Essays in Ancient Epistemology

GAIL FINE
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GAIL FINE
To the memory of my mother
and
To Debbie and Darrell
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Preface and Acknowledgements

This volume brings together thirteen of my essays on ancient epistemology, along with a new, synoptic introduction. The earliest of the essays was published in 2000; the latest were still unpublished when I submitted this volume to the Press. They are all reprinted here with minor changes. For example, there are occasional slight variations in content. Some references have been corrected; and sometimes transliterations are used where the originally-published version used Greek. For various reasons, some material that was originally in the text is now in footnotes; hence the footnote numbers in the essays as they appear here are sometimes different from those in the essays as they originally appeared. The essays as they were originally published differ in style, usually because the venues that published them had different house styles. In this volume, some changes have been made so as achieve more uniformity of style.

In the Introduction, I discuss some of the essays’ main themes and indicate how the essays fit together. I also occasionally criticize what I say in one or another essay; and sometimes I discuss literature that the essays discuss only very briefly or not at all. However, I have not done either of these things systematically or in detail. Nor does the Introduction defend my views in detail. It provides an overview; details are reserved for the essays that follow.

The chapters that follow record various debts. But I should also like to record a few particular acknowledgments here: to Peter Momtchiloff and Henry Clarke, both of Oxford University Press, for help and encouragement at various stages; to Peter Osorio for compiling the list of references and the index locorum; and, as always, I owe more to Terry Irwin than I can say.

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Introduction

1. The essays in this volume discuss ancient epistemology, especially in Plato, Aristotle, and the Pyrrhonian skeptics. One central theme is cognitive conditions and their contents.¹ In particular, how are epistêmê, doxa, dogma, and the corresponding verbs, to be understood? Is epistêmê knowledge as it is conceived of nowadays? Are doxa and dogma belief as it is conceived of nowadays? Consideration of such questions should not be limited to the Greek words just mentioned. Since Greek has a rich cognitive vocabulary, we should also consider other Greek words that are sometimes translated as ‘knowledge,’ such as eidenai and gignôskein, as well as other Greek words that are sometimes thought to indicate belief, such as hupolêpsis and oiesthai. We should also consider what knowledge and belief are.

The first work in the Platonic corpus that engages with some of these issues is the Apology, which I discuss in Chapter 2. Socrates is often thought to have said that the only thing he knows is that he knows nothing. If he says this, and if ‘know’ is used univocally, he seems to contradict himself. For if he knows that he knows nothing, he doesn’t know anything, contrary to his claim to know something (viz., that he knows nothing). On the other hand, if he doesn’t know anything, then he can’t know that fact. For if he did, he would know something after all. Yet the view that Socrates says that he knows that he knows nothing, though by no means universal,² is widespread.³ In Chapter 2, I ask whether, in the Apology, Socrates says, or implies, that he knows that he knows nothing in a way that involves self-contradiction. I also consider the related but different question of whether he says that he knows nothing, a claim that, unlike the claim to know that one knows nothing, is not self-contradictory.⁴

¹ Cognitive conditions include states of knowing and believing, as when John knows, or believes, that 2+2=4. Cognitive contents include what is believed and known, e.g. that 2+2=4.
³ For one recent example, see S. Bakewell, How to Live (London: Chatto and Windus, 2010), 124. For another, see H. Lagerlund, Skepticism in Philosophy (New York: Routledge, 2020), who says that ‘Socrates famously proclaimed that he knows that he does not know anything’ (2; cf. 26). I cite further examples in Chapter 2.
⁴ One might argue that it implies a contradiction, since it is an assertion; and, according to one view, if one asserts that p, one takes oneself to know that p. But that view of assertion is controversial; and I suggest in Chapter 2 that Plato does not accept it.
At Ap. 21b4–5, Socrates says:

For I am aware of being wise in nothing, great or small.

Egô gar dé oute mega oute smikron sunoida emautô(i) sophos ὄn.

This passage isn’t explicitly self-contradictory, for it uses two different cognitive phrases, sunoida emautô(i) and sophos ὄn. However, the passage would be implicitly self-contradictory if these phrases were synonymous, or if to suneidenai something implied being sophos with respect to it.⁵

However, to know something would not usually be thought sufficient for being wise with respect to it.⁶ It would normally be thought to be more difficult to attain wisdom than to attain just any old knowledge. If Socrates claims to know that he is not wise, that does not imply a contradiction unless the knowledge he takes himself to have is wisdom. But the Apology does not support that view. Indeed, it is not even clear that suneidenai is being used for knowledge: the word can be used for being aware of something in a way that falls short of knowing it. In Chapter 2, I argue that Socrates is saying either that he knows that he is not wise (where knowing something falls short of being wise with respect to it); or else that he is aware that he is not wise (where being aware of something falls short of knowing it). Neither claim involves or implies a contradiction.⁷

One might argue that if, in Ap. 21b4–5, Socrates claims to lack all wisdom, he contradicts the oracle’s claim that no one is wiser than he is (21a) and that he is wisest (21b). For the oracle doesn’t lie (21b). One solution is to say that Socrates disclaims wisdom only before hearing what the oracle said; after hearing what it said, he decides that he is wise after all. He doesn’t contradict himself, holding both p and not p at the same time; rather, upon reflection he changes his mind.⁸

I defend a different solution, according to which, even after reflecting on what the oracle said, Socrates continues to believe that he lacks all wisdom. This is consistent with what the oracle says. For Socrates can be wiser than others without any of them being wise, just as one person can be wealthier than another without

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⁵ This is how Richard Kraut understands the passage. He translates ‘sunoida’ as ‘know,’ and says that ‘you cannot know that you are not wise even in a small way; for to know something is to have a small amount of wisdom’: Socrates and the State (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 272 n. 44.

⁶ In Rep. 428c–429a, Plato takes sophia to be just one kind of epistêmê. However, in Meno 96e–100c he uses a variety of cognitive terms interchangeably, including sophia and epistêmê. Tht. 145d7–e6 explicitly identifies epistêmê and sophia. Despite this terminological variation, Plato often seems to recognize different kinds, or levels, of epistêmê.

⁷ Either way, on the interpretation I’ve suggested 21b4–5 uses two different cognitive terms for two different cognitive conditions. Gregory Vlastos, by contrast, argues that Socrates not only takes a variety of cognitive terms to be synonymous but also takes each of them to be ambiguous as between two senses of ‘know,’ which Vlastos calls ‘certain knowledge’ and ‘elenctic knowledge.’ See his ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,’ Philosophical Quarterly 35 (1985), 1–31. Reprinted in G. Fine (ed.), Plato I, 64–92, at 82–4, 91. Some commentators agree with Vlastos’s basic point but favor different senses of ‘knowledge’ than he does.

⁸ For this view, see Kraut, Socrates and the State, 271.
either of them being wealthy. It’s just that Socrates comes closer to being wise than others do, just as one person can be closer to being wealthy than others are. Similarly, Socrates can be wisest by being the one who is closest to being wise, just as the healthiest person in the room need not be healthy. It’s true that, after reflecting on the oracle, he claims to have human wisdom (23ab); but he doesn’t think that it is genuine wisdom or even genuine knowledge. For it consists just in the fact that, when he doesn’t know that p, neither does he think he knows that p: he differs from others in not having any false pretenses to knowledge. Though this is compatible with his being wise, it doesn’t imply that he is wise. And it remains his considered view, even after considering the oracle’s pronouncement, that he lacks all wisdom.

Although Socrates consistently claims to lack all wisdom, he claims to know some things. For example, at 29b he claims to know (eidenai) a moral truth. This doesn’t contradict either his claim to lack all wisdom or the view that human wisdom isn’t genuine wisdom. For the knowledge he says he has in 29b is not part of his human wisdom. Nor is having it sufficient for him to be genuinely wise; it is knowledge of a less demanding sort.

In deciding how best to understand Socrates’s various claims about his cognitive condition, it is important to bear in mind that, as I have mentioned, Greek has many cognitive terms; and it is not always clear how to understand them in a given context. For example, we have seen that there is dispute about whether Socrates’s claim, in 21b, to suneidenai something implies that he takes himself to be wise with respect to it, or to know it in a way that falls short of being wise with respect to it, or to be aware of it in a way that falls short of having knowledge. Similar questions arise about other cognitive terms. For example, at 23b Socrates says that he egnôken that his wisdom is worthless. To gignôskein something can be to know it. But the term can also be used for a grasp that falls short of knowledge. How can we decide which way it is used here? Further, there are disputes about what knowledge is. How, then, do we know when it is appropriate to translate a given Greek word as ‘knowledge’?

Here it is helpful to distinguish the concept of knowledge from particular conceptions of it. The concept of knowledge provides an abstract account of what knowledge is; particular conceptions fill in this account in more determinate ways. Two people can agree about the concept of something while disagreeing about the right, or best, conception of it. The distinction between a concept and a
conception is analogous to the distinction between a job description and the candidates for it. The job description specifies what criteria the successful candidate should satisfy. The candidates purport to satisfy them. Some in fact don’t do so. But more than one might do so; and one of them might satisfy the description best of all. For example, a job description might say that the successful candidate should be skilled at teaching at a variety of levels and should also be a good administrator. Some candidates might satisfy one of these criteria but not the other; if so, they don’t make the grade. More than one candidate might satisfy both criteria, but some might do so better than others. The job description is analogous to a concept; the candidates are analogous to conceptions.

I take the concept of knowledge to be that of a truth-entailing cognitive condition that is appropriately cognitively superior to mere true belief. Particular conceptions of knowledge say how knowledge is appropriately cognitively superior to mere true belief: they say what it takes to get over that threshold. If to suneidenai something isn’t truth entailing, or if isn’t appropriately cognitively superior to mere true belief, it isn’t knowledge. It doesn’t satisfy the job description. If a given cognitive term is used for a condition that is both truth entailing and also appropriately cognitively superior to mere true belief, it is used for knowledge: it satisfies the job description, though we should then ask how well it does so. Is the candidate minimally, or well, qualified?

Even when a given cognitive term can, in a given context, be properly translated as ‘knowledge,’ it might be misleading to do so if it obscures the fact that, in that context, more than one Greek term is used, all of which can, in some contexts, properly be translated as ‘knowledge.’ Further, as we have seen, some Greek terms—e.g. suneidenai and gignôskein—can be used both for knowledge and for something less than that. We have to pay careful attention to the context to determine how the terms are used. Even if a given term is always used for knowledge, it might indicate different levels of knowledge in different contexts. For example, two cognitive states might both count as genuine knowledge (not just approximations to knowledge), yet one might be deeper than the other by having a better explanation of why what one knows is true, or a better justification for one’s belief that something is so. Further, different dialogues might have different conceptions of knowledge.

Even if each of the passages I have discussed so far is internally consistent, and even if they are also all compatible with one another, other passages might be

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10 This concept does not imply that knowledge is either a species or implication of belief, though it is compatible with both of those options.

11 To say that there are different levels of knowledge is not to say that ‘knowledge’ has different senses. If something is a level of knowledge, it is genuine knowledge: it is a cognitive condition that is appropriately cognitively superior to mere true belief. But there can be different ways of being cognitively superior to mere true belief. I discuss levels of knowledge, as well as of justification and explanation, below; see also Chapter 2.
more difficult to accommodate. However, in Chapter 2, I argue that nowhere in the Apology does Socrates claim, or imply, that he knows that he knows nothing in a way that involves contradiction. Every passage that might seem to do so is more plausibly read in a different way, either as claiming that he is aware (in a way that falls short of knowing) that he isn’t wise; or as knowing, in a low-level way, that he lacks knowledge of a higher-level sort. Not only does Socrates not claim to know that he knows nothing in a way that is self-contradictory; but neither does he claim to know nothing. To be sure, we have seen that, at 21b, he claims to lack all wisdom. But, as we have also seen, lacking all wisdom does not imply lacking all knowledge. And, as we have seen, elsewhere in the Apology he claims to know some things—though without implying that he is wise with respect to them.

If my account is correct, the Apology implicitly distinguishes levels of knowledge. For Socrates takes himself to have some knowledge that falls short of wisdom: he has low-level knowledge but lacks high-level knowledge. He also implicitly distinguishes knowledge from belief. If, for example, in 21b suneidenai is used for awareness that falls short of knowledge, it is arguably used for mere belief, that is, for belief that falls short of knowledge. (However, suneidenai doesn’t mean ‘mere belief.’ As we have seen, it can be used in other ways. We have to rely on the context to tell us how it is used on a given occasion.) Further, at 23ab, after considering what the oracle says, Socrates eventually arrives at a settled and well-reasoned view about what it meant and of what, in the light of that, his own cognitive condition is. He has acquired what he takes to be a well-justified true belief, though not one that he thinks is justified well enough to count as knowledge.¹² However, the Apology doesn’t explicitly say what knowledge, wisdom, belief, or true belief are. Plato is more explicit about some of these cognitive conditions in the Meno, which I discuss in Chapter 3.¹³

2.

In the Meno, Plato explicitly distinguishes epistêmê from true or correct belief (alêthes/orthê doxa). (At 97, he also notes some similarities between them: both imply truth; both imply belief; and they are equally reliable guides to action on a given occasion.) He also defines epistêmê as true belief that is tied down with reasoning about the explanation (aitias logismos) (98a3–8). That is, one has epistêmê that p if and only if one has the belief that p, p is true, and one can explain why p is true.¹⁴

¹² This is not to say that he rejects the view that knowledge is justified true belief. He might think that knowledge is justified true belief, where the justification has to be of a certain sort; not any old justification will do. I discuss this view further below.

¹³ Chapter 2 also discusses some issues that are relevant to Chapter 3; see esp. n. 6 and n. 7.

¹⁴ For reasons for thinking this is at least an outline definition of epistêmê, see Chapter 3, sect. 4.
In the previous paragraph, I used ‘belief’ to translate doxa. However, the *Meno* doesn’t provide an account of doxa; and there is dispute about whether doxa, as Plato conceives of it, counts as belief as it is standardly understood nowadays. To be sure, not everyone nowadays has the exact same view of belief. But on what I take to be the standard view, which I shall assume here, for A to believe that p is for A to take p to be true (with the aim of its being true: taking it to be true for the sake of exploring a hypothesis doesn’t count). In Chapter 3, I assume rather than argue that doxa, as Plato uses the term in the *Meno*, means ‘belief’ in this sense; hence I simply translate it as ‘belief.’ But in Chapter 5, I argue that doxa, as it is used in the *Phaedo*, is belief in this sense. In Chapters 9 and 10, I briefly discuss Aristotle on doxa and belief. In Chapter 11, I ask whether Sextus uses dogma for belief.

One reason to think that doxa, as it is discussed in the *Meno*, is belief in the sense of taking to be true is that 98a defines epistêmê as a species of doxa. However, the dialogue also sometimes takes doxa to be mere belief: that is, belief that falls short of knowledge. For example, in 97e–98a true doxai are compared to Daedalus’ statues which, unlike epistêmê, are unstable. When doxa is mere belief, epistêmê is not a species of, and doesn’t imply, doxa; similarly, knowledge is not a species of, and doesn’t imply, mere belief. Though Plato uses doxa both for generic taking to be true and for mere belief, he doesn’t use the term in two different

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15 For this view of belief, see e.g. S. Blackburn, *sv ‘belief,’ The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); E. Schütz, ‘Belief,’ in Zalta, E. (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Summer 2015 Edition); B. Williams, ‘Deciding to Believe,’ in his *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); R. Stalnaker, *Inquiry* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984); D. Velleman, ‘The Possibility of Practical Reason,’ *Ethics* 106 (1996), 694–726 at 706–7; and his ‘On the Aim of Belief,’ in his *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 244–81. Though the view that belief is taking to be true is widespread, not everyone understands taking to be true in exactly the same way. I discuss this in Chapter 11, where I also explain how I understand the notion. For a different view of belief, on which it need not involve taking to be true, see M. Frede, ‘The Skeptic’s Beliefs,’ in his *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), ch. 10; and his ‘Two Kinds of Assent and the Possibility of Knowledge,’ also in his *Essays*, ch. 11. I discuss his alternative in Chapter 11.

16 This is sometimes doubted. For example, in ‘Three Platonist Interpretations of the *Theaetetus*,’ in C. Gill and M. M. McCabe (eds.), *Form and Argument in Late Plato* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), ch. 6, at 93, D. Sedley notes that Plato says that true beliefs become (gignontai) knowledge (98a6), which might mean that they then cease to be true beliefs just as, when a child becomes an adult, she ceases to be a child. (Though Sedley mentions this interpretation, he does not commit himself to it. Contrast J. Moss and W. Schwab, ‘The Birth of Belief,’ *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 57 (2019), 1–32, at 9.) But gignesthai can be used non-temporally, as it is in e.g. *Meno* 82d2. If it is used non-temporally in 98a6, the point is that it turns out that knowledge is true belief that is appropriately bound: that is the conclusion of their reasoning. If, however, gignesthai is used temporally, the point might just be that true belief becomes knowledge from not having been knowledge; it need not indicate that the true belief ceases to be a true belief, though of course it ceases to be a mere true belief.

One might say that rather than taking knowledge to be a species of true belief, Plato means just that true belief is a component of knowledge. When we say that water is H₂O, we don’t mean that water is a species of hydrogen; we mean that hydrogen is a component of water. But even on this view, it remains the case that the sort of true belief that is involved in the definition of knowledge is generic taking to be true; mere true belief is not at issue. I shall continue to speak of knowledge being a species of true belief; but the view that true belief is a component of knowledge would do for my purposes, as would the view that knowledge implies true belief.
senses.¹⁷ Rather, he uses it to mean taking something to be true, but sometimes a given context makes it clear that only some beliefs are at issue.

Let’s now turn to epistêmê. It is sometimes thought that, in defining epistêmê in 98a, Plato is defining knowledge as justified true belief.¹⁸ I ask later whether epistêmê is knowledge. But let’s ask first whether he defines epistêmê as justified true belief. His definition mentions part of the justified true belief account of knowledge: it says that epistêmê is a species of true belief. But is having an aitias logismos having a justification? According to Myles Burnyeat, it is not: ‘the Meno’s leading condition on knowledge, aitias logismos (98a) is Greek for working out the explanation of something, not for assembling a justification for believing it, which the slave already has at a stage when Plato denies he has knowledge (85c).’¹⁹ Burnyeat makes two points. One is that aitias logismos doesn’t mean ‘justification.’ The other is that Plato doesn’t take knowledge (epistêmê) to be justified true belief.

I agree with Burnyeat’s first point. That, however, leaves open the possibility that Plato thinks that having the sort of justification that’s needed for one’s beliefs to count as epistêmê consists in having an aitias logismos; and, in Chapter 3, I argue that that is Plato’s view.

