

THE TWO FACES OF PLATONIC KNOWLEDGE

Plato is traditionally held to be the originator of our modern standard definition of knowledge. In its modern version, the definition goes more or less thus:

S knows that *p* if and only if

- (i) *S* thinks (has an opinion, or the like) that *p*;
- (ii) *p*;
- (iii) *S* can adduce adequate support to his opinion that *p*.

(i) The first difference to be noted between our formulation and Plato's is that Plato's epistemic states refer — at least in their primary characterization — to *objects*, not to states-of-affairs. They are more akin to *können*, *connaitre*, than to *wissen*, *savoir*. It is true that the Greek εἰδέναι is indifferent between those,¹ but, as we shall see, this is not what is at stake here.

Parmenides introduced what I shall call 'the binary model of cognition'. Knowing is akin to seeing. 'Knows' is a two-place predicate: '*S* knows this or that' or '*S* knows that this or that is the case'. One can know τὸ ὄν, what is, or one can know ὡς ἔσται, that (it)² is, indifferently.³ In any case, for Parmenides, the object of knowing as the object of seeing is there to be seen καθ' αὐτό, in itself.⁴ One can see it or not see it, but, on this view, there cannot be seeing wrongly, just as one can grasp something or not grasp it, but one cannot grasp it falsely. Of course, we talk now, especially after Wittgenstein, of 'seeing as.'⁵ But this depends on a

¹Cf. LSJ, s.v. εἶδω B.

²That 'it' is purely grammatical; i.e., it does not refer to anything, as if that verb had a subject. This is not a mere linguistic quirk. Its more serious reasons will become apparent presently.

³Fr. 2.7, and cf. fr. 8.36; fr. 2.3, 8.2.

⁴Cf. fr. 8.29.

⁵Cf. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G.E.M. Anscombe. Oxford, 2nd ed., 1958, II xi.

mediated conception of seeing, alien to the more common-sensical Parmenidean, and still current modern view.

Such a mode of knowing depends on the distinction between objects and states-of-affairs. In seeing or knowing *A* as *B* one judges *that A is B*. But that distinction will be made only in the *Sophist*, based on the structures developed in the *Parmenides*,⁶ and especially on the possibility of ideas being πρὸς τι (or κατὰ τι),⁷ i.e. in relation to something, in this case in relation to one another, πρὸς ἄλληλα.

(ii) The second condition, that *p* is the case, is equivalent to the Greek λέγειν τὰ ὄντα, saying what is, or rather γινώσκω τὰ ὄντα, knowing what is. This should give us right, or true, as opposed to wrong, opinion. However, on the binary model, not even that much is possible. On that model, one can know or fail to know, just as one can see (or grasp) or fail to see (or grasp). If one succeeds in knowing, one knows, of course, what is there to be known. Therefore, every act of cognition, if successful, is knowledge in the strictest sense; if it fails, it is no cognition at all. There is no room for opinion, right or wrong, as distinct from knowing or not knowing. In the same way, there can be no distinction between error and ignorance in the sense of zero cognition. Parmenides is thus right in considering opinion, δόξα, on his model, as totally unwarranted.⁸

In order to allow for true and false opinion, as distinct from knowledge and from ignorance, Plato introduces the triadic model of knowledge. Knowledge is cognition of what is *as it is*, ἐπιστήμη μὲν ἐπὶ τῷ ὄντι πέφυκε, γινώσκω ὡς ἔστι τὸ ὄν.⁹ This triadic structure of cognition, *S* knows *F* as *F*, is made explicit in the *Republic*, but it first appears in the *Meno*: ‘Do you know a square figure, that it is like this?’¹⁰ It is important to note that in both cases, in the *Republic* and in the *Meno*, the triadic model is brought up within the context of introducing the concept of right, or true

⁶*Parmenides* 142b1–157b5, *Sophist* 262b1–e12.

⁷On the equivalence of πρὸς τι and κατὰ τι, cf., e.g., *Parmenides* 133c9 and d3 with 133a9, c4 and c6.

⁸Cf. fr. 8.50–52.

⁹*Republic* v 477b10–11. Cf. 478a6: ἐπιστήμη μὲν γέ που ἐπὶ τῷ ὄντι, τὸ ὄν γινώσκω ὡς ἔχει.

