

Chapter 13

The argument from knowledge and Overview

13.1 Readings and Homework

13.1.1 Readings

Required

- Plato, *Republic*, Book V, 473d-end (pp. 469-476 in RAPG) and *Phaedo*, 77a-84c, (pp. 247-254 in RAPG)

Recommended

Go further in the *Republic*

13.1.2 Homework

Give a short answer to the following questions on the basis of the readings:

1. *Republic*: Explain how Plato argues that there can be no knowledge unless the non-sensible forms exist.
2. *Republic*: Why can't we gain knowledge of the sensible things?
3. *Phaedo*: Give a list of the characteristics that Plato attributes to the sensible things and to the forms, respectively.

4. *Phaedo*: Explain why Socrates does not find the Presocratics' account of the world satisfactory? What does he call a "true cause"?

13.2 The forms as the object of knowledge

13.2.1 Reading the *Republic* end of book V

Looking for the definition of the philosopher

- Proposition 1: Love is love of its object in its entirety
- Examples: love of beautiful boys, love of honors, love of food
- Consequence 1: Philosophy, as love of wisdom, is love of wisdom in its entirety
- Sub-conclusion 1: First characteristic of the philosopher: eager and happy to learn all you can learn
- Restriction: the philosopher is eager and happy to learn all the *truth* there is to learn, by contrast with those who go to dramatic performances or other arts. *Remember: art is based on appearances; as such, it is based on a form of deception* – art is almost entirely ruled out of the ideal city.

Philosophers and the forms: exposition of the thesis

- Proposition 2a: Forms are *one* and the same, even if they appear in *many* sensible instantiations (the beautiful / beautiful things)
- Proposition 2b Philosophers only love the (in?)sight of the unique forms, while all others love the sights and sounds of the sensible instantiations
- Definition 2c: To dream:= to take an image for the real thing.
- Sub-conclusion 2a: Philosophers only are awake (= see reality), while all others are dreaming (take some appearances to be realities)
- Sub-conclusion 2b: Philosophers only have knowledge, while all others have opinions.

- Note that this move is not argued for properly. It remains to prove that there is a clear division between:
 - On the one hand, dreaming, that is, take the image for what it is an image of, identifiable with the epistemological state of the soul called “opinion” and that “opinion” is about the sensibles;
 - On the other hand, being awake, that is, contemplate the real thing and take the images for what they are, identifiable with the epistemological state of the soul called “knowledge” and “knowledge” is about the forms;
 - In short, Plato has to prove that *there is no knowledge except of the Forms and what we take to be knowledge of the sensible is nothing but mere opinion.*

The following argument is meant to fill in the gap.

Argument for the forms as the only object of knowledge

1. **Epistemological Intermediate:** Plato first shows that there exists an intermediate between knowledge and ignorance

Proposition 3a: knowledge is about what is, ignorance is about what is not

Proposition 3b: what is perfectly is perfectly knowledgeable, what is not at all is not knowledgeable at all

Proposition 3c: There is something that is intermediate between being and not being – **Ontological intermediate**

Sub-conclusion 3: there must be something in between ignorance and knowledge

2. **The epistemological intermediate: Opinion**

Proposition 4a: opinion and science are both powers of the soul

Proposition 4b: distinct powers have distinct objects

Proposition 4c: opinion is distinct from science, because it is fallible, while science is infallible.

Sub-conclusion 4a: opinion has a distinct object than science

Proposition 4d: opinion has for object something that is an intermediate between being and non being

Sub-conclusion 4b (given Sub-conclusion 3): opinion is thus the intermediate between knowledge and ignorance we were looking for.

3. The ontological intermediate: Sensible things

Proposition 5a: the many sensible things are and are not (are F and not F, are ambiguous, “roll between being and not being”).

Sub-conclusion 5 (given Sub-conclusion 4): sensible things are the object of opinion

4. Conclusion (back to Sub-cc 2a and Sub-cc 2b, using P2a and P2b)

CC1: The lovers of multiple things, ignorant of the forms, know nothing and have only opinions

CC2: The lovers of the forms know in the proper sense

philo-doxia vs. *philo-sophia*

13.2.2 An epistemological argument

- According to **Aristotle** (*Metaphysics*), the argument from knowledge is the one that put Plato on the path to the doctrine of forms.
- Here is an **overview** of the argument:
 1. Plato bases his argument on the premise that knowledge is perfect, infallible knowledge about what really is what it is (this, of course has to be made more precise).
 2. Now, the sensibles cannot be the object of such knowledge for they are constantly in flux between being and not being. There are only object of opinion.
 3. So, if now there is to be something like knowledge, then we have to postulate the existence of the forms, distinct the multiple and changing sensible things.
 4. The forms will be these permanent objects of perfect knowledge.