As to Burnyeat’s second point, it’s true that, by 85c, the slave has some justification for his beliefs but is said to lack epistêmê. But this shows only that Plato doesn’t think it’s sufficient for having epistêmê that one have a true belief that is justified to any old degree or in any old way. Rather, he thinks one has epistêmê when one has a justified true belief, where the justification involves being able to explain why what one believes is true. Not all justification is on a par; some is better than others. In taking epistêmê to require explanation, Plato isn’t bypassing justification; he is specifying the sort of justification that’s needed for epistêmê.²⁰

We can now ask whether epistêmê is knowledge. Once again, the distinction between the concept of knowledge and particular conceptions of it proves useful.²¹

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¹⁷ Pace Moss and Schwab, ‘The Birth of Belief,’ 8. In saying that the Meno uses doxa both for the genus and for mere belief, I retract a claim made in Chapter 3 n. 32.


²⁰ For the view that it is adding a certain sort of justification—not just any old justification—to true belief that yields knowledge, see e.g. J. Cargile, ‘On Near Knowledge,’ Analysis 31 (1971), 145–52, at 145–6; and R. Fogelin, Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), ch. 1. In speaking of adding something to true belief, I do not mean to endorse what is sometimes called the additive model of knowledge, for which, see Chapter 3 n. 39.

²¹ Or so I think. But not everyone finds the distinction between concept and conception helpful. Indeed, in ‘Explanation in the Epistemology of the Meno,’ Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy 48 (2015), 1–36, W. Schwab is skeptical about whether there even is a concept of knowledge (2); hence he focuses instead on comparing Socrates’s account of epistêmê in the Meno with contemporary (2) (or standard contemporary: 25) accounts of knowledge. He concedes that Socrates’s account of epistêmê in the Meno is like some contemporary accounts of knowledge; but he argues that such accounts aren’t
According to the concept of knowledge I have suggested, knowledge is a truth-entailing cognitive condition that is appropriately cognitively superior to mere true belief. Epistêmê, as Plato defines it, counts as knowledge when knowledge is so described. For it implies truth and is also cognitively superior to mere true belief, since it also involves justification, where the relevant justification consists in explaining why what one knows is true. To be sure, epistêmê doesn’t have to be justified true belief to be knowledge; that’s just one, controversial, conception of knowledge.²² But it is a conception of knowledge: it fits the job description even if, in the end, one favors a different candidate.

Plato takes epistêmê to be knowledge as such, not just one type of knowledge: he thinks that it is the only candidate that satisfies the job description. For he thinks that any cognitive condition that falls short of epistêmê is at best mere true belief.²³ Hence, in his view, one can have epistêmê, and so knowledge, that p is true only if one can explain why p is true. By contrast, in contemporary epistemology it is often assumed that one can know that p is true without knowing why it is true. This indicates a difference in conceptions, but not in the concept, of knowledge. We should not be surprised that there are different views of how knowledge is appropriately cognitively superior to mere true belief.

We have seen that Plato thinks that to know that p is true, one needs to be able to explain why it is true. On one view, he thinks that, to do this, one must have a deep synoptic grasp of a sort few can have. An alternative is that, though he requires this sort of explanation in some cases (in particular, for knowledge of forms), he doesn’t (in the Meno) require it for all epistêmê. For example, he says that one can know who Meno is (71b) and how to get to Larissa (97a). To do so, an explanation is needed; but it need not be one that involves a deep, synoptic grasp that very few people can have. Nor does it require a grasp of forms: though forms are explanatory, there are also explanations that do not invoke forms. Hence we need not (as is sometimes done) dismiss these examples as mere analogies; they are literal examples of things one can know.

In requiring explanation for all knowledge, Plato makes knowledge more difficult to acquire than some—though not all—do nowadays. But in allowing

‘standard.’ If epistêmê, as Plato describes it, is like some contemporary accounts of knowledge, that’s sufficient (though not necessary) for its being knowledge.

²² Vlastos, for example, says that hardly anyone nowadays accepts the justified-true-belief account of knowledge: ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,’ n. 25.

²³ Nor does the Meno countenance a cognitive condition that is higher level than epistêmê (which is consistent with the dialogue countenancing different levels of epistêmê, as it seems to do). Of course, Plato didn’t have the de dicto belief that epistêmê is knowledge: he didn’t know English. My point is that given what he says about various cognitive conditions, it is reasonable to describe his view as the view that the only knowledge there is is epistêmê, and that any other cognitive condition is at best mere true belief.
levels of explanation, and so of knowledge, he doesn’t make *all* knowledge as
difficult to acquire as he is sometimes thought to do.²⁴

It is sometimes thought that the fact that Plato requires explanation for
*epistêmê* shows that *epistêmê* is understanding. And it is sometimes thought that
understanding is either just one (especially high-level) type of knowledge or else it
is different from knowledge altogether. How we decide about this depends not
only on how we think Plato conceives of *epistêmê*, but also on how we conceive of
knowledge and understanding. Whitney Schwab, for example, argues that
*epistêmê* is understanding but not knowledge, whereas Lindsay Judson takes
understanding to be a type of knowledge. They agree that *epistêmê* is understand-
ing; but they disagree about whether understanding is a type of knowledge.²⁵ If
one thinks that having an explanation of why what one knows is true is sufficient
for understanding, then *epistêmê* is understanding. Plato would in this case hold
the view that understanding is the only sort of knowledge there is. However, as we
have seen, he thinks there are levels of explanation, and so of understanding. Some
explanations are easier to come by than others are; and so some *epistêmê* is easier
to come by than linking it to understanding might suggest.

Plato is often thought to hold the so-called Two Worlds Theory (TW), accord-
ing to one version of which there can be knowledge only of forms, and belief only
about sensibles.²⁶ Whatever may be true elsewhere, the *Meno* rejects this view. For,
as we have seen, the dialogue allows knowledge of sensibles: we can know who
*Meno* is (71b), and how to get to Larissa (97a). It also allows belief about forms. For
Socrates says various things about, for example, the form of virtue—e.g. that it is
one and the the same in all cases (72b–d)—but he not only disclaims knowledge of
what it is but also thinks one must know what something is in order to know
anything at all about it (71). It is reasonable to think that he is expressing his beliefs
about what it is. Here belief is mere belief; and, of course, one can’t, at t1, both
know and merely believe that p. However, one can first merely believe that p and
then come to know that p.²⁷ Further, as we have also seen, Plato defines knowledge

²⁴ For the view that Plato allows levels of explanation, and so levels of knowledge, see also
R. Wedgwood, ‘Plato’s Theory of Knowledge,’ in D. Brink, S. Meyer, and C. Shields (eds.), *Virtue,
Happiness, Knowledge: Themes from the Work of Gail Fine and Terence Irwin* (Oxford: Oxford
University Press, 2018), 33–56. If knowledge requires explanation, different levels of explanation are
sufficient for different levels of knowledge. However, even if one doesn’t think knowledge requires
explanation, one could still posit levels of knowledge by, for example, distinguishing levels of justifi-
cation: among justifications that are sufficient for turning true belief into knowledge, some might be
higher level than others by, for example, being more synoptic.
²⁶ For further discussion of TW, see Chapters 4 and 10. Discussion of TW typically focuses on
sensibles and forms, and that will be my focus here. However, Plato also countenances other sorts of
entities—e.g. souls and god.
²⁷ Hence Sedley’s suggestion about 98a (see n. 16 above) does not support TW, since it leaves open
the possibility that there can be knowledge and belief about the same objects; it rules out just one
person’s having both knowledge and true belief about something at one and the same time.
as a species of belief, where belief is generic taking to be true. If knowledge is a species of belief, then, whenever one knows something, one thereby believes it. Hence Plato rejects TW both when belief is mere belief and when it is the genus.

3.

We have seen that Plato rejects TW in the _Meno_. But it is often thought that he accepts it in such middle dialogues as the _Phaedo_ and _Republic_.²⁸ I have argued elsewhere, however, that _Republic_ 5 leaves open the possibility that one can have beliefs about forms as well as knowledge of sensibles. I have also argued elsewhere that, in the _Republic_, Socrates says that he has mere belief about the form of the good (506c) and that the philosopher who returns to the cave will have knowledge of the things there, that is, of sensibles (520c).²⁹

But what about the _Phaedo_, which is generally thought to have been written after the _Meno_ but before the _Republic_? In Chapter 4, I argue that the _Phaedo_ also rejects TW. For example, Socrates discusses a _doxa_ that philosophers have; their _doxa_ countenances forms. And in discussing the theory of recollection, he countenances _epistêmê_ of e.g. one’s friend and his cloak, and of a lyre. One might dismiss these remarks as loose or, in the case of _epistêmê_, as mere analogies. But it is not just that he mentions _doxa_ about forms and _epistêmê_ of sensibles. It is also that, as we shall see, his more theoretical remarks make it reasonable to take his examples at face value.

One might argue that, though the _Phaedo_ countenances _doxa_ about forms and _epistêmê_ about sensibles, it does not countenance _beliefs_ about forms or _knowledge_ of sensibles, since _doxa_ is not belief (at least, not as we understand it nowadays), and _epistêmê_ is not knowledge (at least, not as we understand it nowadays). I address this issue in Chapter 5. In doing so, I again distinguish the concepts of knowledge and belief from conceptions of them. I have suggested that the concept of belief is taking something to be true, with the aim of its being true. It has been argued that Plato, in at least some dialogues, does not use _doxa_ for generic taking to be true, but just for mere belief or, in _Republic_ 10 but perhaps also elsewhere, so as to include what we would call non-doxastic appearances,

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²⁸ For the view that the _Phaedo_ holds TW, see, for example, D. Gallop, _Plato: Phaedo_ (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). The view that the _Republic_ does so is widespread.

²⁹ Fine, ‘Knowledge and Fine, Belief in Republic V’ and ‘Knowledge and Belief in Republic V–VII,’ both reprinted in my _Plato on Knowledge and Forms_ (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), chs. 3 and 4, respectively.
as when the oar appears bent in water to me, but I do not take it to be bent. It has also been argued that, in some dialogues, Plato takes doxa to be narrower than we take belief to be, insofar as he restricts it to claims that are accepted as a result of active reflection.³⁰

Whatever may be true elsewhere, these views do not fit the Phaedo. None of the doxai mentioned in the Phaedo is a non-doxastic appearance. And though some of the doxai it mentions are carefully considered, not all of them are. For example, the philosophers’ doxa that is described at 66b1–67b5 is carefully considered. But the bones and sinews’ doxa that Socrates should flee (99a2) is not carefully considered. Nor does the Phaedo use doxa to mean ‘mere belief.’ In some cases doxa is used neutrally, without its being implied that the doxa is a mere belief. For example, when Cebes says that he wants to hear Socrates’s doxa about the soul (70b9), he does not mean to imply that Socrates has a mere belief here (though Socrates would no doubt disclaim knowledge here). He wants to know what Socrates thinks, what he takes to be true. But even if doxa were always used with the conversational implicature that the doxa at issue is a mere belief, that wouldn’t imply that doxa means ‘mere belief’: we need to distinguish the meaning of the term from its extension or reference in a given context.

Let’s now turn to epistêmê. According to Lloyd Gerson, the term ‘epistêmê’ in the Phaedo ‘appears to be used so loosely that it is virtually equivalent to “cognition.”’ For example it is used for objects of sense-perception as well as for forms (cf. 73c8, d3, 74b2). A self-conscious restriction in the use of the term for epistêmê such as we find in the Republic is not in evidence here.³¹ As we have seen, some commentators think epistêmê isn’t knowledge because it is more demanding than knowledge is. Gerson, however, thinks that, in the Phaedo, epistêmê is too extensive to count as knowledge. One of his reasons is that the dialogue allows epistêmê of sensibles. I have argued, however, that Plato allows epistêmê of sensibles (where that counts as knowledge) both in the Meno, which precedes the Phaedo, and in the Republic, which follows it. So we should not be surprised if he also does so in the Phaedo.

³⁰ As we have seen, in ‘The Birth of Belief’, Moss and Schwab argue that, at least in some dialogues, Plato uses doxa not for generic taking to be true but, at best, for mere belief, and so more narrowly than we use ‘belief.’ They also mention, but do not discuss, the view that Plato sometimes uses doxa so as to include what we would call non-doxastic appearances. In ‘Plato’s Appearance-Assent Account of Belief,’ Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 114 (2014), 213–38, J. Moss argues that, at least in Rep. 10, Plato uses doxa so as to include non-doxastic appearances. (Cf. H. Lorenz, The Brute Within: Appetitive Desire in Plato and Aristotle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).) She also argues that in some later dialogues Plato restricts doxa to claims that are accepted as a result of active reflection, and so more narrowly than we use ‘belief.’ For this latter view, see also S. Broadie, ‘The Knowledge Unacknowledged in the Theaetetus,’ Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy 51 (2016), 87–117, though she sometimes qualifies her view with ‘typically’ (e.g. 92, 96).

I also provide an account of how epistêmê is conceived in the *Phaedo* on which it is knowledge: that is, it treats epistêmê as a truth-entailing cognitive condition that is appropriately cognitively superior to mere true belief. For epistêmê, as it is conceived in the *Phaedo*, requires a truth-entailing logos (e.g. 76b) as well as a certain degree of familiarity; neither of these is required for doxa.

It is not clear whether the sort of logos that the *Phaedo* requires for epistêmê must be explanatory. If it must be, then all epistêmê, in the *Phaedo* as in the *Meno*, requires explanation; but, also as in the *Meno*, there are levels of explanation, and not all explanation requires a grasp of forms. If, however, the logos needn’t always be explanatory, then, in the *Phaedo*, one can sometimes have epistêmê that something is so even if one can’t explain why it is so. Nonetheless, all epistêmê goes beyond mere true belief, even if not all of it requires explanation. On this reading, the *Phaedo* differs from the *Meno* which, as we have seen, requires explanation for epistêmê.

In Chapter 6, I continue my exploration of the *Phaedo*’s epistemology, focusing on the theory of recollection. Plato’s argument for the claim that what we think of as learning is really just recollecting what we once knew has been much maligned. For example, it has been argued that it is invalid, that it is circular, and that it begs the question. I defend Plato’s argument against these charges: which is not to say that the argument is sound.

The theory of recollection is generally thought to posit innate knowledge. I have argued elsewhere that the *Meno*, which also posits the, or a, theory of recollection, does not countenance innate knowledge.³² In Chapter 6 of the present volume, I argue that the *Phaedo* does not do so either. So far from doing so, it rejects its existence. Indeed, Plato’s argument for recollection depends on rejecting it.

In Chapter 7, I discuss a further aspect of the *Phaedo*’s epistemology, comparing its account of perception with a celebrated passage on perception in *Theaetetus* 184–6. It’s debated whether, in the latter passage, Plato takes perception to be propositional,³³ or to fall below that threshold. I defend the latter view. Some of those who favor that view of *Theaetetus* 184–6 think that the middle dialogues, by contrast, take perception to be propositional. I defend a different view. Although the *Phaedo* agrees with *Theaetetus* 184–6 at an abstract level, insofar as both dialogues argue that perception is not knowledge, they give

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³² See G. Fine, *The Possibility of Inquiry: Meno’s Paradox from Socrates to Sextus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), ch. 5. On pp. 172–3, I argue that the *Phaedo* also rejects innate knowledge; but my discussion is very brief. In Chapter 6 of the present volume, I expand it.

³³ In asking whether perception is propositional, I am asking just whether every case of perception is a case of perceiving that something is so. I am not assuming any particular analysis of what propositions are. One might argue that even if perception isn’t propositional, it could be conceptual. However, on my view and, I think, on Plato’s, one has the concept of F if and only if one grasps propositions; one has the concept of cat, for example, if and only if one grasps that cats are thus and so. So if Plato takes perception to be non-propositional, he also takes it to be non-conceptual. However, one can have the concept of F, and so grasp some propositions about F, without being able to answer the ‘What is F?’ question about F.
different reasons. In *Tht.* 184–6, the point is that knowledge is propositional, whereas perception is not. Hence perception falls short not only of knowledge but also of belief; for belief, like knowledge, is propositional. In the *Phaedo*, the point is that perception can’t grasp any truths about forms, but wisdom (*phronēsis*) requires such a grasp. That view is compatible with perception’s being propositional, for it leaves open the possibility that perception grasps other propositions—e.g. about sensibles. But what the *Phaedo* says is also compatible with the view that perception is not propositional. Unlike *Theaetetus* 184–6, the *Phaedo* takes no stand on this issue. Perhaps that’s because its concerns lie elsewhere: in showing that we need to engage in non-perceptual reasoning if we are to acquire wisdom, which is just one sort of knowledge, an especially high-level sort. For this purpose, it doesn’t matter whether perception is propositional. Of course, perceptual *reasoning*—reasoning based on perception—is propositional. But the *Phaedo* distinguishes perceptual reasoning from perception. Although the former is propositional, it does not follow that the latter is; nor does it follow that it is not.

4.

In Chapter 8, I turn from Plato to [Plato]. Here I explore an unjustly neglected spurious dialogue, the *Sisyphus*. Socrates begins by proposing an account of deliberation. Sisyphus challenges this account and suggests a different one, according to which deliberation is a type of inquiry. Socrates proceeds to challenge that view. He also challenges the view that there could be such a thing as deliberation, if deliberation requires knowledge; for the sort of knowledge it would require is unattainable. If, however, deliberation does not require knowledge, deliberation is mere guesswork. But deliberation is not mere guesswork. So deliberation is impossible whether or not it involves knowledge.

This Paradox of Deliberation neatly parallels Meno’s Paradox (or, as it is sometimes called, the Paradox of Inquiry) as it is discussed in Plato’s *Meno*.³⁴ According to the Paradox of Deliberation, there are just two options: deliberation either involves knowledge or it is mere guesswork; either way, deliberation is impossible. These two options do not seem to be exhaustive. What, for example, about true belief? Some true beliefs are neither knowledge nor mere guesswork. Perhaps if we have and rely on them, we can deliberate. According to Meno’s Paradox, one either knows or does not know what one is inquiring into; either way, inquiry is impossible. Now, whereas knowledge and guesswork (the options offered in the *Sisyphus*) are not exhaustive options, knowing and not knowing are exhaustive. Or so it might seem. However, it is sometimes thought that Meno’s

³⁴ See esp. 80d–e. I discuss Meno’s Paradox in detail in *The Possibility of Inquiry*. 
Paradox takes knowledge to be complete knowledge, and not knowing to be complete ignorance; and these are not exhaustive options. If so, we can reply to Meno’s Paradox by noting that there are cognitive states that fall short of complete knowledge but are more robust than ignorance: for example, true belief and knowledge that is less than complete. If one has and relies on one of them, one can inquire. But it is not clear that Meno’s Paradox takes knowledge to be complete knowledge, and not knowing to be complete ignorance. It might instead take knowing and not knowing to be exhaustive options. In this case we can reply that there are different ways of knowing and of not knowing, and some of them allow inquiry. For example, whether one is totally ignorant or has mere true belief, one lacks knowledge. Although one can’t inquire if one is totally ignorant, one can inquire so long as one has and relies on relevant true beliefs. The structural parallel between the Paradox of Deliberation and Meno’s Paradox should lead us to consider whether they can be disarmed in parallel ways.