¹⁰*Meno* 82b9–10: γινώσκεις τετραγώνου χωρίου ὅτι τοιοῦτόν ἐστιν.

opinion, as distinct from knowledge and from absolute ignorance. Plato continues to use the binary model, if sufficient for his needs, but he resorts to the more sophisticated, triadic model when in need of further precision.¹¹

But this model raises, for Plato, some further difficulties. Γνωῖναι, to know, involves a relation between the knower and the known. Any epistemic state assumes that the known is πρὸς τι, in relation to something, namely in relation to the knowing subject. This is the lesson of Argument I of the *Parmenides*. If τὸ ὄν, what is, is καθ' αὐτό, in itself only, there can be no cognition whatsoever of it.¹² On the other hand, knowledge for Plato is, by definition, of something καθ' αὐτό, in itself. Τὸ ὄν, what is, is, in itself, always ὡς ἔστι, 'as it is', and only apprehension of it as it is in itself can be knowledge in the strict sense.

This triadic structure lays bare the twin problems inherent in Plato's concept of knowledge as true cognition: How can one have cognition of something that is in itself, unrelated to anything else? And, on the other hand, how can one have cognition of something *not* as it is? As the second part of the *Theaetetus* (186e12–210b3) makes clear, in a world in which everything is only καθ' αὐτό, there is no possibility of seeing or apprehending or taking cognition of anything *as* this or that. One can grasp the wrong bird, but one cannot grasp it not as it is. Thus, the difference between error and ignorance disappears. If one grasps the bird, any bird, one has succeeded in grasping it.¹³ In order to label the act as erroneous rather than as non-occurring, we would have to compare the bird to something else, i.e., view it as πρὸς τι.

The difference between the two cognitive models employed by Plato is apparent also from a somewhat different point of view, in the ways in which the difference between knowledge and opinion is presented in the *Phaedo* and in the *Meno*. In the *Phaedo*, the difference is one of objects: knowledge is of unchangeable Forms and opinion is of changeable sensible things. In the *Meno* the difference is one of structure of the cognitive state, which reflects the structure of the object: knowledge implies the ability to provide a *logos* (which is, of course, adequate, i.e., fitting to the object in

¹¹Cf. also *Euthydemus* 284c7 ff.

¹²*Parmenides* 142a3–4.

¹³Cf. *Theaetetus* 199e8–200b7.

question); opinion does not. In other words, the *Phaedo* requires two types of entities, δύο γένη τῶν ὄντων; the *Meno* requires that the same object of opinion be considered differently. In the third section of the Divided Line, in the *Republic*, διάνοια is an opinion-like cognition of the Forms, not adequately justified. It is an indirect apprehension of the Forms, which, in a way that remains to be explained, turns into direct apprehension by being given a *logos*.

(iii) This brings us to the third necessary condition in our definition of knowledge: ‘S can adduce adequate support to his opinion that *p*.’ For Plato, adequate support means a *logos* that can be dialectically supported, that can not only withstand the elenchus but also, in accordance with the hypothetical method of the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*¹⁴ (which, I would maintain, Plato never abandoned), that can be justified by ‘the strongest’ hypotheses until ‘something sufficient’, τι ἰκανόν, is arrived at.¹⁵

As even a cursory examination of the occurrences of the term will show, an ὑπόθεσις can be either a term (or, rather, an object)¹⁶ or a proposition (or, rather, a state-of-affairs).¹⁷ A *logos* is thus an interconnection of Forms, requiring Forms to stand in (internal) relations to each other. In other words, Forms must be capable of being πρὸς ἄλλα, in relation to each other. But, as the first part of the *Theaetetus* (151d7–186e12) and Argument VII of the *Parmenides* (164b5–165e1) show, objects that are only πρὸς ἄλλα, in relation to something else, cannot be said to be, and cannot be, this or that, cannot be truly said to have, and cannot have, any characteristic at all.

As has been long recognized, the requirement of a sufficient *logos*, is left by Plato purposefully vague. Sufficient for whom? The *logoi* given by Socrates are deemed sufficient first by Simmias and then by Cebes. But not by Socrates: One must check ‘the first hypotheses.’ Is there ever, then, a complete *logos*? The absolutely sufficient *logos*, as is well known, should be the unhypothetical beginning of the *Republic* (511b6). But can it ever be attained? In the terms we have been using, it is this unhypothetical

¹⁴*Meno* 86e ff., *Phaedo* 100a ff.

¹⁵*Phaedo* 100a2, 101e1.

¹⁶Cf. *Republic* vi 510c3–5, *Theaetetus* 191c8–9.

¹⁷Cf. *Meno* 87a2, d3, *Republic* iv 437ab.

beginning that guarantees that the chain, or the web, of *logoi* will give us the Form itself, in itself. In other words, that the Form, considered as purely πρὸς τι, will eventually be revealed as καθ' αὐτό, in itself, if such a thing is at all possible or even imaginable.

