

Knowledge and opinion in Plato's philosophy

Some useful extracts from the Dialogues

The Timaeus (27d) - *how the ontological and epistemological align*

“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.”

The Republic (476b-480a) *The knowledge of philosophers, and the opinions non-philosophers.*

(Although too long to read in our relatively short session, we will make reference to this important passage in the fifth book of the *Republic* and we can certainly work through some of the trickier steps - do mark anything you would especially like to discuss). A distinction is made between the lovers of truth, and those who are “lovers of sights and sounds”: one seeks contact with real beings (or, if you like, eternal forms) while the other pursues the images which reflect those forms - the former cultivates knowledge, the latter forms opinions (or beliefs):

476b Your lovers of sights and sounds delight in beautiful tones and colours and shapes and in all the works of art into which these enter; but they have not the power of thought to behold and to take delight in the nature of Beauty itself. That power to approach Beauty and behold it as it is in itself, is rare indeed.

c Quite true.

Now if a man believes in the existence of beautiful things, but not of Beauty itself, and cannot follow a guide who would lead him to a knowledge of it, is he not living in a dream? Consider: does not dreaming, whether one is awake or asleep, consist in mistaking a semblance for the reality it resembles?

I should certainly call that dreaming.

d Contrast with him the man who holds that there is such a thing as Beauty itself and can discern that essence as well as the things that partake of its character, without ever confusing the one with the other — is he a dreamer or living in a waking state ?

He is very much awake.

So may we say that he knows, while the other has only a belief in appearances; and might we call their states of mind knowledge and belief?

Certainly.

But this person who, we say, has only belief without knowledge may be aggrieved and challenge our statement. Is there any means of soothing his resentment and converting him gently, without telling him plainly that he is not in his right mind?

e

We surely ought to try.

Come then, consider what we are to say to him. Or shall we ask him a question, assuring him that, far from grudging him any knowledge he may have, we shall be only too glad to find that there is something he knows? But, we shall say, tell us this: When a man knows, must there not be something that he knows? Will you answer for him, Glaucon?

My answer will be, that there must.

477a Something real or unreal?

Something real; how could a thing that is unreal ever be known?

Are we satisfied, then, on this point, from however many points of view we might examine it: that the perfectly real is perfectly knowable, and the utterly unreal is entirely unknowable?

Quite satisfied.

Good. Now if there is something so constituted that it both *is* and *is not* will it not lie between the purely real and the utterly unreal?

It will.

Well then, as knowledge corresponds to the real, and absence of knowledge necessarily to the unreal, so, to correspond to this intermediate thing, we must look for something between ignorance and knowledge, if such a thing there be.

b Certainly.

Is there not a thing we call belief? [*doxa* - also translated as opinion]

Surely.

A different power from knowledge, or the same?

Different.

Knowledge and belief, then, must have different objects, answering to their respective powers.

Yes.

c And knowledge has for its natural object the real — to know the truth about reality. However, before going further, I think we need a definition. Shall we distinguish under the general name of ‘faculties’ those powers which enable us — or anything else — to do what we can do? Sight and hearing, for instance, are what I call faculties, if that will help you to see the class of things I have in mind.

Yes, I understand.

Then let me tell you what view I take of them. In a faculty I cannot find any of those qualities, such as colour or shape, which, in the case of many other things, enable me to distinguish one thing from another. I can only look to its field of objects and the state of mind it produces, and regard these as sufficient to identify it and to distinguish it from faculties which have different fields and produce different states. Is that how you would go to work?

d Yes.

Let us go back, then, to knowledge. Would you class that as a faculty?

Yes; and I should call it the most powerful of all.

And is belief also a faculty.?

It can be nothing else, since it is what gives us the power of believing.

But a little while ago you agreed that knowledge and belief are not the same thing.

478a Yes; there could be no sense in identifying the infallible with the fallible.

Good. So we are quite clear that knowledge and belief are different things?

They are.

If so, each of them, having a different power, must have a different field of objects.

Necessarily.

The field of knowledge being the real; and its power, the power of knowing the real as it is.

Yes.