The forms are thus postulated just as the “only things” which are truly knowledgeable.

Epistemological Side	Knowledge	Opinion	Ignorance
Ontological Side	What is – Form	Intermediate – Sensibles	What is not

- It is important to notice that the argument for the existence of the forms is based on the consideration of how we know. That is to say, **Plato derives ontological conclusions from epistemological premises.** The postulation of the forms is given as an answer to the question: how knowledge is possible?
- Now, most of us would think that we can and we do possess a great deal of knowledge about the sensible things. It does not seem that we need to postulate the existence of the forms as a condition of possibility of knowledge.

Of course, this is the line of argument that Plato addresses here. On the basis of a restricted definition of what counts as knowledge, he shows that the sensible things cannot be the object of knowledge but only of opinion.

- The **distinction between knowledge and opinion** (*doxa*) is thus of utmost importance in the passage and for Plato in general. It gives him his main support for the existence of the forms. He uses a similar argument in the *Timaeus* (51d), which is often considered as a dialogue from the late period:

If understanding and true opinion are distinct, then these by themselves things definitely exist - these Forms, the objects not of our sense perception but of our understanding only. But if - as some people think - true opinion does not differ in any way from understanding, then all the things we perceive through our bodily senses must be assumed to be the most stable things there are. But we do have to speak of understanding and true opinion as distinct, of course, because we can come to have one without the other, and the one is not like the other . . . Since these things are so we must agree that (i) that which keeps its own form unchangingly, which has not been brought into being and is not destroyed, which neither receives into itself anything else from anywhere else,

nor itself enters into anything else anywhere, is one thing. It is invisible - it cannot be perceived by the senses at all, and it is the role of understanding to study it. (ii) The second thing is that which shares the others name and resembles it. This thing can be perceived by the senses, and it has been begotten. It is constantly borne along, now coming into being in a certain place and perishing out of it. It is apprehended by opinion, which involves sense perception [...].

- **A first main premise** for the distinction between opinion and knowledge is thus that **opinion is fallible, while knowledge is not.**
- Plato argues that such a difference between opinion and knowledge is due to a **difference in their object.**

The reason why opinion can be mistaken is because of the ambivalent existence of its objects.

The sensibles cannot be object of anything better than opinion: because they are ambivalent. They are both F and not F (ambiguous or relative). They change. The relationship between these statements is not clear. Heraclite seems to be here, but Plato does not stick to the strict idea of the sensible things being in constant flux or change. Instead, he focuses on the idea that sensible have an ambivalent way of being. Now, that can be linked with change of course but is not strictly equivalent (See Shield on this point). *Thus, sensible things are deceptive and have us make mistakes.*

This is a **strong thesis**: *that means that, according to Plato, knowledge is not, as we might think, an “ameliorated” opinion on the same subject. Rather, knowledge and opinion are not about the same kind of being.*

- The **second main premise** is thus that what is perfectly knowledgeable is also what “is”. This could be interpreted in different ways...

Here is the interpretation of the argument given by Marc Cohen in his course notes: <http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/rep476.htm>

Interpreting the argument

- Platos three claims:
 - (K) Knowledge is of what is. (477a1)
 - (I) Ignorance is of what is not. (477a3)
 - (B) Belief is of what is and is not. (477a-b)
- What is the sense of is (be) involved?
 - * is_e : existential
 - * is_p : predicative
 - * is_v : veridical
- So Platos [second] premise is one or more of the following: Knowledge has as its objects:
 - * what is_e (= what exists).
 - * what is_p (= what is really F).
 - * what is_v (= what is the case, i.e., is true).

It is most plausible to construe these as **conditionals**:

- * (Ke) if Kx, then x exists
- * (Kp) if Kx, then x [really] is [F]
- * (Kv) if Kq, then q is true

In (Ke) knowledge = acquaintance: If you know (i.e., are acquainted with) something, then that thing exists.

In (Kv), we have propositional knowledge: If you know something, then that thing is true.

(Kp) seems to dissolve into the other two, depending on whether we take knowledge to be acquaintance or propositional knowledge:

- * If you are acquainted with something, then that thing is real (i.e., exists).
- * If you know, about something, that it is F, then (it is true that) it is F.

So we can restrict our attention to (Ke) and (Kv).