Aristotle agrees with the Sisyphus that deliberation is a type of inquiry; and he thinks deliberation is possible. So, just as he thinks that Meno’s Paradox can be answered, he thinks that the Paradox of Deliberation can be answered. It is unclear when the Sisyphus was written; but it is reasonable to think it was written before the Nicomachean Ethics. It does not follow that Aristotle is replying to it; nonetheless, some of the connections are quite interesting. Whenever the dialogue was written, it is a fascinating bridge between the Meno and Aristotle’s ethics and epistemology.

5.

In Part II, I consider Aristotle’s epistemology, focusing on issues explored in Part I. In Chapter 9, I ask how he conceives of epistêmê in the Posterior Analytics (APo.). In particular, is it knowledge and, if so, is it knowledge as such or just a kind of knowledge? In considering this question, I compare Aristotle’s account of epistêmê in the Posterior Analytics with Plato’s account of it in the Meno. As we have seen, in Meno 98a Plato says that epistêmê is true belief bound with an aitias logismos. That is, A has epistêmê that p just in case p is true, A believes that p, and A can explain why p is true. This is a definition of epistêmê as such, not of just one kind of epistêmê. It is also a definition of knowledge as such. That is, it is the only

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55 See EN 1142a. For discussion of Aristotle’s view that deliberation is a type of inquiry, see K. Nielsen, ‘Deliberation as Inquiry,’ Philosophical Review 120 (2011), 383–421.
56 I discuss Aristotle’s reply to Meno’s Paradox in The Possibility of Inquiry, ch. 6.
57 C. W. Müller, Die Kurzdialog der Appendix Platonica (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1975), 94–104, and D. S. Hutchinson, ‘Introduction to Sisyphus,’ in J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (eds.), Plato: Complete Works (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 1707, plausibly suggest that the Sisyphus was written in the mid-fourth century; see Chapter 8.
truth-entailing cognitive condition Plato countenances that goes beyond, and is appropriately cognitively superior to, mere true belief. Hence he imposes more demanding conditions on knowledge than is common nowadays, since it is not usually thought nowadays that, to know that \( p \) is true, one must be able to explain why \( p \) is true. (However, as we have also seen, it is not clear that he takes all explanations to be difficult to come by.) This may not be the most familiar conception of knowledge nowadays. Be that as it may, it is a conception of knowledge: it fits the job description.

But what about Aristotle? In \( A Po \). 1.2, he says.\(^{38}\)

We think we epistasthai something without qualification (\( haplós \)) (and not in the sophistical, incidental way) whenever we think we ginôskein the explanation (\( aitia \)) because of which the thing is, ginôskein that it is the explanation of that thing, and ginôskein that it cannot be otherwise.

We may paraphrase this as follows: A epistatai \( haplós \) \( x=\text{df.} \) A ginôskei \( y \), which is the explanation of \( x \); A ginôskei that \( y \) is the explanation of \( x \); and A ginôskei that \( x \) is necessary.\(^{39}\)

\( haplós \) (without qualification, simpliciter) might indicate that Aristotle is defining just an ideal kind of \( epistêmê \), one that leaves room for other sorts of \( epistêmê \) that fall short of the ideal.\(^{40}\) Alternatively, \( haplós \) might indicate that he is defining \( epistêmê \) as such: if something falls short of \( epistêmê \) so defined, it isn’t \( epistêmê \), period, but, at best, it approximates to it.\(^{41}\) Sometimes, but not always, being an ideal \( F \) and being an \( F \) diverge. For example, a line that isn’t perfectly, ideally straight, isn’t really straight; it just approximates to being straight. By contrast, an ideal parent has all the virtues that are proper to being a parent. But one can be a

\(^{38}\) There is dispute about whether 1.2 offers a definition, or something less than that. I shall assume, with Barnes, that Aristotle is offering a definition. See J. Barnes, \textit{Aristotle: Posterior Analytics} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975 (1st edition = B1), 96; 1994 (2nd edition = B2)), 90. Aristotle defines, not \( epistêmê \), but \( epistasthai \): he uses the verb, not the noun. Although it’s been argued that the verb is more specialized than the noun, I don’t think that affects anything I say here; and I shall move freely between them.

\(^{39}\) I leave to one side the question of what necessity amounts to here. For one account, see M. Peramatzis, ‘Aristotle on Knowledge and Belief: \textit{Posterior Analytics} 1.33,’ in G. Salmieri (ed.), \textit{Knowing and Coming to Know: Essays on Aristotle’s Epistemology} (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, forthcoming). Thanks to Peramatzis for letting me cite this paper in advance of its publication.

\(^{40}\) This sometimes seems to be Burnyeat’s view: see M. F. Burnyeat, ‘Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge,’ in E. Berti (ed.), \textit{Aristotle on Science: The Posterior Analytics, Proceedings of the \textit{VIII Symposium Aristotelicum}} (Padua: Antenore, 1981), 97–139, at e.g. 100–1. (I discuss Burnyeat more fully in Chapter 9; see also Chapter 2, n. 6 and n. 7.) See also R. Pasnau, \textit{After Certainty} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3–8, 142–5.

\(^{41}\) This may be Barnes’s view: see B1, 90, 149; cf. B2, 89–92. In Chapter 9, I also consider a third interpretation of \( haplós \), which I leave to one side here. \( Nous \) is sometimes taken to be cognitively superior to \( epistêmê \) as defined in 1.2. Aristotle vacillates, at least terminologically, as to whether \( nous \) is a type of \( epistêmê \). 71b6–7 seems to leave open the possibility that it is. But according to 2.19 it isn’t. In \textit{EN} 6.7 Aristotle says that \( sophia \) is \( nous \) plus \( epistêmê \). I shall leave this issue to one side here, since my focus is on \( epistêmê \) and cognitive conditions that fall short of it.
parent even if one lacks all these virtues. If epistêmê functions like ‘straight,’ we need not choose between saying that Aristotle is defining an ideal sort of epistêmê and saying that he is defining epistêmê as such. But if epistêmê functions like ‘parent,’ we do need to choose between these alternatives. In Chapter 9, I incline to the former view (on which being an F and an ideal F do not diverge), in which case Aristotle is defining epistêmê as such; anything that falls short of epistêmê so understood isn’t epistêmê. Similarly, I suggested that Meno 98a is an account of epistêmê as such.

Suppose 1.2 defines epistêmê as such, not just one kind of epistêmê. We can then ask whether epistêmê, so defined, is knowledge, either as such or just one kind. As in the case of Plato, at least three views have been defended: that Aristotle is defining knowledge as such; that he is defining just an ideal kind of knowledge but allows that there are also other, less ideal, kinds of knowledge; and that he isn’t defining either knowledge as such or a kind of knowledge, but a different phenomenon, understanding.

In Chapter 9, I argue that, in defining epistêmê, Aristotle is defining knowledge— but just one kind of knowledge, not knowledge as such.⁴² Epistêmê counts as knowledge, because it is a truth-entailing cognitive condition that is appropriately cognitively superior to mere true belief. But it isn’t knowledge as such, because Aristotle recognizes other cognitive conditions that also fall under the concept of knowledge but that do not count as epistêmê as it is defined in 1.2.

I say more about this in a moment. But first we can note that the claim that he is defining either knowledge as such or a kind of knowledge might be challenged on the ground that his definition doesn’t mention truth, yet knowledge is truth entailing. However, although his definition of epistêmê doesn’t explicitly mention truth, it mentions necessity, which implies truth.⁴³ Further, his general discussion makes it clear that he takes epistêmê to be truth entailing. Similarly, though his definition doesn’t explicitly say that epistêmê implies belief in the sense of taking to be true, his discussion makes it clear that he thinks it does. To be sure, he may not take epistêmê to be a species of, or even to imply, doxa. For he tends to use doxa for mere belief or, at any rate, for something that falls short of epistêmê: see, for example, APo. 1.33, which I discuss in Chapter 10. But in EN 6, 1140b31–2

⁴² As with Plato so with Aristotle: it’s not that he has the de dicto belief that epistêmê is knowledge. The point is rather that as he describes epistêmê and other cognitive conditions, it is reasonable to think not only that epistêmê counts as knowledge, but also that he also countenances other types of knowledge, since they too are truth-entailing cognitive conditions that are appropriately cognitively superior to mere true belief, where belief is taking to be true.

⁴³ At least, this is so when the necessity at issue governs propositions. (I take the relevant sort of truth, in the claim that knowledge implies truth, to be semantic or propositional truth.) However, Aristotle’s definition may include not only propositions that are necessary, but also things that are in some sense necessary. But he thinks one can know such things only if one knows propositions to be true of them. Either way, epistêmê implies truth.
(cf. DA 427b25) Aristotle says that epistêmê is a species of hupolêpsis, which is taking something to be true. So he takes epistêmê to be a species of belief in the sense of taking to be true, whether or not he takes it to be a species of or to imply doxa.⁴⁴

So, though Aristotle’s definition doesn’t explicitly mention truth or belief, he takes epistêmê to imply true belief. He also makes it clear that epistêmê is appropriately cognitively superior to mere true belief; for example, unlike mere true belief, it includes grasping an aitia of why what one knows can’t be otherwise. Hence, Aristotle takes epistêmê to be a truth-entailing cognitive condition that is appropriately cognitively superior to mere true belief, and so it counts as knowledge. But unlike Plato in the Meno, he recognizes other kinds of knowledge than epistêmê. For example, he allows that one can eidenai that something is so, even if one doesn’t grasp why it is so (see e.g. APo. 79a). This doesn’t count as epistêmê, since to have epistêmê of something, one must grasp why it is so. But it goes beyond mere true belief.⁴⁵ It’s unclear exactly what Aristotle thinks is required for knowing that something is so even if one doesn’t know why it is so. But one possibility that I am sympathetic to is that he thinks one must have a justified true belief that p is so, where the justification gives one more than mere true belief but falls short of the sort of justification that is needed for epistêmê.⁴⁶

This yields an interesting result. As Aristotle conceives of epistêmê, its scope is less extensive than Plato takes it to be in the Meno. For Aristotle thinks one can have epistêmê of something only if it can’t be otherwise, whereas Plato does not think this. For example, he allows one to have epistêmê of how to get to Larissa; but the route to Larissa could have been different. Even if one dismisses this as a mere analogy, still, Plato’s account of epistêmê doesn’t restrict it to what can’t be otherwise, whereas Aristotle’s does. However, unlike Plato in the Meno, Aristotle doesn’t think that epistêmê exhausts the scope of knowledge since, as we have seen, he allows one to know that something is so without knowing why it is so. So, though Aristotle has more demanding conditions for epistêmê than Plato does, he has less demanding conditions for knowledge.

It is, however, difficult to determine what Aristotle takes the lower bounds of knowledge to be. For example, in 2.19 he counts the sort of perception animals and humans have from birth as gnôsis; and gignôskein can be used for knowledge.

⁴⁴ I discuss this briefly in Chapter 9. See also Moss and Schwab, ‘The Birth of Belief.’
⁴⁵ However, as with nous, Aristotle’s terminology is not fixed. APo. 1.13, for example, begins by distinguishing epistasthai why, and that, something is so, as though both are possible. Similarly, 2.1 seems to open by allowing one to have epistêmê that something is so even if one doesn’t grasp why it is so. But it may be significant that after this opening remark, he uses forms of eidenai and gignôskein instead (89b28, 29, 30, 34) for grasping that something is so. See also 2.2. I take it that, in these passages, eidenai and gignôskein indicate knowledge that falls short of epistêmê.
⁴⁶ Another possibility, suggested by J. L. Ackrill, is that one must grasp that the relevant proposition or object can be explained. See his ‘Aristotle’s Theory of Definition: Some Questions on Posterior Analytics II 8–10,’ in E. Berti (ed.), Aristotle on Science: The ‘Posterior Analytics’ (Padua: Antenore, 1981), 359–84, at 376–81.
That’s how it is used in Aristotle’s definition of epistêmê in 1.2. So one might think that he is saying that animals, and humans from birth, have knowledge. However, both Plato and Aristotle sometimes use forms of gignôskein for something less than knowledge; and that is how Aristotle uses it in 2.19 when he says that animals, and humans from birth, have perception, which is a kind of gnôsis. This isn’t to say that Aristotle doesn’t think there’s such a thing as perceptual knowledge. It’s just that he doesn’t count the sort of perception humans have from birth, and that animals have, as knowledge. That leaves open the possibility, though it does not imply, that he thinks that an adult who perceives that the cat is on the mat thereby knows that it is. Be that as it may, Aristotle’s conditions on knowledge are not so permissive as to allow that animals, or humans from birth, have knowledge. But insofar as he allows one to know that p is so without knowing why p is so, he disagrees with Plato in the Meno, though they agree that grasping that p is so without grasping why it is so doesn’t count as epistêmê.

6.

Just as there is dispute about whether Plato favors TW, so there is dispute about whether Aristotle does so. One main source of evidence is Posterior Analytics 1.33, which contrasts epistêmê and doxa—as Plato also does in Republic 5. Earlier we looked at Plato’s attitude to TW in the Meno and Phaedo; and elsewhere I’ve discussed his attitude to it in Republic 5–7.⁴⁷ In Chapter 10, I consider Aristotle’s attitude to it in APo. 1.33, and I compare his views with Plato’s in Republic 5–7.

There are different versions of TW. In Chapter 10, I discuss several of them.⁴⁸ First, we can distinguish a Two Worlds Theory about propositions from one about objects. Secondly, we can distinguish strong from weak Two Worlds Theories. According to a Strong Two Worlds Theory for Propositions (STWP), no proposition can be both believed and known. According to a Strong Two Worlds Theory for Objects (STWO), there are no objects about which both knowledge and belief are possible. According to a Weak Two Worlds Theory for Propositions (WTWP), not every proposition that can be known can also be believed. (Of course, not every proposition that can be believed can be known, since there are false beliefs. So a WTWO shouldn’t say that not every proposition can be both known and believed; for if it did, it would be trivially true. To be sure, Protagoras denies that there are false beliefs. But we can safely leave him to one side here.) According to a Weak Two Worlds Theory for Objects (WTWO), the set of objects

⁴⁷ See the articles cited in n. 29. ⁴⁸ See also Chapters 3 and 4.
one can know and the set of objects one can have beliefs about are different, but not disjoint.

In the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*, Plato rejects both a strong and a weak Two Worlds Theory for both Objects and Propositions. In these dialogues, he allows both knowledge and belief about both sensibles and forms.⁴⁹ He also allows that every proposition that can be known can also be believed. (Of course, as we’ve noted, one can’t, at t₁, both know and merely believe that p; but one can first merely believe that p, then come to know that p. And if knowledge is a species of or implies belief (though not, of course, mere belief), then whenever someone knows that p, one thereby believes that p.)

But what about Aristotle? He begins 1.33 by restricting *epistêmê* to what is universal and necessary. It is not always clear whether he is distinguishing *epistêmê* from *doxa* in terms of their different or disjoint propositions, or in terms of their different or disjoint objects. But I argue that, at the beginning of 1.33, he means that *epistêmê* implies necessary truth (where such truths are universal or general), whereas *doxa* does not do so. So like Plato in *Republic* 5, he distinguishes *epistêmê* from *doxa* in terms of the truth implications of their contents. But unlike Plato, he takes *epistêmê* to imply, not just truth, but necessary truth. In doing so, however, we should not suppose that he makes the mistake ‘made every five years in *Mind*’ of inferring from the necessity of the conditional (‘Necessarily, knowledge implies truth’) to the necessity of its consequent (‘Knowledge implies necessary truth’);⁵⁰ he has other reasons for restricting *epistêmê* to necessary truths.

Since, when thinking of propositional contents, Aristotle restricts *epistêmê* to necessary truths, he is committed to the view that there is no *epistêmê* of contingent truths. Hence he is committed to at least a WTWP: there are some true propositions one can have *doxa* but not *epistêmê* of. That, however, leaves open the possibility that there can be not only *epistêmê* but also *doxa* of necessary truths; if he endorses that possibility, he rejects a STWP. However, I argue that in 1.33 he is committed to a STWP.⁵¹

Although, at the beginning of the chapter, he distinguishes *epistêmê* from *doxa* in terms of the truth implications of their contents, later in the chapter (beginning at 89a23) he distinguishes the objects of *epistêmê* from those of *doxa*; and he in some way correlates *epistêmê* with those that are necessary, and *doxa* with those that are not.

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⁴⁹ As well as about e.g. gods and souls, which are neither sensibles nor forms. But as mentioned in n. 26, discussion of TW in Plato typically focuses on just sensibles and forms.

⁵⁰ Barnes, B1, 97, says that it is ‘quite conceivable’ that Aristotle makes this mistake, though he also suggests an alternative explanation on which he doesn’t do so.

⁵¹ Against this, one might argue that Aristotle allows both *epistêmê* and *doxa* about some of the same propositions which, however, are grasped in different ways. For example, when one has *epistêmê* that man is an animal, one grasps that that is necessary; when one has *doxa* that man is an animal, one doesn’t grasp that that is necessary. I consider, but ultimately reject, this interpretation in Chapter 10. It is, however, defended by B. Morison and H. Lorenz, ‘Aristotle’s Empiricist Theory of Doxastic Knowledge,’ *Phronesis* 64 (2019), 431–64.
that are contingent. Similarly, in Rep. 5 Plato initially distinguishes epistêmê (gnôsis) from doxa in terms of the truth implications of their contents; but later he explains how these are correlated with forms and sensibles. The point in Rep. 5 is not that there is epistêmê only of forms, and doxa only of sensibles. The point is, rather, that one needs to have epistêmê of forms to have any epistêmê at all whereas, if one is restricted to sensibles, the best one can have is doxa.

How does Aristotle, in 1.33, correlate epistêmê and doxa with certain sorts of objects? I argue that he rejects an STWO, but accepts a WTWO. He restricts the objects one can have epistêmê of to those that are necessary; but he allows one to have doxa about such objects. It’s just that the propositions that one grasps about them are disjoint from those one grasps when one has epistêmê of those objects.