Whereas belief, we say, is the power of believing. Is its object the same as that which knowledge knows.? Can the same things be possible objects both of knowledge and of belief?

b Not if we hold to the principles we agreed upon. If it is of the nature of a different faculty to have a different field, and if both knowledge and belief are faculties and, as we assert, different ones, it follows that the same things cannot be possible objects of both.

So if the real is the object of knowledge, the object of belief must be something other than the real.

Yes.

c Can it be the unreal? Or is that an impossible object even for belief? Consider: if a man has a belief, there must be something before his mind; he cannot be believing nothing, can he?

No.

He is believing something, then; whereas the unreal could only be called nothing at all.

Certainly.

Now we said that ignorance must correspond to the unreal, knowledge to the real. So what he is believing cannot be real nor yet unreal.

True.

Belief, then, cannot be either ignorance or knowledge.

It appears not.

Then does it lie outside and beyond these two? Is it either more clear and certain than knowledge or less clear and certain than ignorance?

No, it is neither.

d It rather seems to you to be something more obscure than knowledge, but not so dark as ignorance, and so to lie between the two extremes ?

Quite so.

e Well, we said earlier that if some object could be found such that it both *is* and at the same time *is not* that object would lie between the perfectly real and the utterly unreal; and that the corresponding faculty would be neither knowledge nor ignorance, but a faculty to be found situated between the two.

Yes.

And now what we have found between the two is the faculty we call belief.

True.

479a It seems, then, that what remains to be discovered is that object which can be said both to be and not to be and cannot properly be called either purely real or purely unreal. If that can be found, we may justly call it the object of belief, and so give the intermediate faculty the intermediate object, while the two extreme objects will fall to the extreme faculties.

Yes.

On these assumptions, then, I shall call for an answer from our friend who denies the existence of Beauty itself or of anything that can be called an essential Form of Beauty remaining unchangeably in the same state for ever, though he does recognize the existence of beautiful things as a plurality — that lover of things seen who will not listen to anyone who says that Beauty is one, Justice is one, and so on. I shall say to him. Be so good as to tell us: of all these many beautiful things is there one which will not appear ugly? Or of these many just or righteous actions, is there one that will not appear unjust or unrighteous?

b

No, they must inevitably appear to be in some way both beautiful and ugly; and so with all the other terms your question refers to.

And again the many things which are doubles are just as much halves as they are doubles. And the things we call large or heavy have just as much right to be called small or light.

Yes; any such thing will always have a claim to both opposite designations.

Then, whatever any one of these many things may be said to be, can you say that it absolutely *is that*, any more than that it *is not that*?

c They remind me of those punning riddles people ask at dinner parties, or the child's puzzle about what the eunuch threw at the bat and what the bat was perched on. These things have the same ambiguous character, and one cannot form any stable conception of them either as being or as not being, or as both being and not being, or as neither.

d Can you think of any better way of disposing of them than by placing them between reality and unreality? For I suppose they will not appear more obscure and so less real than unreality, or clearer and so more real than reality.

Quite true.

It seems, then, we have discovered that the many conventional notions of the mass of mankind about what is beautiful or honourable or just and so on are adrift in a sort of twilight between pure reality and pure unreality.

We have.

And we agreed earlier that, if any such object were discovered, it should be called the object of belief and not of knowledge. Fluctuating in that half-way region, it would be seized upon by the intermediate faculty.

Yes.

- e So when people have an eye for the multitude of beautiful things or of just actions or whatever it may be, but can neither behold Beauty or Justice itself nor follow a guide who would lead them to it, we shall say that all they have is beliefs, without any real knowledge of the objects of their belief.

That follows.

But what of those who contemplate the realities themselves as they are for ever in the same unchanging state? Shall we not say that they have, not mere belief, but knowledge?

That too follows.

- 480a And, further, that their affection goes out to the objects of knowledge, whereas the others set their affections on the objects of belief; for it was they, you remember, who had a passion for the spectacle of beautiful colours and sounds, but would not hear of Beauty itself being a real thing.

I remember.

So we may fairly call them lovers of belief rather than of wisdom — not philosophical, in fact, but philodoxical. Will they be seriously annoyed by that description?

Not if they will listen to my advice. No one ought to take offence at the truth.

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Republic (510a-511e) - *The Divided line*

- 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, d 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 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.