It seems, then, that for knowledge in the strict Platonic sense to be possible, its objects must be capable of being, concomitantly, in two different modes: both καθ' αὐτό, in itself, and πρὸς ἄλλα, in relation to something else. It is precisely this dual character of the Form as πρὸς τι and as καθ' αὐτό that allows it to be an object both of δόξα and of ἐπιστήμη. If it were only πρὸς τι, it could be only an object of opinion, relative to the perceiver (even if it is a Form), an opinion that could be neither true nor false, for there would be nothing in itself to which it could be related in any way. But for ἐπιστήμη (or even for true δόξα), an object is needed that is καθ' αὐτό, in itself. *Episteme* is γινῶναι ὡς ἔστι τὸ ὄν, to know what is as it is.

Nevertheless, this is still cognition as apprehension, albeit apprehension of a peculiar object. How does this apprehension relate to the definition of ἐπιστήμη as (true) δόξα with a *logos*? It should be noted that, on the triadic model, ἐπιστήμη is no longer pure, unmediated apprehension. It would be, if ὡς ἔστι were equivalent to καθ' αὐτό, and then it would also be redundant, as it has been often taken to be. But it is not. It presupposes it, of course, but, in Plato's technical use of the term, ἔστι is primarily a matter of οὐσίᾳ, of something being as it is, i.e., with all its interconnections.¹⁸ If so, ὡς ἔστι, 'as it is', refers to the object including (or rather: pointedly stressing) its characteristics,¹⁹ i.e., setting it within the context of the other objects of knowledge (in the strict sense of ἐπιστήμη) expressed in its *logos*. γινῶναι [...] τὸ ὄν gives us true δόξα; ὡς ἔστι gives us the *logos* that will transform this δόξα into ἐπιστήμη.

This formulation thus bridges the gap between the object-based concept of knowledge (of the *Phaedo*) and the structure-based concept (of the *Meno*). The object is now seen *in its particular structure*, and

¹⁸See, e.g., *Parmenides* 142b5–c1, and cf. also 141e7–10.

¹⁹This is apparently the force of the Plato's variant formulation (ὡς ἔχει) at 478a6, quoted above.

apprehending it properly implies apprehending its structure. The implications of this will be seen in a moment.

But first, a word of caution about οὐσία. Forms are not substances. For Plato, οὐσία is simply the abstract noun corresponding to εἶναι. It is what a thing is; it refers to whatever attribute is considered in the subject in question.²⁰ For reasons of his own, Plato makes no distinction between being essentially and being accidentally. οὐσία is whatever anything, sensible object or Form participates in. It is so used, technically, in the *Parmenides*, e.g., in the expression μετέχειν οὐσίας.²¹ οὐσία is, then, whatever is participated in.

This is important for our subject, because it follows that having an οὐσία (not *being* an οὐσία) does not imply the separation of the Form participated in. The Form is *not* a substance, if by being a substance one means being separate *tout court*. Since Aristotle, it is common-place to accuse Plato of χωρισμός, of separating the Forms from the sensible things. But nowhere does Plato use the word χωρίς of the Forms. (In the *Parmenides* it is used by Parmenides as *his* interpretation of the Platonic Forms, except at 129d6, where young Socrates says that he would like to see someone proving that the Forms are *both* χωρίς, separate, *and* capable of mixing with each other).²²

Did Aristotle, then, misunderstand Plato? Not really, although he is not innocent of some misrepresentation. If Plato's Forms are οὐσία, then, in Aristotelian terms, they must be καθ' αὐτά, *per se*, not *per accidens*. But if so, they must be separate, for to be a substance (for Aristotle) is to be

²⁰Strictly speaking, there are no Platonic *subjects* (ὑποκείμενα). Ultimately, forms are predicated (loosely speaking) of place (χώρα). But for most purposes this exactness is not necessary, and Plato himself, except in the *Timaeus*, uses subject-predicate formulations, and especially so in the *Parmenides*, where, however, the subject, represented by a place-holder ('one'), is soon dissolved away (cf. 142e3–143e3).

²¹Cf., e.g., *Parmenides* 141e9.

²²Χωρίς is a technical Parmenidean term, used of the spurious two εἶδη in the second part of his poem, which are each καθ' αὐτό (fr. 8.58), in itself, χωρὶς ἀπ' ἀλλήλων (fr. 8.56), separate from each other.

separate, to be what it is on its own. In other words, Aristotle means Platonic Forms make poor Aristotelian substances. Indeed.²³

But what does young Socrates in the *Parmenides* mean when he demands that the Form be both separate and capable of combining, of participating and being participated in? Is not what participates different from what is participated in? Is not the beauty in Helen different from the beauty itself? Is not this Plato's complaint against the lovers of sights in the *Republic*,²⁴ that they fail to distinguish between the beautiful and the many beautiful things?