- Platos [first] premise (knowledge is infallible) seems to make the truth of his first premise a matter of necessity:

Necessarily, (Ke): What you know must exist.

Necessarily, (Kv): What you know must be true.

All of these seem plausible enough; but as we shall see, Plato slides from these innocuous sounding premises to rather startling conclusions.

End of Marc Cohen's notes

Two problems in the arguments

Marc Cohen identifies two fallacies in Plato's argument

1. A modal fallacy

From Prof. Cohen's course notes:

Are the premises innocuous? That is, can they be accepted by one not antecedently committed to the Theory of Forms? (Remember, Plato is arguing for the existence of Forms from features of the concept of knowledge.) To claim that knowledge is infallible seems innocent enough, for all it seems to say is that knowledge entails truth: Necessarily, if you know that q , then q is true.

But Plato slides from this innocuous reading of the premise to a more controversial one: that the things that we know are necessary truths; that what we know is not merely an existent, but something which must exist (a necessary being).

In the case of is_e , the transition is from "What is known must exist" to "What is known is a necessary existent."

In the case of is_v , the transition is from "What is known must be true" to "What is known is a necessary truth."

But this is a now-familiar modal fallacy, conflating the necessity of a conditional statement (*necessitas consequentiae*) with the necessity of the consequent of that statement (*necessitas consequentis*).

Necessitas consequentiae vs. Necessitas consequentis

- necessarily (if p , then q) vs. if p then necessarily q

- It is necessary that(p implies q) vs. p implies (It is necessary that q)

It is necessary that(p implies q) may be true even though both p and q are contingent truths. Hence, it does not entail p implies (It is necessary that q).

Example: Necessarily, if Toms shirt is crimson, then Toms shirt is red. (Being crimson entails being red.) But although Toms shirt is crimson, it is not a necessary truth that Toms shirt is red. The color of Toms shirt is a contingent matter.

Cf. Parmenides treatment of the claim what exists must exist.

This fallacy vitiates phase one of Platos argument: the argument that takes us from the truism that knowledge entails truth to the controversial thesis that what is known is a necessary truth.

2. The second fallacy

The transition from “Knowledge is of necessary truths” – SLB: the propositions are necessary truths – to “The objects one has knowledge about are invariable, fixed, permanent, unchanging - i.e., the Forms.” – SLB: the things the propositions refer to are necessary beings.

This appears to be a different sort of fallacy: that of transferring a property of a proposition to the thing(s) the proposition is “about”. It’s not in general true that if p is about x and p has property F, then x has F. (E.g., one may have a complex proposition about a simple object, a short proposition about a tall object, etc.)

Two comments on Platos move in Phase Two

- **From truth to being: knowledge by proposition and knowledge by acquaintance**

Plato’s inclination to suppose that invariable objects are required as the things invariable (i.e., necessary) truths are about may have been fostered by his assimilation of propositional knowledge (knowing that) to knowledge by acquaintance (knowing someone). For the unalterability of the propositional object of knowledge seems to require a proposition that cannot ever fail to be true. And if one stresses the unalterability

of the object of propositional knowledge and slides (unwittingly) into thinking of it as knowledge by acquaintance, then it appears that an unalterable object that one can be directly acquainted with is required: a non-propositional object of contemplation which always remains the same, etc.

The slide from knowledge-p to knowledge-a is partially concealed by the fact that, in both cases, what is known can be described as a being, something that is. Cf. the plausibility of both of principles (Kv) and (Ke):

What you know-p must be (= be true).

What you know-a must be (= exist).

- **Necessary beings as bearers of truth-value**

Platos move from invariable truths to invariable objects of knowledge may be made to seem more plausible if one thinks of the bearers of truth-value - the sorts of things that can be true or false - in a non-standard way.

The standard way (nowadays): the bearer of truth-value (and hence the object of propositional knowledge) is what is expressed by a fully explicit declarative sentence, viz., a proposition. Such things are either true (eternally) or false (eternally), and don't go around changing truth-value. So the proposition that 'it rained in Seattle on March 14, 1876' is, if true, true forever. It won't change in truth-value. It does not differ at all in that respect from the proposition that $2 + 2 = 4$. Thus, on this model it is hard to see why necessity should have anything to do with fixity of truth-value.

But suppose we think of the bearers of truth-value (i.e., the things our cognitive states are about) as corresponding not to fully explicit declarative sentences, with all the local and temporal parameters filled in (like 'It rained in Seattle on March 14, 1876') but as corresponding to what Quine calls "occasion sentences," i.e., sentences like 'It's raining.' Such sentences have implicit *indexical* elements (here, now, I, you, this, etc.) Such sentences are true on some occasions of utterance, and false on others.