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 510e 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, *viz.* the principle of the universe, and coming into contact with it, again c adhering to those things which adhere to the principle, it may thus 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

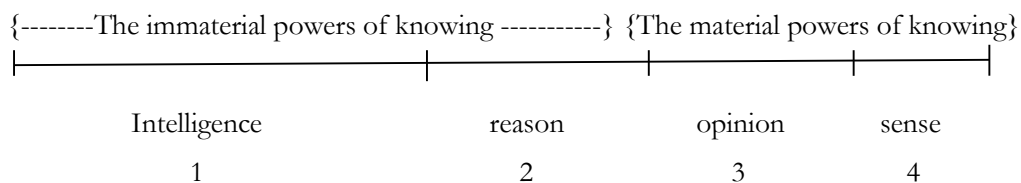
¹ Dianoëtic: literally "knowing through" – the dianoëtic power is that power by which we know things through a process of thought.

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.

d 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, 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 principle. 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.

e 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.



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Selections from the Meno

In the *Meno* - a dialogue which explores the question, “can virtue be taught?” - the subject of knowledge comes up: Socrates wants to know something as “a thing in itself”, not its relation to other things (in this case, virtue). But Meno suggests that we cannot learn what a thing in itself is because if we don’t know it, how could we recognize it even if we happen to stumble upon it? Either we know it, in which case we don’t have to search it out, or we don’t know it and it must stay unknown however much effort we make to learn it. Socrates replies to this:

I apprehend, Meno, what it is you mean. Do you observe how captious a way of reasoning you introduce? For it follows from hence, that it is impossible for a man to seek, either for that which he knows, or for that of which he is ignorant. For no man would seek to know

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

what he knows, because he has the knowledge of it already, and has no need of seeking for what he has. Nor could any man seek for what he is ignorant of, because he would not know what he was seeking for.

81a 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.

b 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.

He then quotes verses from Pindar in which the human self - that is to say the soul - is involved in a series of earthly lives, carrying into each one an inborn set of true ideas (or forms) which lie more or less forgotten deep within. The learning experience is the process by which we recall those half-buried ideas - in other words, there is a sense in which we know the "things in themselves" but in order to bring them into full consciousness, we are reminded of them by their reflections in the visible world. Socrates then illustrates this process by taking a relatively uneducated slave-boy who is accompanying Meno through a geometric puzzle. At the outset the boy thinks he knows the solution to it - in reality he does not, and Socrates first task is to show him that his supposed answer is wrong. He then takes the boy through a series of steps in order that the true answer can emerge from the boy's own thinking. We should note, however, that this single exercise is not seen as productive of knowledge, but it is the first step. The dialogue goes as follows:

Soc. Well; what think you, Meno? Has this boy, in his answers, given any other opinion than his own?

85c Meno None other: he has given his own opinion only.

Soc. And yet, but a little before, as we both observed, he had no knowledge of the matter proposed, and knew not how to give a right answer.

Meno True.

Soc. But those very opinions, which you acknowledge to be his own, were in him all the time: were they not?

Meno They were.

Soc. In a man therefore, who is ignorant, there are true opinions concerning those very things of which he is ignorant.

Meno It appears there are.

Soc. *Those opinions then are stirred up afresh in the mind of that boy, as fancies are in dreaming.* And if he should frequently be questioned of these things, and by many different persons, you may be assured he *will at length know them with as much certainty as any man.*

85d

Meno Indeed, it seems so.

Soc. Will he not then know them without being taught them, having only been asked questions, and recovering of himself from within himself his lost knowledge?

The dialogue continues towards the resolution of the question concerning the teaching of wisdom, but the issue of opinion and knowledge continues to crop up. From one point of view, says Socrates, opinion just as useful as genuine knowledge - for a man can guide people to Larissa even though he has only a correct report of the right route, just as well as someone who has actually made the journey and genuinely knows the way. When it comes to simply taking action, right opinion is as good as knowledge: but it has a flaw, which Socrates then points out:

SOC. Right opinion, therefore, *with regard to right action*, is not at all a worse guide than science or perfect knowledge. And this it is which we omitted just now in considering the nature of virtue; when we said that prudence only or knowledge led to right action; it is this, right opinion.

97c

MENO It seems so.

SOC. Right opinion therefore is not at all of less advantage to man than certain knowledge.