A Two Worlds Theory is more often associated with Plato than with Aristotle. But on the view I defend, Plato rejects both a Weak and a Strong Two Worlds Theory for both Objects and Propositions, whereas Aristotle is committed to both an STWP and a WTWO. In a way, however, there may be less disagreement with Plato than this suggests. For when Plato, in Republic 5, contrasts epistêmê and doxa, he is contrasting all knowledge with belief as such and, sometimes, with mere belief. But when Aristotle discusses epistêmê in 1.33, he has in mind just high-level knowledge; the chapter does not discuss lower-level types of knowledge although, as we have seen, he countenances them. Perhaps in 1.33 he implicitly classifies them as doxa, if, in that chapter, he uses that term for any cognitive condition that falls short of epistêmê. If he is doing so, 1.33 would not preclude low-level knowledge of what is contingent.

7.

In Part III, I turn to Pyrrhonian skepticism. In Chapter 11, I consider the much-discussed question of whether, according to Sextus, skeptics⁵ take themselves to have any beliefs.⁵² In doing so, I focus on Outlines of Pyrrhonism 1.13, a central text in which Sextus asks whether skeptics dogmatizein or have any dogmata.⁵³
Here it is helpful to distinguish an internal from an external question. The internal question asks whether Sextus says that skeptics have any dogmata. If he says they do, we can then ask what dogmata he takes them to have. The external question asks whether dogmata are beliefs in the sense of taking to be true. Just as there are questions about whether Plato and Aristotle use doxa for belief in this sense, so there are questions about whether Sextus uses dogma that way.

In Chapter 11, I consider these questions by distinguishing the Some Belief View from the No Belief View. It would perhaps be better to reserve that nomenclature for the external question, and to use ‘the Some Dogmata View’ and ‘the No Dogmata View’ for the internal question. We can then begin by asking whether Sextus describes the skeptics as holding the Some Dogmata View or the No Dogmata View: that is, does he say they have some, or no, dogmata? We can then ask whether, if he says that they have some dogmata, we should describe him as saying that they have some beliefs; or whether, if he says that they have no dogmata, we should describe him as saying that they have no beliefs.

In 1.13, Sextus says that skeptics don’t have any dogmata if to have a dogma is to ‘assent to some unclear object of investigation in the sciences’ (PH 1.13; trans. Annas and Barnes). However, they have dogmata ‘in the more general sense in which some say that dogma is acquiescing (eudokein) in something; for the sceptic assents (sunktatithetai) to the affections (pathê) forced upon her by an appearance (kata phantasian)’ (1.13; Annas and Barnes modified). That is, to have a dogma is to acquiesce to something. Sextus then says that skeptics assent, and so acquiesce, to some things but not to others. They don’t assent to, and have no dogmata about, any ‘unclear object of investigation in the sciences,’ but they do assent to, and so have dogmata about, ‘the affections forced upon them by an appearance.’ So skeptics assent to, and so have dogmata about, some things; but they don’t assent to, and have no dogmata about, other things. This is the Some Dogmata view.

The dogmata skeptics have are about how they are appeared to: if it appears to a skeptic that an apple is red, he has the dogma—not that the apple is red, a matter about which he suspends judgment, but—that it appears to him that the apple is red. To have a dogma about something is to assent to it; and to assent to something is to take it to be true, and so it is to have a belief about it. When skeptics have

Skeptical Tradition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), ch. 2 n. 67. However, dogma is also sometimes used for belief as such even in Hellenistic philosophy. In notes 69 and 70, Barnes himself cites [Galen], def. med 14, 19.352–3K and DL 9.102–4. As we’ve seen, Plato uses doxa for belief as such (as well as for mere belief). 55 ‘To acquiesce (eudokein) doesn’t have to involve taking to be true; it can be used in other ways. So one might argue that when Sextus says that skeptics have dogmata since they acquiesce, he is not saying that they have beliefs in the sense of taking to be true. However, as Frede argues, eudokein doesn’t have a fixed philosophical sense (‘The Skeptic’s Beliefs,’ 193); we have to tell from the context how it is being understood. In Chapter 11, I argue that in 1.13 Sextus means that skeptics acquiesce in the sense that they assent; and assent, as it should be understood in 1.13, is belief in the sense of taking to be true. Burnyeat and Frede defend a different view, both from me and from one another.
dogmata about how they are appeared to, they therefore believe that they are appeared to that way: skeptical dogmata are beliefs. Hence the Some Belief View is correct.⁵⁶ We asked earlier whether, as Plato uses doxa, it is belief. Against some commentators, I argued that it is. Similarly, Sextus uses dogma for belief.

8.

If, as I have argued, skeptics have beliefs about how they are appeared to, they take it to be true that they are appeared to in various ways; hence they take there to be truths about how they are appeared to. It is tempting to think that how one is appeared to is a subjective state. So we might infer that skeptics think there are truths about subjective states.

It has been argued, however, that the ancients do not view the subjective as a realm about which there are truths since, in their view, truth ‘always means “true of a real objective world.”’⁵⁷ It is not until Descartes that it was thought that there are truths about subjective states.⁵⁸ If the ancients do not think there are truths about subjective states, then either they do not think there are truths about how one is appeared to or else they do not take of states of being appeared to be subjective.

We have already seen that the skeptics—and so some of the ancients—think there are truths about how they are appeared to. So the crucial question is whether any of the ancients views such states as subjective. I ask about this in Chapter 12, where I focus on the skeptics and the Cyrenaics.⁵⁹

Just as the controversy over whether epistêmê is knowledge, and over whether doxa and dogma are belief, depends not only on how one understands the Greek terms but also on what one takes knowledge and belief to be, so the question of whether any of the ancients takes anything to be subjective depends, in part, on what one takes subjectivity to be. And just as there is controversy about how to

⁵⁶ Although Frede agrees that the skeptics have beliefs, he doesn’t think they take anything to be true (or, as he sometimes puts it, really true); he has a different account of belief from the one I’ve assumed here. I discuss his alternative in Chapter 11.

⁵⁷ M. F. Burnyeat, ‘Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed,’ Philosophical Review 91 (1982), 3–40, at 26. In F. Leigh, ‘Kinds of Self-Knowledge in Ancient Thought,’ in her Self-Knowledge in Ancient Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 1–50, Leigh takes Burnyeat to think that there are two senses of ‘truth,’ or two kinds of truth, objective and subjective, a view she seems to endorse in her own right; see esp. 4–7. (She does not distinguish senses of ‘truth’ from kinds of truth; yet the two are importantly different.) I consider but reject this view in Chapter 12. At one point, Leigh takes subjective truth to be ‘the certainty that attaches to statements expressing subjective states’ (4). But ‘certainty’ is not a special sense of ‘truth,’ nor is certainty a kind of truth. Certainty is epistemological, whereas truth is not.

⁵⁸ ‘Idealism,’ 32–3. Burnyeat mentions Augustine, but he says that ‘the Augustinian precedent does not amount to as much as one might expect’ (‘Idealism,’ 33).

⁵⁹ The Cyrenaics flourished in the fourth and third centuries bc. They are so called because their founder, Aristippus, was from Cyrene, a Greek colony in N. Africa.
characterize knowledge and belief, so there is controversy about how to characterize subjectivity. But just as there is rough agreement about the concepts of knowledge and belief, even though there are disagreements about particular conceptions of them, so there is rough agreement about the concept of subjectivity, even though there are different conceptions of it. There is, for example, rough agreement about examples of subjective states: being in pain, having a sensation, experiencing something, and being appeared to all count. Further, on one familiar account, if S is a subjective state, there is something it is like to be in S, and one has privileged access to one’s own subjective states. Different conceptions of subjectivity involve different accounts of, for example, what sort of privileged access one has to one’s subjective states.

With this account of subjectivity in mind, let us now ask whether the skeptics or the Cyrenaics have the concept of subjectivity or think anything is subjective. According to Stephen Everson, they do not take anything to be subjective. Rather, in his view, the ancients view such things as states of being appeared to as ‘wholly and only objective.’ If he is right, then even if some of the ancients think there are truths about being appeared to, they are not thereby admitting truths about subjective states. In Chapter 12, however, I argue that the Cyrenaics think that there are subjective states; they also think that there are truths and knowledge about them. I also argue that Sextus is aware of their view, and describes the skeptics as accepting at least part of it.

The Cyrenaics and skeptics certainly countenance states that are typically viewed as subjective: they allow, for example, that we can be in pain and that we can be appeared to in various ways. Further, as I argue in Chapter 12, they take such states to be subjective in the sense I’ve described. For example, when the Cyrenaics speak of being ‘yellowed or reddened or doubled’ (Sextus, M 7.193), they do not (contrary to what Everson, among others, argues) mean that the eye jelly becomes yellow or red, or that some physical part of oneself is doubled. Rather, they have in mind the experience as of seeing something as yellow or red or doubled. When they say that ‘the crazy person sees Thebes double and imagines the sun double’ (Sextus, M 7.193), they mean that it subjectively appears to the crazy person that Thebes and the sun are doubled, that is, that there are two of each of them. Not only do they describe such states as being subjective. They also claim that we can know how we are appeared to; when we experience something as being yellow, we can know that we are having this experience, where the

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62 As I explain in Chapter 12, this is not to say that such states are not also physical or material.
experience is taken to be a subjective state. They also claim that all we can know are our own present subject states. Since knowledge implies truth, they think there are truths about subjective states. And since they think each of us can know only our own present subjective states, they accord each of us privileged access to our own subjective states.

Since Sextus is our main source of evidence for the Cyrenaics, he is aware of the view that there are subjective states, and that one can know only one’s own subjective states. But does he take the skeptics to hold this view? We have already seen that, in *PH* 1.13, he says that skeptics have beliefs (*dogmata* which, I have argued, are beliefs in the sense of taking to be true), though they have them only about how they are appeared to. Since being appeared to is a subjective state, Sextus describes skeptics as having beliefs about what are in fact subjective states. In Chapter 12, I argue that not only are they in fact subjective but, also, Sextus describes them as being subjective. Since he says that skeptics assent to—and so have beliefs about—how they are appeared to, he takes them to have beliefs about their subjective states. Since belief is taking to be true, Sextus describes the skeptics as thinking that there are truths about subjective states. And since he thinks skeptics have beliefs only about how they are appeared to, he takes each of us to have privileged access to our subjective states; he also posits an epistemological asymmetry between our access to those states and everything else. It’s less clear whether he takes skeptics to claim knowledge of how they are appeared to. In Chapter 12, I consider evidence that counts both ways and take no stand on that issue. But even if skeptics don’t claim to know how they are appeared to, the Cyrenaics do so; and skeptics at least admit beliefs and truths about subjective states.

Even if one agrees that some of the ancients countenance subjective states in the sense I have described, one might argue that Descartes introduces a new conception of subjectivity that is more robust than any countenanced by the ancients. I argue, however, that Descartes does not articulate the stronger conception of subjectivity that is sometimes ascribed to him. That leaves open the possibility that his conception of subjectivity is different from any countenanced by the ancients. It would not be surprising if different philosophers, whether existing at the same time or at different times, have different conceptions of subjectivity. That should not lead us to think that the ancients don’t take anything to be subjective in a recognizable sense of the term. The skeptics and the Cyrenaics are counterexamples to that claim. In this respect they are not as different from Descartes as they are sometimes taken to be.

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63 By, for example, McDowell, ‘Singular Thought.’ I discuss his view in Chapter 12.
In Chapter 13, I consider a variety of ways in which Pyrrhonian skepticism has been thought to differ from Cartesian skepticism: that is, from the sort of skepticism Descartes describes in (among other places) Meditation 1. For example, it has been argued that Pyrrhonian skepticism disavows belief, whereas Cartesian skepticism disavows only knowledge. It has also been argued that Pyrrhonian skepticism is less extensive than Cartesian skepticism is, and that Pyrrhonian but not Cartesian skepticism is a way of life. I argue, however, that Pyrrhonian skepticism is closer to Cartesian skepticism than it is often taken to be.

In arguing this, I side with Descartes, who says that he was not ‘trying to sell them [the skeptical arguments he considers] as novelties . . . I sought no praise for reviewing them; but I do not think I could have omitted them, any more than a medical writer can leave out the description of a disease when he wants to explain how it can be cured’ (AT 7.171–2/CSM 2.121). He was just serving ‘reheated cabbage’ (AT 7.130/CSM 2.94). What is new, he thinks, is not the skepticism he describes, but his refutation of it.

In Chapter 14, I provide a fuller discussion of the scope of Pyrrhonian skepticism and how it compares with the scope of Cartesian skepticism. In doing so, I focus on external world skepticism. At least three general views have been held. First, some commentators think that Pyrrhonian skepticism is less extensive than Cartesian skepticism is. Burnyeat, for example, argues that ‘the Greeks never posed the problem of the existence of an external world in the general form we have known it since Descartes’; and he takes this to show that ancient skepticism is less extensive than Cartesian skepticism is. Secondly, as we have seen, Descartes denies that there is a difference in the scopes of ancient and Cartesian skepticism. Thirdly, Hegel thinks that ancient skepticism is more extensive than the skepticism from Descartes’s day to his own is.
Once again, it will be useful to begin by distinguishing the concept of something from conceptions of it. Let’s take the concept of external world skepticism to involve suspending judgment about, or denying knowledge or belief about, anything external to (that is, independent of) one’s present subjective states, while not suspending judgment about one’s present subjective states. On this account, external world skepticism involves a first-person stance, insofar as one has some sort of privileged access to one’s present subjective states. There is also an epistemological asymmetry between one’s grasp of, or attitude to, one’s present subjective states, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, what’s external to it. Different conceptions of external world skepticism involve different accounts of, for example, the sort of privileged access one has to one’s present subjective states. Given this concept of external world skepticism, the ancients can’t be external world skeptics if they lack the concept of subjectivity.

I have already argued that the Cyrenaics think that there are subjective states. As we have seen, they also think that one can know one’s own subjective states and that that is all one can know. Hence they are external world skeptics: each of us has privileged access to our own present subjective states since we know them, yet no one else can; nor can we know anything other than our own present subjective states. (Sextus, however, classifies the Cyrenaics, not as skeptics, but as negative dogmatists because, rather than suspending judgment, they claim we can’t know anything other than our affections (pathê): PH 1.215.)

What about the Pyrrhonists? We have seen that Sextus describes them as having beliefs, though only about how they are appeared to, where states of being appeared to are subjective states. This counts as external world skepticism, since it involves an epistemological asymmetry in our access to our present subjective states and anything external to them: we have beliefs about the former but not about anything else. I develop this argument in Chapter 14, where I both rebut various arguments for the claim that Pyrrhonists are not external world skeptics and argue, more positively, that they are external world skeptics.

For example, it has been argued that the skeptics’ appearance statements are of the form ‘x appears F’ rather than of the form ‘it appears that x is F,’ and that this shows that they assume that x exists and question only whether x is F. In saying, for example, that honey appears sweet, they assume that honey exists and question only whether it is sweet. Hence they assume that there are external objects. Against this, I argue that, though some of the skeptics’ appearance statements are phrased that way, not all of them are. Sometimes they speak of its appearing that x is F, where this does not assume the existence of x. And sometimes, even when they use locutions of the form ‘x is F,’ they don’t mean to imply that they take x to exist. When Macbeth asks ‘Is this a dagger which I see before me, the handle toward my hand? . . . or art thou but a dagger of the mind, a false creation, proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain? I see thee yet, in form as palpable as that which now I draw’ (II.i.33–41), he isn’t assuming that there is a dagger there.
He’s wondering whether the ‘dagger’ that he sees (or seems to see) is a real dagger or an ‘ostensible object’: it purports to exist, but it may not exist; and Macbeth is not committed to the view that it exists.

Or again, it has been argued that in speaking of what is external, skeptics do not mean what is external to one’s present subjective states, but only what is external to one’s body. However, in, for example, Against the Ethicists (= M 11) 79–89 (cf. PH 3.183–90; and PH 1.15), Sextus explicitly describes one’s body as being external to one. The reason, he says, is that ‘it will escape our awareness (gnôsis) (for all awareness is on the part of the soul).’ He seems to mean that all we are aware of are states of our own souls: in which case we aren’t aware of any bodies. This does not imply that souls are not bodily, or material. The point is that we are not aware of them as being bodily; we are aware of them only under a subjective mode of presentation.

In PH 3.38–49 Sextus says that skeptics suspend judgment about whether there are any bodies. In M 9.1–3 he says that if one undermines the foundations of a wall, the towers tumble along with it: that is, if one challenges a general belief, the particular beliefs that fall under it are thereby challenged as well. Hence when a skeptic challenges the claim that, or suspends judgment as to whether, there are any bodies, she also challenges the claim that, or suspends judgment as to whether, she has a body.

In PH 1.15 (cf. 1.208) Sextus says that ‘in uttering these [skeptical] phrases, he [the skeptic] says what is apparent to himself and reports his own affections without holding beliefs (adoxastôs), affirming nothing about external objects.’ Once again, the skeptic reports his affections: he says how he is appeared to. But he doesn’t affirm anything about external objects; here he has no beliefs.

In PH 2.29–30, skeptics suspend judgment not only about whether there are any bodies, but also about whether there are any minds. One might infer that they cannot be external world skeptics, since they do not take us to have privileged access to our minds. But even if one suspends judgment about whether there are any minds (as Descartes sometimes does: see AT 7.25/CSM 2.16–17), one need not suspend judgment about one’s present subjective states. Hume, for example, does not doubt that he has perceptions, though he doubts whether there is anything ‘simple and continu’d’ that constitutes himself (Treatise on Human Nature 1.4–6). If one does not suspend judgment about one’s present subjective states, but does suspend judgment about whether one has a mind or a body, that counts as external world skepticism. I have argued that skeptics do not suspend judgment about how they are appeared to, where these are conceived of as

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68 I take adoxastôs to go with what follows: skeptics have no beliefs in the sense that they don’t affirm anything about what’s external, but only about how they are appeared to. When Sextus says that skeptics live without beliefs, he means they don’t have the dogmata disclaimed in PH 1.13.
subjective states, but do suspend judgment about everything external to that; hence they are external world skeptics.

One might argue that to be an external world skeptic, at least of the Cartesian sort, one must claim certainty about one’s subjective states. In fact, skeptics might claim more than that they have beliefs about how they are appeared to. For in PH 1.215, Sextus says that both skeptics and Cyrenaics say that ‘we apprehend katalambanein) only affections’; apprehension is more robust than mere belief (cf. DL 9.103). Sextus distinguishes skeptics from Cyrenaics not in that respect, but insofar as the Cyrenaics claim that we cannot know what is external to our subjective states of being appeared to, whereas skeptics suspend judgment about that. But even if the skeptics do not claim first-person certainty of the sort Descartes has been taken to favor, that shows only that they have a different conception of external world skepticism than he does. It does now show that they are not external world skeptics.

10.