I hope to have shown elsewhere²⁵ that the participating and the participated in are not, in last analysis, essentially different from each other, but are basically the same entity *in two different modes of being*. To participate in *F* is to *be F* with restrictions of aspects (and time, for sensible things), to be qualifiedly *F*. Helen's beauty is not different from the beautiful, it is just restricted to certain aspects, resulting from its being reflected in the $\chi\acute{\omega}\rho\alpha$ and 'in' time. The three is odd, but only in a certain respect, namely, in respect of its indivisibility by two. It is not *the* odd $\kappa\alpha\theta' \alpha\acute{\upsilon}\tau\acute{o}$, in itself, but it is odd in a certain respect, and in *that* respect it does not differ from the odd. As Aristotle would have put it, it bears its name, but (and this is not Aristotle) it bears its definition only in a certain aspect (i.e., insofar as it is not divisible by two). To be odd is not to be divisible by two, and three is not, but this is not all there is to the three. But insofar as three *is* indivisible by two, there is no difference between it and the odd in itself. The operative word is, of course, 'insofar'.

How is this relevant to our epistemological concerns? In the same way that, in order to be susceptible of definition (not in an Aristotelian technical sense), the Form must be capable of entering in relations with other Forms, i.e., it must be capable of being *in relation to something*, $\pi\rho\acute{\omicron}\varsigma \tau\iota$. It must also, in order to be perceived, be capable of being in relation to the perceiver. (It is important to note that Plato does not find it necessary to distinguish between $\pi\rho\acute{\omicron}\varsigma \tau\iota\kappa\alpha$ and $\pi\rho\acute{\omicron}\varsigma \tau\iota$, for, or: in relation to, *someone*

²³See, e.g., Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Z 16. 1040b27–29, 1086b8–9.

²⁴*Republic* 475d1 ff.

²⁵S. Scolnicov, *Plato's Parmenides*, translated with a commentary. Berkeley, 2003.

and in relation to *something*. But then the Greeks had no conception of subjectivity in the modern, Cartesian sense.)

On the other hand, if knowledge is not cognition of what is as it is καθ' αὐτό, it cannot be knowledge, nor even true opinion, in the Platonic sense. This is the lesson of the second part of the *Theaetetus* and of Argument VII of the *Parmenides*. If the Forms are πρὸς τι, they are purely relative to each other and/or to the perceiver, and (as we would say) subjective. In order that knowledge be possible, the Form must be (condition i) *for someone*, (condition ii) *in itself*, and (condition iii) *in relation to others*. Plato does not distinguish, so far as the Forms are concerned, between the presuppositions of condition (ii) and condition (iii).²⁶

These then are the two faces of the Platonic object of knowledge. It must be relative, so as to be apprehended by the knower and so as to be susceptible of being the object of discourse; and it must be absolute, or in itself, in order to guarantee true cognition. Heidegger was right, then, in maintaining that, with Plato, truth becomes epistemic, a property of cognitive states and of their expression in discourse.²⁷ But Plato did not let go of the ontic aspect of truth, as the attribute of what-is. Plato can do this because his ontic entities and epistemic objects of discourse are *not* two different things. They are the same thing in two different modes: they are fully *and* they are restrictedly.

But does the chain of *logoi*, in which each step is necessarily true only *in relation* to the next, ever attain the point where the *logoi* finally touch the thing itself? Does the δεύτερος πλοῦς, the second-best voyage, ever come to its secure haven? Or is Platonic knowledge no more than an enticing illusion, a siren that draws us relentlessly to nowhere?

If the above analysis is correct, Plato thought that without strict knowledge there cannot even be true opinion, and that without the duality of the object of cognition, no true apprehension of any sort is possible. The

²⁶Condition (ii) implies, of course the existence of ψυχαί, souls. Cf., e.g., *Euthydemus* 295b4 ff. But this is not to our point.

²⁷Martin Heidegger, *Platons Lehre von Wahrheit. Mit einen Brief über den 'Humanismus'*. Bern, c. 1947.

initial dilemma, as he sets it up, is stark: either a Parmenidean ontology, in which there is no room for true discursive knowledge, or a total Heraclitean-Protagorean relativism and subjectivism, without even a concept of truth. Plato denies both and substitutes for them a paradoxical duality. But all he can offer in its support is no more than a sort of transcendental argument with a leap of faith, an epistemological postulate that cannot remain on this side of ontology. We do have knowledge (and true opinion); therefore, this is what their object must be like.

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