So if, on Monday, you have a belief that you express by saying 'It's raining,' and, on Wednesday, I have a belief that I express by saying

‘Its raining,’ you and I are in the same belief-state. The content of your belief looks (from the inside) exactly like mine. *But we believe different propositions*: what you believe is true, and what I believe is false. So if all one has to rely on is the contents of one’s mind, one’s belief-state, one cannot be guaranteed to arrive at the truth. Here, then, is a cognitive state (belief) that can sometimes go wrong.

But now contrast these (seemingly present tense) sentences:

* ‘Two plus three equals five’ (i.e., $2 + 3 = 5$)

* ‘The sum of the interior angles of a triangle is equal to two right angles.’

These cannot change in truth-value. And why is that? Contrast them with ‘It’s raining.’ That can change in truth-value because the weather can change. But these mathematical statements have fixed truth-values because they are about objects that don’t change. The eternal truth of ‘ $3 + 2 = 5$ ’ is guaranteed by the fact that the entities involved, and the relations asserted to obtain among them, are not capable of changing in the respects needed to make the statement turn out to be false.

Plato’s argument in Phase Two now seems much more plausible than it did before. But there is still room to lodge a complaint:

One complaint

Plato has not allowed for the possibility of fixed and unchanging relationships among noneternal (contingent) objects. If there were such relationships, his demands for the objects of propositional knowledge would be met without the need for immutable objects of acquaintance (= the Forms).

Are there such relationships? Consider these propositions:

- Zebras have stripes.
- Salt dissolves in water.
- Gold has atomic number 79.

These propositions seem to be invariably true, even though they are not about invariable objects. What makes Zebras have stripes invariably true is not the existence of an invariable zebra, but the fact that an invariable relationship exists among ordinary, variable, corruptible, flesh-and-blood zebras.

The discovery, examination, and explanation of such regularities in nature is the business of natural science, for which Plato makes no provision. **His idea that things that can move and change are cognitively unreliable, and cannot be known, has the consequence that natural science is impossible!**

For natural science - as Aristotle was quick to notice - “must take for granted that the things that exist by nature are, either all or some of them, in motion (i.e., subject to change) (Phys. 185a12-13). And physical science maintains that there can be invariable, necessary truths about changeable, corruptible objects.

Instead, Plato supposes that necessary truths are about Forms. If it really is invariably true that zebras have stripes, this is because of some invariable feature of the Zebra Itself, an incorruptible and eternal object of contemplation.

Note that a consequence of the line Plato takes is that propositions that appear to be about sensible, spatio-temporal particulars turn out, if they are to be objects of knowledge, not to be about those things at all. Which is to say, **our knowledge gets cut off from the world of experience.**

(end of March Cohen’s notes)

13.3 The theory of the forms: Overview

This section is largely based on Marc COhen course notes “Theory of Forms” <http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/thforms.htm>

From Marc Cohen course notes:

- The theory of the forms is a general metaphysical and epistemological theory. Central to all of Platos thought, but nowhere systematically argued for. Not stated in any one dialogue; we must cull from several (but principally Phaedo and Republic).
- The theory is the forms is a theory of postulated abstract objects, deriving from the Socratic What is X? question, which presupposes that there is a single correct answer to the What is X? question.
 1. The correct answer is not a matter of convention, of what we all (or most of us) think.

2. What makes such an answer correct: it is an accurate description of an independent entity, a Form.
3. Forms are thus mind-independent entities: their existence and nature is independent of our beliefs and judgments about them.

END of M. Cohen's course notes

- Along with the “affinity argument” for the immortality of the soul, Plato gives one of the most complete characterization of the forms in the *Phaedo* 80b, giving the characterization of the soul: divine, deathless, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, always the same as itself.

- Plato's Forms

A interesting way to understand a philosophical notion is by contrasting it with its opposites. In our case, the forms are to be contrasted with the sensibles.

Sensibles	Forms
Observable entities	Theoretical entities
Material	Immaterial <i>passim</i>
Situated in a spacetime	Eternal 79d2
Changing flux	Immutable 78c10-d9
Imperfectly	Perfectly what they are 75b
From this world	Divine 80a3, b1
Perceptible	Intelligible 79a1-5

- From other dialogues (we will not read these in class), we can further complete the characterization: they are non-temporal (*Timeaus* 37e-38a), non-spatial (*Phaedrus* 247c), they do not become, they simply are (*Timeaus* 27d3-28a3).