Although the essays in this volume can be read independently of one another, I hope that the foregoing makes it clear that they are connected in various ways. Many of the essays consider questions about cognitive vocabulary and cognitive conditions. Some essays compare Plato and Aristotle with one another. For example, I compare their accounts of epistêmê, and their attitudes to TW. Some essays compare Plato, Aristotle, or Sextus with later discussions, asking how if at all they differ. I ask, for example, how Plato’s and Aristotle’s accounts of epistêmê compare with contemporary accounts of knowledge. I also ask how Plato’s account of doxa and Sextus’s account of skeptical dogmata compare with the now-standard account of belief. I also ask whether the skeptics or the Cyrenaics have the concept of subjectivity and, if so, whether they take anything to be subjective. I also ask whether they are external world skeptics of a recognizable sort, a sort allegedly not countenanced until Descartes.

In discussing these issues, I often invoke the distinction between concepts and conceptions: between an abstract account of, for example, knowledge, and determinate ways of filling it in. I argue that, on the issues I have explored here, Plato, Aristotle, the Pyrrhonian skeptics, and the Cyrenaics share concepts with modern and contemporary philosophers, even if, as is sometimes the case, their conceptions differ from this or that more recent philosopher. Those who argue that epistêmê, as described by Plato and/or Aristotle, isn’t knowledge show at most that Plato and/or Aristotle has a different conception of knowledge from this or that modern or contemporary conception of it. They do not show that Plato or Aristotle lacks the concept of knowledge; nor do they show that epistêmê is not knowledge. As to doxa and belief, I argue, against some commentators, that Plato
uses *doxa* for generic taking to be true, which is how belief is typically understood nowadays. To be sure, he also uses the term *doxa* for mere belief. But, in just the same way, we use ‘belief’ both for the genus and for mere belief. Just as Plato has the concept of belief as taking to be true, so too does Aristotle, though he tends to use *hupolēpsis* for belief, reserving *doxa* for mere belief. I also argue that skeptical *dogmata* are beliefs as belief is generally understood nowadays.

In addition to discussing *epistêmê* and knowledge, and *doxa*, *dogma*, and belief, I also discuss subjectivity and external world skepticism, focusing on the Pyrrhonian skeptics and the Cyrenaics. Against some commentators, I argue that both the Pyrrhonian skeptics and the Cyrenaics have the concept of subjectivity, and take various states, such as being appeared to, to be subjective, even if their conception of subjectivity differs from e.g. Descartes.’ I also argue, however, that their conception of subjectivity is not as different from Descartes’s as it is sometimes taken to be. Similarly, I argue that both the Pyrrhonian skeptics and the Cyrenaics are external world skeptics of a recognizable sort.

One moral that emerges is that, though Plato, Aristotle, the Pyrrhonian skeptics, and the Cyrenaics not surprisingly differ in some ways not only from one another but also from later philosophers, on some important issues there are also important similarities. For example, Plato distinguishes knowledge from both belief and true belief in ways that are familiar in contemporary epistemology; and the Pyrrhonian skeptics and the Cyrenaics are closer to Descartes on subjectivity and external world skepticism than has sometimes been acknowledged.

One way in which ancient philosophy is exciting is that it asks questions and considers views that are not much discussed nowadays; considering these questions and views enables us to overcome various blind spots, thereby allowing us to approach issues in ways that are not common nowadays but that might prove fruitful. But ancient philosophy is also exciting because it is less alien than it might initially seem to be: it raises many questions that still concern us; and I, at any rate, find many of their answers appealing. In the essays collected here, I try to bring out some of these continuities and, in doing so, to call attention to some of the attractions of ancient epistemology.
PART I

PLATO AND [PLATO]
2
Does Socrates Claim to Know that He Knows Nothing?

1. Introduction

Ever since antiquity, some have found it tempting to suppose that Socrates claims to know that he knows nothing.¹ Here is a contemporary example: I was recently on holiday in Capri; and, on one of my walks, I went to the Parco Filosofico. It was divided into such areas as Realismo and Idealismo, with suitable quotations decorating the paths. In the Realismo section, the following quotation was attributed to Socrates (though no specific reference was given): ‘Hen oida, hoti ouden

¹ Or so we are told. I do not know when this claim was first attributed to Socrates. One early source often thought to do so is Cicero, Academica 1.16: nihil se scire dicat nisi id ipsum. Cf. 1.44–5: itaque Arcesilas negabat esse quicquam quod sciri posset, ne illud quidem ipsum quod Socrates sibi reliquisset, ut nihil scire se sciret. (Notice that the only cognitive terms Cicero uses are forms of scire.) Cf. 2.74. For this reading of what Cicero says, see J. Annas, ‘Plato the Skeptic,’ in P. Vander Waerdt (ed.), The Socratic Movement (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 309–40 at 310. For a recent challenge to this reading, see M. F. Burnyeat, ‘Antipater and Self-Refutation,’ in B. Inwood and J. Mansfeld (eds.), Assent and Argument (Brill: Leiden, 1997), 277–310, at 290–300; see further n. 5 below.

1.44–5 says that Arcesilaus attributed some version of the claim to Socrates; if Cicero is right, some version of the attribution goes back at least that far. (I say ‘some version’ because there is dispute about precisely what claim Cicero takes Arcesilaus to have attributed to Socrates. Unfortunately, it is not clear precisely what Arcesilaus’s own formulation was.) In ‘Socrates in Hellenistic Philosophy,’ Classical Quarterly 38 (1988), 150–71, reprinted in his Stoic Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–34, latter pagination, A. A. Long argues that Arcesilaus is the ‘effective creator of the totally sceptical Socrates’ (12). However, it is not entirely clear how Long conceives of skepticism. He is certainly right to say that Aristotle says that Socrates disavows knowledge (SE 183b7–8: hómologei gar ouk eidenai). But it is one thing to disavow knowledge, and another to claim to know that one knows nothing; see n. 4, and the end of section 5 (on the knowledge account of assertion). My primary concern here is with the latter claim.

See also Lactantius, De Ira Dei, ch. 1: ait se nihil sciri nisi unum, quod nihil sciret. Like Cicero, the only cognitive terms Lactantius uses are forms of scire. However, Lactantius seems to go on to use intellexit to mean something different from what he seems to want to convey with forms of scire. He seems to go on to say that Socrates denies that there is such a thing as human wisdom; yet in (T4) (for which, see below) Socrates claims to have human wisdom. Perhaps Lactantius thinks that Socrates’s human wisdom is not genuine wisdom: which agrees with my interpretation in section 7.

See also Jerome, Letter 57, sect. 12 (where, again, just forms of scire are used). The letter’s primary concern is ‘the best method of translating.’ Jerome defends himself against the charge that he doesn’t render word for word, saying that ‘in translating from the Greek… I render sense for sense and not word for word,’ noting that Cicero did the same. He also says (quoting himself in another work) that ‘[e]ach particular word conveys a meaning of its own, and possibly I have no equivalent by which to render it.’ (He’s not talking about his brief remark about Socrates, which is not at all his main concern in the letter.) I agree with the general point. But using the same Latin word for two different Greek words can obscure the sense of the latter; and, in the case to hand, there are different cognitive Latin words that Jerome (and Cicero and Lactantius) could have used. I return to this issue below.
oida—I know one thing, that I know nothing.’ Apparently T-shirts with this Greek ‘quotation’ are popular in Greece.

There are also more scholarly examples. For example, in their book *The Delphic Oracle*, Parke and Wormell say that Socrates thought he was wiser than others ‘because whereas all men thought they knew something and did not, Socrates knew that he knew nothing.’³ At least three articles in the recently-published Blackwell *Companion to Socrates* also ascribe the claim to Socrates. Harold Tarrant, for example, says that ‘[t]he most famous claim of Socrates is that he knows that he knows nothing.’³

The claim that one knows that one knows nothing seems to be a contradiction. For if one *knows* that one knows nothing, one knows something: in which case it seems it is not true that one knows nothing. Conversely, if one knows nothing, it seems one could not know that fact. For if one knew it, one would know something, in seeming contradiction to the hypothesis that one knows nothing. Even if the claim can be interpreted so as to be consistent, it at least sounds paradoxical. It is therefore worthwhile to ask whether Socrates makes the claim and, if he does, how it is to be interpreted.

Of course, not everyone attributes the claim to Socrates. In his book, *Socrates*, for example, Christopher Taylor says that doing so ‘is a clear misreading of Plato.’⁴

In what follows, I shall try to steer a middle course. I shall suggest that attributing the claim to Socrates does not involve a *clear* misreading of the text.

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³ ‘Socratic Method and Socratic Truth,’ in S. Ahbel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar (eds.), *A Companion to Socrates* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 254–72 at 263. He takes Ap. 22e–23b to make this claim. (T4) below is part of this passage; so we can evaluate Tarrant’s interpretation of the passage when we turn to (T4). (So far as I can tell, it would not be plausible to say that in the part of the passage immediately preceding (T4), Socrates claims to know that he knows nothing; if Tarrant is right, it would be on the basis of (T4).) According to R. Janko, Socrates ‘famously claimed that he knew nothing except that he knew that he knew nothing’ (*Socrates the Freethinker,* in S. Ahbel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar, *A Companion to Socrates*, 48–62 at 58; cf. 59, 60). Janko doesn’t say what passage or passages he has in mind. And, as phrased, he seems to iterate levels of knowledge once too often for the point he wants to make. In *Socrates in the Italian Renaissance* (S. Ahbel-Rappe and R. Kamtekar, *A Companion to Socrates*, 337–52), J. Hankins also seems to attribute the claim to Socrates or, at any rate, to think that Cicino does so, though the passage he cites from Cicino does not do so: see 349.

⁴ C. C. W. Taylor, *Socrates: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998; 2nd ed. 2019), 42. (Page references to Taylor in this chapter are to the first edition. C. C. W. Taylor, *The passage just quoted in the text continues as follows: ‘Though Socrates frequently says that he does not know the answer to the particular question under discussion, he never says that he knows nothing.’ I assume Taylor means that if Socrates never says that (a) he knows nothing, then he never says that (b) he knows that he knows nothing. But it is useful to distinguish (a) from (b). For Socrates could claim to know nothing, without claiming to know that fact: or so it might seem. I consider this below, in discussing the knowledge account of assertion at the end of section 5. Burnyeat, ‘Antipater and Self-Refutation,’ 290–1, and Annas, ‘Plato the Skeptic,’ 310, also say that Socrates never claims to know that he knows nothing, though neither discusses the matter in detail, since their main concerns lie elsewhere. See also G. Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 82–3, n. 4, retracting the view in his ‘Socrates Disavowal of Knowledge,’ *Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1985), 1–31, and reprinted in G. Fine (ed.), *Plato I: Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 64–92 at e.g. 91. See also M. Stokes, *Plato: Apology* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1997), 18–21.
Nonetheless, on balance it is better not to attribute it to him—though explaining why this is so takes some work. In assessing the evidence, I shall focus on the Apology, which is the main place where Socrates has been thought to claim that he knows that he knows nothing.

2. Some preliminaries

The Greek ‘quotation’ that I saw in Capri—hen oida, hotiouden oida—doesn’t occur in the Apology or, indeed, anywhere else in Plato. But it doesn’t follow that the English sentence ‘I know one thing, that I know nothing’—or: ‘I know that I know nothing’—doesn’t correctly translate something Socrates says. After all, eidenai (the infinitive of which oida acts as the first person present tense singular) is just one of many Greek words that are generally translated as ‘to know.’

But when is it appropriate to translate a given Greek word as ‘knowledge?’ There are, after all, disputes about what knowledge is, and so there are also disputes about when it is appropriate to say that someone has, or lacks, knowledge. This, in turn, has led to disputes about which words should be translated as ‘knowledge.’ Myles Burnyeat, for example, argues that epistêmê, which is often translated as ‘knowledge,’ should instead be translated as ‘understanding.’ One of his reasons is that he thinks the conditions for having epistêmê are more demanding than the conditions for having knowledge are. That is true as Burnyeat conceives of knowledge. But it is not true on every conception of knowledge.

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5 I do not know when the sentence first occurs in Greek, whether as something Socrates allegedly said or in some other context. A TLG search did not turn up any occurrences. Nor did it cite any occurrences of oida hotiouden oida or of oide hotiouden oide. According to DL 2.32, Socrates said kai eidenai men méden plên auto touto [eidenai], which is close. (I follow the OCT in bracketing eidenai.) So far as I can tell, this is ambiguous as between (a) Socrates knows that, for all p, he does not know that p; and (b) there is a p such that Socrates knows that p: namely, for all q, where q is not identical to p, Socrates does not know that q. (a) is a contradiction (if ‘know’ is used univocally), but (b) is not. Unfortunately, there is not enough context in DL to allow us to know which way to understand the remark. For the distinction between (a) and (b), see Burnyeat, ‘Antipater and Self-Refutation,’ 291. He argues that Varro ascribes (b) but not (a) to Socrates. Whether or not the claim that DL ascribes to Socrates is self-contradictory, it does not occur in Plato.

See also Metrodorus 70B1 (DK), for which DK cites both Cicero’s Latin from Acad. 2.73 and Eusebius’s Greek from PE XIV 19, 9, ed. Mras. Unfortunately, it is not clear what the Greek original said. For discussion, see J. Brunschwig, ‘Le Fragment DK 70 B 1 de Métrodore de Chio,’ in K. Algra, P. van der Horst, and D. Runia (eds.), Polyhistor: Studies in the History and Historiography of Ancient Philosophy (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 21–38. See C. Brittain, Cicero, On Academic Scepticism (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 43, n. 103.

6 Burnyeat seems to conceive of knowledge as justified true belief, where justification does not imply truth and is not especially difficult to come by: see his ‘Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge,’ in E. Berti (ed.), Aristotle on Science (Padua: Antenore, 1981), 97–139 at e.g. 102 with 115. By contrast, in ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,’ 71 n. 25, Vlastos says that most people nowadays deny that knowledge is justified true belief.

Burnyeat’s article focuses on Aristotle’s use of epistêmê and epistasthai in the Posterior Analytics. But in sect. VI he discusses Plato’s Theaetetus. He argues that at the beginning of the dialogue, epistêmê ‘must be translated as “knowledge”’ since it ‘has plenty to do with certainty and justification’ (133), but
For the purposes of this chapter, I shall assume that for someone to be talking about knowledge, they must be talking about a truth-entailing cognitive condition that is appropriately cognitively superior to mere true belief.\(^7\) Let us say that this is that later on, it ‘verges towards understanding’ (134). He then suggests that Plato believes that you ‘know a thing if and only if you have systematic and scientific understanding of it in terms of its first principles’ (135).

In discussing Aristotle, Burnyeat eventually says that epistêmê is ‘that type of knowledge which is secured by understanding,’ and that ‘in the end it will not do too much damage to go back to the traditional rendering of epistêmê as “scientific knowledge”. But only in the end. If we are not to be badly misled, we need first to think away a welter of assumptions about the aims of the theory of knowledge as a philosophical enterprise’ (132). Hence Burnyeat’s considered view seems to be that Aristotle uses epistêmê in the Posterior Analytics for a kind of knowledge, though not for knowledge as such, whereas he seems to think that Plato (in some places in the Theaetetus) identifies knowledge as such with understanding; Aristotle’s insight is to see that not all knowledge requires understanding. I myself do not favor translating epistêmê as ‘scientific knowledge’ even in the end, since neither Plato nor Aristotle restricts the word to knowledge in the scientific realm, as ‘science’ is understood nowadays. But I have no objection to translating it as ‘knowledge’—except insofar as one might wish to translate (e.g.) eidenai as ‘to know’, and one might well want to use different English words to translate different Greek words.

Though Burnyeat’s considered view seems to be that for Aristotle in the APo. epistêmê (or unqualified epistêmê) is a kind of knowledge, at places he seems to suggest that epistêmê (or unqualified epistêmê) is understanding rather than any kind of knowledge. See e.g. 100–3, where he says that knowledge involves justification, whereas understanding involves explanation, as though these are disjoint.

J. Lesher, ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,’ *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (1987), 275–88, suggests that, in at least one passage in the Apology (= my (T3)), epistêmê ‘may not count strictly speaking as knowledge (“skilled”, “artistic abilities” are equally legitimate options)’ (281). G. S. Kirk, *Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), 155, notes that Herodotus (1.22; 3.139; 8.25) does not always use epistamai veridically: in which case it does not amount to knowledge, as knowledge is generally conceived. Thanks to Alex Long for calling my attention to the Herodotus passages; and see now his ‘Wisdom in Heraclitus,’ *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 33 (2007), 1–17, at 9. On this view, epistêmê is sometimes used for a lower-level cognitive condition than knowledge, whereas Burnyeat’s suggestion, by contrast, is, in effect, that it is sometimes used for a more demanding cognitive condition than knowledge as such (as Burnyeat conceives of it).

There is also some dispute about whether eidenai and its cognates are always used as knowledge. For example, in ‘Aristotle’s Theory of Definition: Some Questions on Posterior Analytics II 8–10,’ in E. Berti (ed.), *Aristotle on Science: The Posterior Analytics* (Padua: Antenore, 1981), 359–84, at 366, J. L. Ackrill suggests that in the APo., Aristotle may sometimes use eidenai for mere true belief. However, he does not press the point; and he more often suggests that Aristotle uses the word for a weak sort of knowledge. In *Socratic Wisdom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), H. Benson suggests that some of Socrates’s avowals of knowledge are ‘unconsidered, careless, or vernacular expressions’ (236). Some of the passages he thinks can be read in this way use eidenai; hence he thinks that Socrates does not always use eidenai to indicate genuine knowledge.

\(^7\) There are two ways in which this view of knowledge is broader than the justified-true-belief account of knowledge. First, it does not say that knowledge is a species of, or even implies, true belief, though it leaves both possibilities open. Secondly, it does not require justification to be the factor that makes knowledge appropriately cognitively superior to mere true belief. On the other hand, the account of knowledge I assume here is not committed to the view that being in a truth-entailing cognitive condition and having just any old justification is sufficient for having knowledge. It leaves open the possibility that some true beliefs are justified to some extent, but not justified enough to constitute knowledge. It also leaves open the possibility that, of two people, both of whom know, say, a mathematical theorem, one might know it better than the other does—by, for example, being able to relate it to a wider range of related propositions, or by being able to give a deeper and fuller explanation. I return to this issue later.

It would do for my purposes to say that knowledge is true belief plus something, where there is room for dispute about precisely what must be added to true belief so as to yield knowledge. I use the less familiar and somewhat more awkward phrasing in the text so as to side step questions about whether
the basic concept of knowledge. It leaves room for dispute about the precise criteria for knowledge: about the precise way in which knowledge is cognitively superior to mere true belief.