MENO In this respect, however, Socrates, it is; in that he who has a perfect knowledge of his end, would always attain to it; but the man who had only a right opinion of it, sometimes would attain to it, and sometimes would not.

SOC. How say you? would not the man, who had a right opinion of it, always attain to it, so long as he entertained that right opinion?

d

MENO It appears to me that he must. And therefore I wonder, Socrates, this being the case, on what account it is that knowledge is so much more valuable than right opinion; and indeed in what respect it is that they differ at all one from the other.

SOC. Do you know now why you wonder? or shall I tell you?

MENO By all means tell me.

SOC. It is because you never considered attentively those images⁴ made by Dædalus. But perhaps you have none of them in your country.

MENO With what view is it now that you speak of these images?

SOC. Because these, if they are not fastened, run away from us, and become fugitives: but if they are fastened, they abide by us.

e

MENO Well; and what then?

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

⁴ These were small figures of the gods, reported to have in them the power of self motion. -S.

98a 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 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 knowledge is a thing more valuable than right opinion; and in this respect it is they differ, in that the parts of knowledge only are fastened one to another, and bound down together.

MENO By Zeus, Socrates, they are similar to some such things as those to which you resemble them.

b SOC. Nay, for my part, I speak thus not from knowledge; but only from conjecture. But that right opinion and knowledge are two different things, this, as it appears to me, I do not merely imagine or conjecture. For if I were to profess the knowledge of any things whatever (and there are but a few things which I could profess to know), this I would set down for one of them.

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Guide to important Greek terms and their English equivalents

Perception (aísthēsis) - generally limited to *sense perception*, although there is an overspill (as so often with other related words such as “see” and “taste”) where a metaphorical use is made to refer to the perceptions of the mind. Exactly where the sense data passed on by the passive senses is transformed into something with a degree of interpretation attached is a matter of some discussion.

Logos - this has a wide range of meanings and one’s interpretation of what any specific use of it refers to must be based on context. It can mean word, speech, argument, discourse, account, reason, a productive principle derived from an idea or form, and so on. When we use the term reason/rational when talking about our gnostic powers we usually mean that power which moves step by step along a chain of reasoning - in other words a discursive power which works on syllogisms. Sometimes a Platonic author will stretch the term to cover more than the dianoetic (reason proper, literally “knowing through (a series of steps)”) to include intuitive reason.

Doxa - opinion, judgment, belief. Quasi knowledge formed on the appearance of things. There are two particular aspects of *doxa* which Plato presents to us: firstly, that it addresses things which are within the material world in some respect - that is to say things which, in the words of the *Republic*, both *are* and *are not*. For since in this order of existence nothing is completely stable and everything is moving from one form to another, it cannot be that anything is purely what it seems to be. An apple is decaying into something else, what seems to be heavy, sweet, beautiful or tall in some circumstance or to somebody, can be light, sour, ugly or short in some other circumstance or to somebody else. But secondly, *doxa* as a judgement is also what arises as the conclusion of a reasoning process (both Proclus and Taylor define it as the “termination of reason”): as Plato says, when thinking in a series of questions and responses finally finishes so that there are no further questions to ask, then a judgement is formed (see the *Sophist* 263e and the *Theaetetus* 190a). Opinion knows *that*

something is, but cannot know *why* it is - for it is the province of reason to investigate the *why* of something.

Episteme - knowledge (or science - Taylor often uses this alternative, writing in the years before our common understanding of the word became narrowed down). The nature of knowledge, for Plato, means that it is *always true* and *addresses real being* - in contrast to opinion/belief which can be true or false, and which addresses things which are *becoming to be* (either material things, or conceptions formed in the human mind).

Nous - intellect. Nous, in itself considered, is the knowing side of real being. Nous is eternal and creative - it is the effective producer of the manifested cosmos and all its inhabitants, including psyche (soul). Soul (especially rational souls, such as ours) participates in nous, and so the Platonic tradition talks of intellect as a power of the human gnostic range of faculties: at the highest point of reason lies intellect. When reading Platonic texts (especially late Platonic texts) it is important to understand when intellect is being used in the primary sense, and when it is being used in the participatory sense. The first transcends the soul, the second is within the soul.