles, that, proceeding as far as to that which is unhypothetical, *ἄρχη* the principle of the universe, and coming into contact with it, again adhering to those things which adhere to the principle, it may thus
c descend to the end; using nowhere anything which is sensible, but forms themselves, proceeding through some to others, and at length in forms terminating its progression.²

Glaucon: I understand, but not sufficiently. For you seem to me to speak of an arduous undertaking: but you want, however, to determine that the perception of real being, and that which is intelligible, by the science of reasoning, are more conspicuous than the discoveries made by the arts, as they are called,
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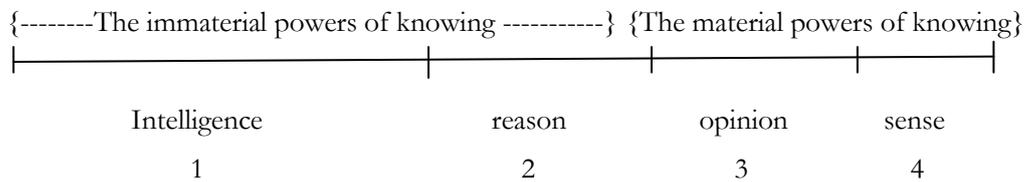
¹ Dianoëtic: literally "knowing through" – the dianoëtic power is that power by which we know things through a process of thought.

² An alternative translation of this speech runs: "So understand, too, what I mean by the other section of the intelligible, which reason itself grasps by the power of dialectic, using hypotheses which are not first principles, but genuine hypostheses, like steps and starting points, in order to go as far as what is unhypothetical and the first principle of everything. And, grasping this principle, it returns once again, keeping hold of what follows from it, and comes down to a conclusion in this way, using no sense perception in any way at all, but Forms themselves, going through Forms to Forms and ending up at the Forms.

which have hypotheses for their first principles; and that those who behold these are obliged to behold them with their dianoëtic power, and not with their senses. But as they are not able to perceive, by ascending to the principle, but from hypotheses, they appear to you not to possess intellect respecting them, though they are intelligible in conjunction with the principal. You also appear to me to call the habit of geometrical and such like concerns, the dianoëtic part, and not intellect; the dianoëtic part subsisting between opinion and intellect.

Socrates: You have comprehended, most sufficiently: and conceive now, that corresponding to the four sections there are these four passions in the soul; intelligence answering to the highest, the dianoëtic part to the second; and assign belief to the third; and to the last imagining.³ Arrange them likewise analogously; conceiving that as their objects participate of truth, so these participate of perspicuity.

Glaucon: I understand, and I assent, and I arrange them as you say.



³ The word here is *eikasia* for which there is no exact English translation. Taylor used "assimilation" while others use "apprehension by images".