If we think of knowledge in this way, then, when Plato, in *Meno* 97aff., asks what *epistêmê* is, and what it is to *eidenai* something, he is discussing knowledge. For he asks there what distinguishes true belief (orthê doxa, alethês doxa) from a truth-entailing cognitive condition that is more valuable than mere true belief. He calls this condition *epistêmê*; and, in 97aff., he speaks interchangeably of having *epistêmê* and of knowing (*eidenai*).⁸ At least in the *Meno*, then, Plato uses forms of *epistasthai* and the cognate noun, as well as forms of *eidenai*, for knowledge, as I am conceiving of knowledge here.⁹

It therefore seems *prima facie* reasonable to assume that when, in the *Apology*, Plato uses forms of *epistasthai* and the cognate noun, and forms of *eidenai*, he’s talking about knowledge.¹⁰ To be sure, even if he uses these words for knowledge in the *Apology*, it might assume different views about knowledge from those

knowledge is a species of, or implies, true belief, since such questions lie apart from my concerns here. Despite the somewhat unfamiliar phrasing, the basic idea underlying the view of knowledge assumed here is widespread. But it is not uncontroversial. For example, in ‘The Concept of Knowledge,’ in P. A. French, T. E. Uehling, Jr., and H. K. Wettstein (eds.), Midwest Studies in Philosophy (1984), 529–54, C. McGinn says that knowledge is a ‘subrational achievement’ that is ‘more primitive than belief’ and that requires ‘less cognitive sophistication’ (547). (I owe the reference to Benson, Socratic Wisdom, 192 n. 15.)

⁸ See Chapter 3.

⁹ Earlier in the dialogue, however, he sometimes seems to use forms of *eidenai* more broadly than for having *epistêmê*, as *epistêmê* is defined in 98a; see e.g. 91d2. By contrast, *epistêmê* seems to be consistently used in conformity with the definition given in 98a. (Forms of *epistasthai* and of the cognate noun are not used in the *Meno* until 85d1, though forms of *eidenai* are used frequently before then.) I ask about the *Apology* later. Of course, we might not want to use ‘knowledge’ (‘to know’) to translate both words; for we might want to use different English words to correspond to different Greek words (Jerome notwithstanding: see n. 1). Be that as it may, at *Meno* 97aff., when Plato uses forms of *epistasthai* and the cognate noun, and forms of *eidenai*, he is talking about knowledge, as knowledge is being conceived of here, however we in the end choose to translate these two words. Nor is it unique to Plato to use these words for knowledge—that is, for a truth-entailing cognitive condition that is appropriately cognitively superior to mere true belief. To take just one pre-Platonic example, Xenophanes says: ‘No man (anêr) has ever seen, nor will anyone ever know (eidôs), the truth (saphês) about the gods or about any of the things I speak of. For even if someone should in fact say what is really the case, still he would not know (oide) it. But belief (dokos) is allotted to all’ (DK B34).

It is awkward that Plato does not use a noun cognate with *eidenai* (e.g. *eidêsis*, for which see the opening lines of Aristotle’s *De Anima*) and that there is no verb cognate with *sophia* (sosoph). Even when verbs are at issue, I shall sometimes speak of knowledge (rather than using e.g. ‘to know’ or ‘knowing’); and I shall sometimes contrast e.g. *epistêmê* (a noun) with *eidenai* (a verb).

¹⁰ One might argue that I am not justified in assuming this, on the ground that it is not until the *Meno* that he explicitly distinguishes knowledge from true belief; hence the distinction can’t be assumed earlier than that. See J. Beversluis, ‘Socratic Definition,’ American Philosophical Quarterly 11 (1974), 331–6; cf. his ‘Does Socrates Commit the Socratic Fallacy?’, American Philosophical Quarterly 24 (1987), 211–33 at 217f. However, the distinction antedates Plato: see previous note. Moreover, one can observe distinctions one does not explicitly draw. Even if one should not assume in advance that forms of *eidenai* and *epistasthai* (*epistêmê*) indicate knowledge, as knowledge is being conceived of here, we shall see as we proceed that the assumption is reasonable in the end—which is not to say that forms of *eidenai* are never used colloquially: see n. 6.
articulated in the _Meno_. But that is a different issue from whether it uses these words for knowledge, as knowledge is being conceived of here.

Although the use of forms of _epistasthai_ and the cognate noun, and of forms of _eidenai_, is _prima facie_ sufficient for Plato to be talking about knowledge, it may not be necessary: perhaps he also uses other cognitive words to indicate knowledge. That is an issue I address in due course. All I’ve said so far is that in order to decide whether he is talking about knowledge, we need to decide whether he is talking about a truth-entailing cognitive condition that is appropriately cognitively superior to mere true belief; and I have suggested that it is reasonable to think that he uses forms of _epistasthai_ and the cognate noun, and forms of _eidenai_, in this way.

Let us now turn to the _Apology_, to see whether Socrates says anything that should be translated as ‘I know one thing, that I know nothing’ or as ‘I know that I know nothing.’ Even if he does not, he might say things that imply such a view. So let us ask about that too.

### 3. Setting the scene

I shall consider five central passages in detail. I begin by setting them briefly in their context. Socrates explains that his friend Chaerephon went to the oracle at Delphi and asked whether anyone was wiser than Socrates; the oracle replied that no one was.¹¹ Socrates was perplexed by this reply. For, he says:¹²

(T1) I am aware (_sunoida emautô(i)_) of being wise (_sophos ôn_) in nothing, great or small. (21b4–5)

ἐγώ γάρ δή ὡστε μέγα ὡστε σμικρὸν σύνοιδα ἐμαυτῶσοφὸς ὄν.

Though the oracle cannot lie (21b6–7), it can be difficult to interpret (21b3–4). Socrates therefore decided to try to find out what it meant, by cross-examining others with reputations for wisdom. After cross-examining an unnamed politician, he concluded:¹³


¹² The passage is sometimes translated in a more noncommittal way: ‘In no way, great or small, am I aware (_sunoida_) of being wise (_sophos_).’ See, e.g., Long, _Socrates in Hellenistic Philosophy_, 14; Stokes, _Plato: Apology_, 18; Burnyeat, ‘Antipater and Self-Refutation,’ 290. The translation given in the text seems to me to be a more natural reading of the Greek (though Stokes, _Plato: Apology_, 18, cites _EN_ 1172b31–2 as a parallel for the noncommittal reading). It also fits the context somewhat better: Socrates has just learned that the oracle said that no one is wiser than he is; and he is expressing his surprise at that. His surprise seems more natural if he _sunoi_ that he is not wise than if he does not _sunoidai_ that he is wise. Further, (T1) is parallel to (T3a) (discussed below), which is unambiguously positive.

¹³ I have inserted ‘(a),’ ‘(b),’ ‘(c),’ and ‘(d),’ for ease of reference.
(T2) (a) As I was going away from this man, I reasoned to myself that I am indeed wiser than he is. (b) It is probable (kinduneui) that neither of us knows (eidena) anything fine and good (kalon kagathon); (c) but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas I, just as (hòsper) I do not know, neither do I think I know. (d) Indeed (goun), it seems that I am wiser than he to this small extent, that what I do not know, neither do I think I know. (21d2–8)

Socrates next cross-examined poets, then craftsmen. He went to the latter because, he explains:  

(T3) (a) I am aware (sunoida) that I know (epistemenö(i)) practically (hòs epos eipein) nothing. (b) But I knew (eide) that I should find them [the craftsmen] knowing (epistamenous) many fine (kala) things; and in this I was not mistaken (epseusthen), since they knew (epistanto) things that I did not know (ouk épistamen) and in that respect they were wiser than me. (22c9–d4)

Some further features of this passage, beyond those I discuss in the text below, deserve comment:

1. In (T3a), Socrates claims positively to be aware of something; as he also does in (T1), on my translation of it. See n. 12.
2. (T1) and (T3a) both use forms of suneidenai. But whereas (T1) uses sophos, (T3a) uses forms of épistasthai. This supports a suggestion I shall make later: that, in the Apology, both sophos (sophia) and forms of épistasthai and the cognate noun are used for a high-level sort of knowledge that is difficult to attain.
3. The craftsmen are said to know kala, but they are not explicitly said to know kala kagatha. One might think the difference is significant, on the ground that if the craftsmen were said to know kala kagatha, that would conflict with Socrates’s seeming claim in (T2) that neither he nor an unnamed politician knows anything kalon kagathon; nor, as becomes clear, does he think anyone else knows anything kalon kagathon (as that claim is meant here). However, as we shall see, in 20b he says that equestrians, for example, know kala kagatha about horses, in that they know how to make horses achieve their proper aretê. So I don’t think we can make anything of the fact that (T3) has kala rather than kala kagatha. But Socrates is nonetheless consistent, if (T2) tacitly restricts the scope of kala kagatha to human aretê. The craftsmen mentioned in (T3) know kala kagatha in their domains; but they don’t know anything kalon kagathon in the moral sphere—at least, not in the way at issue in (T2).
4. Socrates says he knows (eidena) that the craftsmen know (epistasthai) their crafts; yet he denies that he knows (epistasthai) them. According to Burnyeat, ‘[t]he Platonist must rather deny (an argument at Charmides 171AC does deny) that A can ever know that B knows that p unless he knows that p in the same sort of way as B does’ (‘Socrates and the Jury: Paradoxes in Plato’s Distinction Between Knowledge and True Belief, Part I,’ Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 54 (1980), 173–91, at 184–5). Here, however, Plato allows that A can know (eidena) that B knows (epistasthai) that p, even if A doesn’t know that p in the same sort of way as B does.
As a result of his cross examination of others, Socrates became widely disliked, as he explains in the following passage:

(T4) (a) As a result of this investigation, Athenians, I have acquired much unpopularity, of the most troublesome and unpleasant kind. The dislike has given rise to many slanders, and to my being described by this word, 'wise.' This is because, each time, the bystanders think that I am myself wise in subjects in which I refute someone else. (b) But what is probable, gentlemen, is that in fact the god is wise and that in that oracle he is saying this: that human wisdom is worth little or (kai) nothing. (c) And he seems to be speaking of Socrates here before you, and to use my name, taking me as an example, as if he were to say: 'This one among you, men, is wisest who, just like Socrates, has realized (egenôken) that in respect of wisdom he is, in truth, worth nothing (oudenos axios).'

Εκ ταύτης δὴ τῆς ἐξετάσεως, ὁ ἄνδρες Αθηναίοι, [23a] πολλαὶ μὲν ἀπέχθειαί μοι γεγονὰς καὶ οίας χαλεπώταται καὶ βαρύταται, ὡστε πολλὰς διαβολὰς ἀπ’ αὐτῶν γεγονέναι, ὅνομα δὲ τοῦτο λέγεσθαι, σοφὸς εἶναι· οἴονται γὰρ μὲ ἐκάστοτε οἱ παρόντες ταῦτα αὐτὸν εἶναι σοφὸν ἢ ἂν ἄλλον εξελέγχω. Τὸ δὲ κινδυνεύει, ὁ ἄνδρες, τῷ ὄντι ὁ θεὸς σοφὸς εἶναι, καὶ ἐν τῷ χρησμῷ τούτῳ τούτῳ λέγειν, ὅτι ἡ ἀνθρωπινὴ σοφία ὀλύγου τυόν ἀξία ἐστίν καὶ οὐδένος. Καὶ φαίνεται τούτων λέγειν τὸν Σωκράτην, προσεκχρησθαί δὲ [23b] τῷ ἔμω ἀνόματι, ἐμὲ παράδειγμα ποιούμενον, ὦσπερ ἂν <εἰ> εἰποί ὅτι Ὁδὸς ὕμων, ὁ ἀνθρωποί, σοφότατος ἢστιν, ὡστε ὦσπερ Σωκράτης ἐγινοκεν ὅτι οὐδένος ἄξιος ἢστι τῇ ἀληθείᾳ πρὸς σοφίαν.

Socrates also explains why he acquired his reputation in the following passage:

(T5) I have, Athenians, acquired this reputation (onoma) on account of nothing other than a sort of wisdom (sophian tina). What kind of wisdom (poian dē sophian) is that? The one which is presumably (isōs) human wisdom (anthropinē sophia). In fact, I probably (kinduneuō) am wise in that. But perhaps (tach’an) the others I mentioned just now are wise with a wisdom that is more than human, for otherwise I can’t explain it (ouk echōi ti legō). For certainly I don’t know (epistamai) it, and whoever says I do is lying and speaks to slander me. (Ap. 20d6–e3)

Ἐγὼ γὰρ, ὁ ἄνδρες Αθηναίοι, δι’ οὐδὲν ἀλλ’ ἡ διὰ σοφίαν τινά τοῦτο τὸ ὄνομα ἐσχηκα. Ποιὰν δὴ σοφίαν ταύτην; ἠπερ ἐστίν ἵσως ἀνθρωπινὴ σοφία· τῷ ὄντι γὰρ κινδυνεύου ταύτην εἶναι σοφός. Ὁδὸς δὲ τάχ’ ἂν, οὐς ἄρτι [20e] ἐλέγων, μεῖζω τινὰ ἡ κατ’ ἀνθρωπον σοφίαν σοφοί εἶνεν, ἢ οὐκ ἔχω τὶ λέγω· οὐ γὰρ δὴ ἔγωγε αὐτὴν ἐπίσταμαι, ἀλλ’ ὡστε φησί, φεύγονται τε καὶ ἐπὶ διαβολὴ ἡ ἔρις λέγει.
Let us now ask how best to interpret these passages, beginning with (T1).

However we interpret (T1) in the end, it is not formally or explicitly contradictory: for it uses two different phrases, *sunoida emautô(i)* and *sophos ón*. The passage would, however, be implicitly contradictory if these phrases were synonymous, or if being aware of something implied being wise with respect to it. This is how Richard Kraut understands the passage. He translates *sunoida* not as ‘aware,’ but as ‘know’; and he says that ‘you cannot know that you are not wise even in a small way; for to know something is to have a small amount of wisdom.’¹⁶ He concludes that (T1) involves a contradiction.¹⁷

However, having some knowledge would not normally be thought sufficient for having *sophia* or for being *sophos*. It would not normally be inferred from the fact that someone knows that today is Tuesday, that he has even a small amount of *sophia* or is at all *sophos*. As Burnyeat puts it, ‘*sophos* usually indicates an expertise or specialised knowledge that most people do not have.’¹⁸ And this seems to me to be how Plato uses *sophos* in (T1). So, for example, he at least sometimes uses *sophia* interchangeably with *epistêmê*.¹⁹ And, in the Apology, he consistently uses *epistêmê* for a high-level sort of knowledge that most people lack.²⁰ For example, at 20b Socrates says that only equestrians have *epistêmê* of how to make horses fine and good (kalon kagathon)—that is, of how to make them acquire their proper virtue (aretê). This involves their having the relevant craft or skill (technê, 20c1): a specialized, systematic, synoptic grasp of a given domain.

Socrates goes on to speak of the technê and of *epistêmê* of how to make humans achieve their proper virtue (aretê), and of what being kalon kagathon consists in for them. But, he says, he does not know (*epistasthai*) such things (20c3). When

¹⁶ Socrates and the State (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 272 n. 44.
¹⁷ However, he softens the blow by adding that (T1) is just Socrates’s pre-oracle belief, which, according to Kraut, Socrates abandons in favor of a consistent position once he understands what the oracle meant. See n. 52. In section 7, I ask whether Socrates abandons his pre-oracle belief.
¹⁹ See esp. 19c6–7. Cf. Tht. 145d11–e7, where the identification is accepted in advance of knowing what *epistêmê* is. See Vlastos, ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,’ n. 4. Lyons notes that *sophia* is frequently used convertibly with *epistêmê*, but only in contexts where *epistêmê* is, as Lyons puts it, ‘graded “upwards”’ (Structural Semantics, 228).
²⁰ Outside the Ap. Plato does not always use forms of *epistasthai* and the cognate noun for a high-level cognitive achievement (though he often does so); see e.g. Eud. 293bc. As noted in the introduction, here and elsewhere in this chapter my remarks are largely confined to the Ap.
Socrates says in (T1) that he sunoide that he is not sophos, he means that he sunoide that he lacks sophia so understood: he sunoide that there is no domain or area about which he has systematic, synoptic understanding.

Now, to be sophos in this sense is to have knowledge, at least of a sort. So in claiming, in (T1), that he is not at all sophos, Socrates is claiming to lack knowledge, at least of a sort.²¹ But does he claim to know that he lacks (this sort of) knowledge? He would do so if to suneidenai something were to know it. And, according to Paul Woodruff, that is Plato’s view.²² His reason is that at Phaedrus 235c6–8, Socrates says: ‘I know well (eu oida) that none of these ideas has come from me—I sunoida my own ignorance (amathia).’²³ Here, Woodruff suggests, ‘sunoida is at least as strongly epistemic as oida (‘I know’).’ Since to eidenai something is to know it, to suneidenai something is also to know it.²⁴

Now eidenai does indeed often indicate knowledge. And if that is how it is being used here, then Woodruff’s reading of the passage is right. For Socrates says that it is because he sunoide his own ignorance that he eu oide that none of the ideas he is discussing comes from him; the fact that he sunoide something grounds his knowing it well (eu eidenai). Hence, in this passage, suneidenai is at least as cognitively strong as eidenai is. So if eu oida is being used here for genuine knowledge, then, in this passage to suneidenai something is to know it. However, later I shall suggest that Plato sometimes seems to use eu oida colloquially, or for something like confident belief for which one has reasonable

²¹ I leave open for now the question of whether, in the Apology, Socrates takes epistêmê and sophia to be just an exalted kind of knowledge, or knowledge as such. If the latter is the case, he has demanding standards for knowledge such that someone who lacks epistêmê and sophia has, at best, true belief. If the former is the case, he takes epistêmê and sophia to be a kind of knowledge, but admits lower-level knowledge as well—i.e. knowledge that does not amount to epistêmê or sophia, as they are conceived of here, but that nonetheless crosses the threshold from mere true belief to knowledge. I ask later which of these two views Socrates seems to favor in the Apology.


²³ ‘Plato’s Early Theory of Knowledge,’ 62 n. 3. The passage in the Phaedrus reads: δτι μεν οδν παρά γε εµαντο οιδέν αὐτῶν ἐννοήσα, εῦ οίδα, συνειδώ έµαντο ἀµαθίαν. Woodruff and Nehamas translate as follows: ‘I am well aware that none of these ideas can have come from me—I know my own ignorance.’ Their translation may be found in ‘Phaedrus,’ in J. Cooper (ed.), Plato: Complete Works (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 506–56. In Plato: Phaedrus (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1986), C. J. Rowe translates the passage in much the same way: ‘I am well aware that none of them has its source in my own mind, because I know my own ignorance.’ It is somewhat curious that they all use ‘well aware’ for eu oida, and ‘know’ for sunoida. The reverse seems preferable, as in my translation in the text, and as in R. Hackforth, Phaedrus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952).

In the Phaedrus passage, as in (T1), Socrates uses two different cognitive terms: he sunoide his amathia. According to Lyons, Structural Semantics, ‘[t]he constant and closest relation to be registered in the analysis of the meaning of sophos (sophia) is its antonymy with amathês (amathia). These terms are explicitly gradable, and perhaps graded, antonyms’ (227–8). So perhaps in this passage, when Socrates claims to suneidenai his amathia, he means that he sunoide that he is not sophos, where sophia is to be ‘graded “upwards”’ (228). On this reading, even if suneidenai is used for knowledge, the passage is neither explicitly nor implicitly contradictory.

²⁴ Lyons, Structural Semantics, 62 n. 3.
grounds, though not grounds that are good enough for genuine knowledge. If that is how it is used here, then the passage is not evidence for the claim that Plato uses *suneidenai* for genuine knowledge, since the use of *eu oida* would not, in this case, indicate genuine knowledge here.

Even if the *Phaedrus* passage provides evidence for the claim that Plato sometimes uses forms of *suneidenai* for genuine knowledge, it doesn’t follow that he so uses *suneidenai* in (T1). For he does not always use *suneidenai* in such a strongly epistemic way. Consider, for example, *Laws* 870c8–d4:

many a murderer has been prompted by the cowardly fears of a guilty man. When a man is committing some crime, or has already committed it, he does not want anyone to *suneidenai* about it; and if he cannot eliminate a possible informer in any other way, he murders him. (Trans. T. Saunders, lightly revised)

The sort of person Plato has in mind does not just want no one to *know* that he is a murderer; he does not want anyone to be aware of the fact at all.²⁵

Can we tell how *suneidenai* is being used in (T1)?²⁶ One might think that considerations of charity should lead us to suppose that it is used for less than

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²⁵ As against this interpretation, Tim Williamson writes (not in connection with Plato, but as a general philosophical point): ‘A notorious criminal may try to eliminate all those who know that he killed the policeman, because they are potential witnesses against him in court. He will not bother to eliminate those who merely believe truly that he did it, because their confidence that he did it, however great, is no threat to him, given the rules of forensic evidence’ (*Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 87). That might be true if the rules of forensic evidence were always strictly and correctly followed; but, alas, they are not. Of course, a criminal might not be (too) worried about someone who had the mere true belief that he committed the crime, if the true belief is a mere lucky guess with no reasons to back it up at all. But he might be worried if the person with mere true belief has some good reasons to back it up, even if the reasons fall short of those needed for knowledge.

²⁶ Forms of *suneidenai* occur just three times in the *Ap.*: in (T1), (T3), and 34b5. I discuss (T3) below. Its use in 34b5 is lower level than *sophia* and *epistêmê*. For if Socrates lacks all *sophia* and *epistêmê*, he does not have *sophia* or *epistêmê* of the fact that Meletus is lying. If he does not, presumably others do not either. (It is true that he thinks the craftsmen are wise in their domains; so it is not that he thinks no one has any wisdom. But it seems plausible to suppose that if he lacks wisdom in the case at issue in 34b5, so too do others.) It is more difficult to say whether *suneidenai* is used in 34b5 for low-level knowledge or for awareness that falls short of knowledge. (To say that *suneidenai* is used in these two ways is not to say that the term is ambiguous or has different senses. Rather, it has a broader sense than ‘to know; but a given context might make it clear whether the sort of awareness at issue is tantamount to knowledge or falls short of it.)

One might think that if *suneidenai* is used for knowledge in the *Phaedrus* passage just explored, then, given the closeness of that passage to (T1), *suneidenai* is also used for knowledge in (T1). However, we must look at each passage in its overall context, to see what reading best fits that context. Perhaps the *Phaedrus* and *Apology* assume different epistemological views, in such a way that similar-sounding claims should in the end be interpreted differently. Both the middle books of the *Republic* and *Theaetetus* 184–6 deny that the perception is knowledge; but there is less agreement here than meets the
knowledge in (T1). For otherwise, would not Socrates in effect be saying that he knows that he knows nothing? And would that not be a contradiction? It would be if, as Kraut believes, *suneidenai* were being used for knowing something *in the sense of being sophos with respect to it*. But it would not be, if *suneidenai* were being used, as it easily can be, for knowing something in a lower-level way. For (or so one might think) one can quite consistently have low-level knowledge that one lacks high-level knowledge.²⁷ For example, I can have good grounds for my true belief that I lack mathematical expertise: grounds that are good enough to count as my knowing that I lack it. Perhaps I know that an expert mathematician must be able to do elementary sums correctly, and that I myself cannot do them, as my repeated mistakes make all too clear. I then have low-level knowledge that I lack mathematical expertise. Or again, I might know that I lack high-level knowledge of Russian: for I know that I have never learned the language at all. But the knowledge I have of these facts is not itself a piece of *sophia*. It is not specialized expertise of a given domain; it does not involve a systematic, synoptic grasp of a field; it is too atomistic to count as wisdom, as wisdom is conceived of in the *Apology*.

And it seems to me that if *suneidenai* indicates knowledge in (T1), it is knowledge that falls short of having the *sophia* Socrates claims to lack; his grasp of the fact that he is not *sophos* is lower level. He does not, in his view, have a deep and systematic enough grasp of a given domain to count as having *sophia* of the fact that he is not *sophos*. Grounds of charity also suggest this reading: for *suneidenai* can be used for less than having *sophia*; and if it is used for less than

²⁷ Of course, one might hold epistemological views that preclude this possibility. It is sometimes thought that Plato holds such views in the *Charmides*. See also n. 14, point 4 above, though the issue there is somewhat different. Whether or not Plato holds such views in the *Charmides*, it is a different question whether he holds them in the *Apology*. My suggestion is that if one thinks that, in the relevant contexts, Plato uses *suneidenai*—and *gignôskein* in (T4)—for knowledge, then one should also think that he allows one to have low-level knowledge that one lacks high-level knowledge: that one can know (*suneidenai*, *gignôskein*) that one lacks *sophia* and *epistêmê*, without thereby having any *sophia* or *epistêmê*. If, however, Plato uses *suneidenai* and *gignôskein* in the relevant contexts for awareness that falls short of knowledge, then we do not know, from the *Apology*, whether he thinks one can have low-level knowledge that one lacks high-level knowledge. For in this case the issue is not broached.

Even if Plato does not broach that issue, he might nonetheless implicitly distinguish between lower and higher levels of knowledge, and claim to have low-level knowledge of something, even if not of his own cognitive condition. Later I shall suggest that he sometimes seems to use *eidenai* for low-level knowledge. (But, in the *Apology*, he never explicitly claims to *eidenai* that he lacks knowledge.) Since he does not explicitly say what it is to *eidenai* something in a way that falls short of having *sophia* or *epistêmê* of it, any attempt to spell out the differences is somewhat speculative. What matters for my purposes here is not that we be able to give a precise account of how Socrates implicitly distinguishes lower- from higher-level knowledge, but that we see that it is reasonable to attribute some such distinction to him, whether in connection with his description of his own cognitive situation (if we think *suneidenai* and *gignôskein* indicate low-level knowledge) and/or in connection with *eidenai*, when it is used in a way that falls short of having *sophia* or *epistêmê*. 
having *sophia* here, we avoid attributing a contradiction to Socrates. So even if Socrates claims to *know* that he is not *sophos*, we need not take him to be even implicitly contradictory; for even if he claims to know that he is not *sophos*, he does so in a way that falls short of being *sophos*. But it is not clear that he claims to *know* that he is not *sophos*: his awareness that he is not *sophos* might fall short of knowing, in even a low-level way, that he is not *sophos*. This need not mean it is a lucky guess: not all true beliefs are mere lucky guesses. Some of them are backed by good reasons, even if these reasons are not good enough to constitute knowledge. In the geometry lesson in the *Meno*, for example, Meno’s slave eventually comes up with the right answer; but Socrates denies that the slave knows the right answer (85b–d). The slave has grounds for his true belief: he worked it out himself and followed a proof, of sorts, at least to some extent. But, in Plato’s view, he has not done so in a way that gives him knowledge.

I have suggested that in *(T1)* *suneidenai* is used either for awareness that falls short of knowledge, or for low-level knowledge that falls short of having *sophia* or of making one *sophos*. I prefer the first reading; and later I shall suggest some reasons in its favor, though they are far from decisive. Be that as it may, for now let me just note a few points about each reading.

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28 It is true that later Socrates says that the fact that he *gignôskei* that he is not wise gives him human wisdom. But, as we shall see in section 7, that is not to say that he has genuine wisdom or is genuinely wise.

29 I have now in effect distinguished different kinds, or levels, of mere true belief (lucky guesses vs. well grounded true beliefs that fall short of knowledge), and of knowledge (low-level vs. high-level). The basic idea is certainly not foreign to Plato. For example, in the Divided Line at the end of *Republic* Bk. 6, he describes two kinds of belief (*eikasia* and *pistis*) and two kinds of knowledge (*dianoia* and *noêsis*). (*Eikasia* and *pistis* are two kinds of belief as such, not two kinds of true belief; but some beliefs at each level are true.) Perhaps the slave, at the end of the geometry lesson in the *Meno*, has *pistis* about the particular geometrical question they have investigated (though not about morality). *Noêsis*, as conceived in the *Republic*, is certainly sufficient for the high-level knowledge (*sophia*, *epistêmê*) discussed in the *Apology*; but it does not seem to be necessary for all *sophia*. For the craftsmen (i.e. good, skilled craftsmen) are said to be *sophoi* in their domains; yet they are not at the highest level of the Divided Line. (But perhaps, even in the *Apology*, Plato thinks that something like *noêsis* is necessary for being *sophos* as such or as a person, as opposed to being *sophos* in a given domain. For the distinction between being *sophos* about a given domain such as geometry, and being *sophos* as such or as a person, see section 7.) I am not sure the Divided Line countenances the sort of lower-level knowledge the *Apology* seems to admit. (I discuss lower-level knowledge in the *Apology* further below.) For even *dianoia* goes beyond it; but, in the Divided Line, anything that falls short of *dianoia* is at best belief. But my intention is not to read the Divided Line into the *Apology*. The point is just that it shows that Plato sometimes countenances higher and lower levels of knowledge and of true belief; and that makes it reasonable to assume that the same is true in the *Apology*, even though there is no explicit theorizing about it, and even if the precise kinds, or levels, of belief and knowledge are not exactly the same.

The view that the *Apology* distinguishes higher- and lower-levels of knowledge is widespread, though there are different accounts of how one should characterize them. For one clear and succinct account which is close to my own, see Taylor, *Socrates*, 42–8. I discuss the Divided Line in ‘Knowledge and Belief in *Republic* V–VII,’ in S. Everson (ed.), *Companions to Ancient Thought I: Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 85–113; reprinted, with minor modifications in *Plato on Knowledge and Forms: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 85–116.
On my preferred reading, Socrates does not claim, in (T1), that he knows that he knows nothing. Rather, he claims to be aware, in a way that falls short of knowing, that he lacks high-level knowledge: he is aware that he is not at all wise. However, if, contrary to my preferred reading, *suneidenai* indicates low-level knowledge in (T1), then there is a sense in which he implies that he knows that he knows nothing. But the sense in which he does so does not involve a contradiction. Rather, he in this case implies that he has low-level knowledge that he lacks high-level knowledge.

It is important to distinguish the second of these two interpretations from another one with which it might easily be confused. In his justly-famous article ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,’ Gregory Vlastos argues that Socrates uses ‘know’ in two different senses, what he calls certain and elenctic knowledge (Kc and Ke, respectively); and he argues that when (as he thinks) Socrates claims to know that he knows nothing, he is at any rate not contradicting himself, because he means that he has Ke that lacks Kc, and this is not a contradiction.³⁰ This, however, misleadingly suggests that Socrates uses a *single* word in two different senses. In fact, however, he uses two *different* words, *suneidenai* and *sophia*, in two different senses. My suggestion is *not* that Socrates uses a single word in two different senses. Rather, he uses two different words non-synonymously. These are very different claims.³¹

My criticism of Vlastos is quite different from one leveled by Lesher. He objects to Vlastos that it would be ‘thoroughly “un-Socratic”’ to distinguish two senses of ‘know’; for doing so would violate his alleged ‘“semantic monism”: that whenever we employ a word, there is a single quality designated by that term which, once properly identified, can serve as a distinguishing mark for all the things designated by that term.’³² But whether Socrates endorses semantic monism is irrelevant here. For, again, Socrates uses two different, non-synonymous words, for two different cognitive conditions.³³

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³⁰ ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,’ 68, n. 13; 82–4; 91. In n. 4, Vlastos mentions several Greek cognitive words; he seems to think that they are all synonymous with one another and that each of them is ambiguous as between Ke and Kc.

³¹ Socrates uses two different words (*suneidenai*, *sophos*) non-synonymously on both of the interpretations I have suggested. For on neither of them does it follow from the fact that he *sunoide* that he is *sophos*, that he is *sophos* about that lack.

As I noted above (n. 1), some of the Latin attributions also use forms of just one cognitive word, *scire*. So the problem is not new with English. Indeed, the terms in which the debate is now cast in English—asking whether Socrates knows that he knows nothing, using just a single English word, ‘know’—may ultimately be due to Cicero’s repeated use of forms of *scire* in this connection. Though I agree with Jerome that we need not always translate word for word, using just one non-Greek word—whether in Latin or English or in any other language—to render two different and nonsynonymous Greek words leads to confusion in the case at hand.

³² Lesher, ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,’ 278.

³³ C. D. C. Reeve, *Socrates in the Apology* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 58–62, agrees with Lesher that Socrates is a semantic monist; this leads him to suggest that Socrates distinguishes, not different senses of ‘know,’ but different kinds of knowledge, where ‘knowledge’ has a single meaning. The second of my two interpretations—on which *suneidenai* indicates low-level knowledge—in effect involves
5. Socrates cross-examines a politician: (T2)

In (T2a), Socrates certainly does not say that he knows that he knows nothing. Nor does he say this in (b). Rather, he says that it is probable that neither he nor the person he cross-examined knows anything fine and good.

One might argue that saying that it is probable that he does not know anything fine and good falls short of saying that he does not know anything fine and good; in which case, so far from disclaiming all knowledge in (b), he would not even clearly be disclaiming any knowledge.

But even if—as I believe (see n. 36)—‘probable’ is not used to avoid a definite commitment, Socrates does not say in (b) that he knows nothing. Rather, he would in this case be saying that he knows nothing fine and good. Saying that he does not know anything fine and good falls short of saying that he does not know anything at all;⁴ hence it falls short of saying that he knows that he knows nothing.

Actually, Socrates probably does not mean to disavow knowledge even of everything that is fine and good; he is speaking elliptically. For earlier, as we have seen, he used the phrase ‘fine and good’ in connection with equestrians, who enable horses to achieve their proper aretê; he went on to ask who has the corresponding skill about how to make humans achieve their proper virtue, saying he lacks it (20c1–4). ‘Fine and good’ in (b) probably refers just to what is fine and good in the human sphere, in connection with moral virtue. For presumably Socrates was not cross-examining the unnamed politician about how to make horses achieve their proper aretê, but about how to enable humans to do so. So I take (T2b) to be saying that neither he nor the unnamed politician has moral knowledge. Since that falls short of saying that he has no knowledge whatsoever, it falls short of saying that he knows that he knows nothing.

Socrates is sometimes thought to disclaim all knowledge in (c). However, it seems better to take (c) to say that, though neither Socrates nor his interlocutor knows anything fine and good, his interlocutor takes himself to know something fine and good, whereas Socrates does not take himself to know anything fine and
distinguishing kinds, or degrees, of knowledge, one conveyed by suendeinai and the other by sophia and epistêmê. But that interpretation is not motivated by Socrates’s alleged semantic monism. For, again, he uses different cognitive words for different kinds, or degrees, of knowledge (if, contrary to my view, suendeinai indicates knowledge here at all). To be sure, I have suggested that sophia and epistêmê are used interchangeably. My point is that to suendeinai something is not to be sophos with respect to it or to have epistêmê of it.

⁴ At least, this is so unless he thinks one cannot know anything at all unless one knows something fine and good. So far as I can see, however, nothing he says in the Apology commits him to this view. One might argue that he’s committed to it in the Republic, if his view there is that one cannot know anything unless one knows the form of the good (which is fine and good). However, even if, in the Republic, knowledge of the form of the good is needed for the best sort of knowledge, I do not think that, even there, it is required for knowledge as such. Be that as it may, we cannot assume that the Apology has the same view as the Republic.
good: ‘just as I do not know’ is elliptical for not knowing anything fine and good which, in turn, refers, here, just to moral knowledge. So read, (c) follows on naturally from (b). By contrast, if in (c) Socrates were suddenly to claim that he knows (eidenai) nothing at all, the logic of the passage would be quite odd.

In (b), Socrates says that neither he nor the unnamed politician knows anything kalon kagathon. In (c), he says that just as he doesn’t know anything kalon kagathon, so he doesn’t think he does, whereas the unnamed politician falsely believes he knows something kalon kagathon. In (d), Socrates explains how (b) and (c) make him wiser than the unnamed politician: he is wiser than the unnamed politician because, when he does not know something (kalon kagathon), neither does he think he does; whereas this is not true of the unnamed politician. Socrates is not claiming that he knows nothing, let alone that he knows that he knows nothing. Rather, he means that (i) he does not know anything kalon kagathon, and does not think he does; and that (ii) this makes him wiser than the unnamed politician, since the latter falsely believes that he knows something kalon kagathon. Socrates is wiser than the unnamed politician in that he lacks a false belief the politician has. Moreover, it is a particularly bad false belief to have, since, as the Meno explains at length, it makes the one who has it lazy and disinclined to inquire—which, however, one must do in order to acquire the knowledge needed for virtue.

For the view that the passage disclaims knowledge only of what is fine and good, see Lesher, ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,’ 281; Stokes, Plato: Apology, 18 (though the translation he gives there differs from the one he gives on 49); T. Brickhouse and N. Smith, Plato’s Socrates (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 33; and, by implication, Vlastos, Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher, 237, n. 5. However, there is dispute about what is involved in disclaiming knowledge of what is kalon kagathon. In Socrates, 237–9, and in ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,’ 88–91, Vlastos implies that it involves disclaiming all moral knowledge, where, however, the knowledge at issue is just Kc. Lesher, by contrast, does not think Socrates is disclaiming all moral knowledge; neither does Kraut, Socrates and the State, 272. However, Lesher and Kraut suggest different exceptions. Brickhouse and Smith think Socrates is disclaiming more than moral knowledge. For they think the craftsmen’s wisdom is included within the scope of what’s fine and good, so that when Socrates claims to lack knowledge of what’s fine and good, he means to claim (among other things) that he lacks the knowledge craftsmen have.

In ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,’ Vlastos translates (c), not as I have done, but as: ‘But he, having no knowledge, thinks he knows something, while I, having none, don’t think I have any’ (67 (= his (T8))). (He gives a different translation in Socrates, 82.) It might seem that on this translation, Socrates disavows all knowledge (eidenai), which is how Vlastos interprets the passage in ‘Disavowal’ (where, again, he thinks the knowledge disavowed is just all Kc). However, even on Vlastos’s translation, the passage can still be taken to say just that Socrates has no knowledge of what is kalon kagathon. That is how Vlastos understands the passage in Socrates: see previous note.

Gary Matthews has suggested to me that we should not supply ‘fine and good’ in (c), on the ground that it would be odd if Socrates first said that it is ‘probable’ that neither he nor his interlocutor knows anything fine and good, only to add, in the very same sentence, that he himself doesn’t know anything fine and good, omitting the ‘probable.’ Matthews therefore takes (c) to make a more general claim. However, it seems to me that if ‘probable’ expresses a qualification or hesitation, its omission in (c) would be odd whether the passage is read as I read it or as Matthews reads it. I therefore doubt that ‘probable’ indicates a qualification or hesitation; certainly it does not always do so. If it does not do so here, its occurrence does not tell in favor of Matthews’s reading.
Though this seems to be all (T2d) means, Socrates may believe a stronger claim. For in Ap. 29a5–b5, he says:

For to fear death, gentlemen, is to think one is wise when one is not; for it is to think one knows (eidenai) things one does not know. For about death, no-one knows whether it is the greatest of goods for man, but they fear it as though they know well (eu eidotes) that it is the greatest of bad things. And yet, how can this fail to be the most disgraceful ignorance, thinking one knows things one doesn’t know? And if indeed, gentlemen, I were to claim to be wiser than others because, even outside the domain of what is fine and good (in the moral sphere), he does not think he does, whereas others sometimes believe they know something, he does not even have beliefs on the matter.

If this is a claim about something fine and good (in the moral sphere), then it is another example of Socrates’s claiming that, when he does not know something fine and good (in the moral sphere), he does not think he does, whereas others falsely believe they know something fine and good (in the moral sphere).³⁷ If, however, the claim is not about something fine and good (in the moral sphere), then Socrates implies that he is wiser than others because, even outside the domain of what is fine and good (in the moral sphere), when he does not know something, he does not think he does, whereas others sometimes believe they know something, they do not. This does not imply that others do not know

³⁷ In (T2d) Socrates says that when he does not know something (kalon kagathon), neither does he think he does. In the passage just cited in the text, he says instead that when he does not know something, he thinks he does not know it. The latter remark presumably does not mean that he thinks he does not know e.g. quantum mechanics, under that description: for he has never even heard of quantum mechanics, and hence cannot have the de dicto thought that he does not know quantum mechanics. Perhaps he means that when he has carefully considered some subject matter without achieving knowledge of it, he is aware that he has not achieved knowledge of it. The higher the level of knowledge, the more plausible this claim is. By contrast, if his claim is that when he does not know something, he does not think he does, that could mean that either he is aware of not knowing it or he has never even considered the relevant subject matter and so a fortiori does not think he knows it, since he does not even have beliefs on the matter.

The claim that when one does not know something neither does one think one knows it might be taken to be equivalent (by contraposition) to the claim that when one thinks one knows something, one knows it. If Socrates is in this position, he is very well off, cognitively speaking, given that he says that when he does not know something neither does he think he does. For in general, as Socrates is at pains to point out, thinking one knows something is not sufficient for knowing it.
anything. Nor does it imply that others are never correct in their claims about what they do and do not know. Rather, Socrates is always correct in making such claims (or is at least always correct in making them in important cases, where these extend outside the moral sphere to, e.g., whether there is life after death, but perhaps not also to trivial empirical matters of fact), whereas others are not, since they make mistakes about the extent of their knowledge not only in the moral sphere but also in other important cases, such as whether there is life after death.

In (T2), Socrates says he does not eidenai some range of things. This contrasts with (T1), where he claims that he is not sophos. As we’ve seen, sophia, like epistêmê (as it is used in the Apology), indicates high-level knowledge. By contrast, in some passages in the Apology, eidenai is used more broadly. For example, when Socrates says ‘I know well (eu oida) that wherever I go, the young will listen to what I say’ (37d6–7), he presumably does not mean that he has sophia of that fact: he does not have a deep, synoptic, explanatory grasp of a domain. Rather, he has good grounds for saying what he does, about this one fact. When he tells the jury to know well (eu iste) that what he says is true (28a4–8; cf. 33b6–8, 30c6–8, 31d6–e1), he is not telling them to acquire specialized expertise of that fact. Rather, he wants them to grasp the reasons why what he says is true, where doing so does not give them sophia or epistêmê. When he tells the jury that they know (iste) Chaerephon (20e8, 21a3), he is not ascribing sophia or epistêmê to them. Rather, they know who he is just in the sense that they have met him, can generally identify him, are aware of some of his salient character traits, and so on. It would be reasonable to think that some of these passages use eidenai colloquially or loosely, rather than for genuine knowledge. At least, the question of who has or lacks knowledge or wisdom is not to the fore, as it is in our key passages. Nor would anything be lost if Socrates had said ‘what I say is true’ (omitting ‘know well that’), or if he had said ‘you’re aware of who Chaerephon is.’ However, it is also possible that eidenai is being used for genuine knowledge that, however, falls short of epistêmê. Whether or not it is so used in the passages just mentioned, I suggest in section 6 that is a plausible reading of its use in (T3); and I shall shortly suggest that it is also a plausible reading of its use in 29b (cf. 28b8–9, 37b).

38 However, at 23c7 Socrates speaks of people who think they know (eidenai) something, but know (eidenai) little or nothing; and in 23d8–e1 he speaks of people who claim to know (eidenai) something, but in fact know (eidenai) nothing. Yet, as we shall soon see, Socrates often takes various people to know (eidenai) something or other. There are various resolutions. The two most plausible seem to me to be that in 23c–e, he means either that the people at issue think they have high-level knowledge, are experts, when they are not, whereas the knowledge he ascribes to various people is lower level than that; or that ‘knowing nothing’ in 23 is elliptical for knowing nothing about the topics under discussion, which is compatible with their knowing something in other areas. Cf. Stokes, Plato: Apology, note on 23d7–e1.

39 Cf. 24a6–7, though schedon may weaken the seeming claim to knowledge.

40 Is it plausible to say that Socrates has low-level knowledge of e.g. Chaerephon or of some moral facts (for the latter claim, see 29b, which I discuss briefly below), but is only aware that he is not sophos.
Even if *eidenai* is sometimes used colloquially, in (T2) it seems to be used for genuine knowledge. If so, we need to know whether Socrates is saying he does not know anything *kalon kagathon* in even a low-level way, or whether he is saying he doesn’t know anything *kalon kagathon* in a high-level way. Though I think it is difficult to be sure about this, the second alternative seems better. For as we have seen, in 19e–20c Socrates was concerned with high-level knowledge, with whether anyone has a deep, synoptic, explanatory grasp about what’s *kalon kagathon*, especially in the moral sphere. The present discussion follows on from that one; it is therefore reasonable to assume that the same sort, or level, of knowledge is at issue in both.

A further reason for taking *eidenai* to be high-level knowledge in (T2) is that at 29b (cf. 28b8–9, 37b) Socrates claims to know (*eidenai*) a moral truth. This would seem to be inconsistent with (T2), if the latter disavows all moral knowledge (*eidenai*) of even a low-level sort. But the two passages are consistent if, in (T2), Socrates disclaims only high-level moral knowledge and if, in 29b (and in 29b8–9 and 37b8), he claims merely to have low-level moral knowledge.\(^{41}\)

\(^{41}\) For this suggestion, see, among others, Taylor, *Socrates*, 45. Why might Socrates think he has low-level knowledge of a moral truth, but lacks high-level moral knowledge? One reason might be that high-level knowledge is synoptic, and involves a grasp of basic moral principles and of answers to the relevant ‘What is F?’ questions. Perhaps, at least in the *Apology*, Socrates thinks one can know a few moral truths without answering a relevant ‘What is F?’ question. Perhaps he thinks repeated use of the elenchus can confer low-level knowledge in such a case. This is not to say that he thinks high-level moral knowledge is won through other means than the elenchus. It’s to say only that perhaps he thinks one can practice it enough to have low-level knowledge that falls short of high-level knowledge. Perhaps even further use of the elenchus would enable one to achieve high-level knowledge. Cf. *Meno* 85c9–d1.

There are many explanations of how to square (T2) with the occasional avowals of moral knowledge (which are always made with forms of *eidenai*), including the view that Socrates is inconsistent. I shall not explore this matter here, since it lies apart from my central concern, which is whether Socrates ever claims to know that he knows nothing.

Even if Socrates uses forms of *eidenai* for both high- and low-level knowledge, that is no help to those who want to argue that, though Socrates claims to know that he knows nothing, he doesn’t contradict himself. For he never claims to *eidenai* that he does not *eidenai* anything. More generally, he does not...
But even if, in (T2), Socrates denies having any knowledge at all, whether moral or nonmoral, and whether high- or low-level, he doesn’t say that he knows that he knows nothing. Rather, he says that when he does not know something (fine and good), neither does he think he does. I am inclined to think this supports my preferred interpretation of (T1), on which suneidenai indicates a sort of awareness that falls short of knowledge. For if Socrates took himself to know when he lacks knowledge, we might have expected him to say here that he knows that he does not know anything (fine and good). But he conspicuously does not say that.⁴²

One might argue that even if he does not say this explicitly, he implies it. Here it is worth mentioning the knowledge account of assertion, according to which knowledge is the norm governing assertion.⁴³ If one accepts this view, one would not assert that p unless one took oneself to know that p.⁴⁴ If Socrates accepts the knowledge account of assertion, then, were he to assert that he knows nothing, he would in effect be committed to the view that he knows that he knows nothing.

But Socrates does not accept the knowledge account of assertion. He often makes very strong claims, yet tells us up front that he lacks knowledge. Perhaps use forms of eidenai to describe the cognitive attitude he has to his cognitive condition. If he uses forms of eidenai in two ways, that might help us avoid contradiction between (T2) and the occasional avowals of moral knowledge; but that is a different possible contradiction from the one I am concerned with here. Interestingly, in the Charmides Socrates explores the notion of knowing (eidenai) what one does and doesn’t know (eidenai). But he does not say, in either the Charmides or Apology, that he or anyone else knows (eidenai) that they know (eidenai) nothing.

⁴² Thanks to Nick Sturgeon for suggesting the relevance of the knowledge account of assertion in this context. For a defense of the knowledge account of assertion, see T. Williamson, 'Knowing and Asserting,' Philosophical Review 105 (1996), 489–523. For a recent criticism of the knowledge account of assertion, see J. Lackey, 'Norms of Assertion,' Nous 41 (2007), 594–626. She defends the Reasonable to Believe Norm of Assertion, according to which '[o]ne should assert that p only if (i) it is reasonable for one to believe that p, and (ii) if one asserted that p, one would assert that p at least in part because it is reasonable for one to believe that p' (608). This is closer to the view I think Socrates assumes than is the knowledge account of assertion.

⁴³ At least, one would not do so ceteris paribus. But even on the knowledge account of assertion there are circumstances in which it would be appropriate to assert that p even if one does not take oneself to know that p. If, for example, one thinks a train is about to run someone over, though one might not claim to know this (if, say, one has very high standards for knowledge), one might shout ‘Move; otherwise the train will run you over.’ Though knowledge remains the norm for assertion, something might require one to violate the norm. See Williamson, ‘Knowing and Asserting,’ 508. So one might argue that Socrates accepts the knowledge account of assertion, but thinks he is required to violate the norm governing it, perhaps in an effort to get his interlocutors to focus on the more important things—the state of their souls—that they think they are all too inclined to ignore.

⁴⁴ In The Midwife of Platonism: Text and Subtext in Plato’s Theaetetus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 31ff., David Sedley argues that in the Theaetetus, Socrates does not make assertions when he takes himself to lack knowledge or wisdom; so Sedley in effect thinks Socrates accepts the knowledge account of assertion in the Theaetetus. Sedley is well aware that in the Theaetetus, Socrates makes many assertions; he argues that in these cases, Socrates takes himself to have knowledge. Sedley says, however, that he doubts that any single interpretation of Socrates’s disavowal of knowledge fits every dialogue (31); he doesn’t say how he interprets the Ap. on this point. For my own part, I doubt that Socrates ever accepts the knowledge account of assertion, though defending that view lies outside the scope of the present chapter. However, I go on to give reasons for supposing that he does not accept it in the Apology or Gorgias.
the most striking example of this is in the *Gorgias*, where he claims to have proven something with arguments of iron and adamant (508e–509a), yet proceeds to say that he lacks knowledge (509a4–6).\(^4^5\) There is also an example in the *Apology*. At 29a, he says that no one, himself included, knows (*eidenai*) whether death is good or bad (for the person who dies). Yet later he says there is strong evidence (*mega tekmêrion*, 40c2) that it is good, and that he has much hope (*pollê elpis*, 40c5) that it is. So he is willing to assert something quite strongly, while at the same time claiming not to know it. Hence, even if, in (T2), he asserts that he knows nothing, he is not committed to the view that he knows that he knows nothing. We cannot add the knowledge account of assertion to the disavowal of knowledge so as to get an implicit contradiction or paradox.\(^4^6\)

6. Socrates and the craftsmen: (T3)

Like the other passages we have explored so far, (T3a) does not involve an explicit contradiction either. For once again, different cognitive words are used: this time, forms of *suneidenai* and *epistasthai*. But, once again, one might argue that to *suneidenai* something is to know it; and one might think that, in that case, (T3a) involves an implicit contradiction, given that to *epistasthai* something is to know it. There is, however, a by-now familiar reply to this by-now familiar argument: to *suneidenai* something might fall short of knowing it; but even if to *suneidenai* something is to know it, it can be knowing it in a way that falls short of having *epistêmê*. Either way, (T3a) is not even implicitly contradictory.

Another way to avoid contradiction would be to say that ‘practically’ (*hôs epos eipein*) introduces a qualification. For if Socrates merely claims to be aware of knowing *practically* nothing, that falls short of claiming to know nothing; and so it falls short of claiming to know that he knows nothing. Perhaps one of the few things he knows is that he knows a few things.\(^4^7\) Indeed, one might think that inconsistency can be avoided *only* by pressing ‘practically’ into service. For in (T3b), Socrates says he knows (*eidenai*) that the craftsmen know (*epistasthai*) their crafts: in which case, he knows something.

\(^{4^5}\) Cf. 506a3–4: ‘I do not have knowledge (*eidenai*) any more than you have when I say what I say’ (Irwin trans., in his *Plato: Gorgias* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979)). In ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge’ (83; see his (T30)), Vlastos translates the passage as follows: ‘I do not assert what I assert as one who knows,’ which sounds like an explicit rejection of the knowledge account of assertion. The word Vlastos translates as ‘I assert’ is *legô*, which Irwin translates as ‘I say.’

\(^{4^6}\) One might argue that in *Gorg*. 509a and *Ap*. 40c, he is disavowing only high-level knowledge but implying that he has low-level knowledge. Even if this argument were correct (though I do not think it is), Socrates would not be either explicitly contradictory (since he does not explicitly claim knowledge in either passage) or implicitly contradictory (since he would be implying only that he has low-level knowledge that he lacks high-level knowledge).

\(^{4^7}\) For this suggestion, see Lesher, ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,’ 281; Stokes, *Plato: Apology*, 18.
However, in (T3a), Socrates claims not to *epistasthai* (practically) anything. In (T3b), by contrast, he claims to *eidenai* that the craftsmen know (*epistasthai*) their crafts. And, as we have seen, at least in the *Apology eidenai* has a broader scope than *epistasthai* does. Hence we need not take ‘practically’ to introduce a qualification. An alternative is that, in claiming to *eidenai* that the craftsmen know their crafts, he is not claiming to *epistasthai* that they do so; he knows that they do so only in a lower-level way.⁴⁸ This allows Socrates to say, in (T3a), that he does not *epistasthai* anything, without contradicting (T3b).

Let us assume that ‘practically’ does not introduce a qualification. We still need to know whether, in (T3a), Socrates claims merely to be aware (in a way that falls short of knowing) or to know that he does not *epistasthai* anything. As we have seen, *suneidenai* can be used both ways. If it is read the first way, Socrates does not claim to know that he does not *epistasthai* anything. But if it is read the second way, one might be tempted to say that he claims to know that he knows nothing. Once again, however, it would be misleading to describe his claim in that way, since doing so involves using just one cognitive term (‘know’) when the Greek has two (*suneidenai, epistasthai*). But if one nonetheless insists on ascribing that claim to him, one should at least add that there is no explicit contradiction, since the Greek uses different cognitive terms. Nor is there an implicit contradiction since, again, the knowledge he (on this reading) claims to have can easily be taken to fall short of the knowledge he disclaims: he might have low-level knowledge (*suneidenai*) that he does not *epistasthai* anything, where the latter involves having high-level knowledge.

Can we choose between these two readings? Here it is relevant to consider (T3b) more carefully. Socrates says he knows (*eidenai*) that the craftsmen know (*epistasthai*) their crafts. He then says (somewhat curiously, to my ear) that he was not mistaken in thinking this, and that the craftsmen know (*epistasthai*) things he does not know (*epistasthai*). One might think he takes himself to know (*eidenai*) not only that the craftsmen know (*epistasthai*) their crafts, but also that he himself does not. And if he claims to know (*eidenai*) that he does not *epistasthai* the crafts, one might think he likewise thinks he knows that he doesn’t *epistasthai* anything at all. It would then be reasonable to think that, in (T3a), *suneidenai* is used for (low-level) knowledge.

This line of argument can be resisted. First, even if Socrates claims to know that he does not *epistasthai* what the craftsmen do, it does not follow that he would

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⁴⁸ On this interpretation, *eidenai* is used more broadly in (T3b) than in (T2). This does not imply either that it is used in different senses or that the different ways it’s used are the ones Vlastos favors. Nor need we be disturbed by the double use of *eidenai*: so long as we pay proper attention to the context, we can see how the word is being used.

Another possibility is that *eidenai* is being used loosely or colloquially, not for genuine knowledge. Though I am sympathetic to the view that *eidenai* is sometimes used loosely or colloquially, in the present passage the context seems too theoretically laden for that to be a reasonable option here.
claim to know that he does not \textit{epistasthai} anything at all. Perhaps it is easier to know that one doesn’t \textit{epistasthai} a given craft than it is to know that one does not \textit{epistasthai} anything at all. Secondly, though Socrates explicitly claims to know (\textit{eidenai}) that the craftsmen know (\textit{epistasthai}) their crafts, he does not explicitly claim to know (\textit{eidenai}) that he lacks their knowledge. To be sure, he claims to lack it. But he does not say that he \textit{knows} (\textit{eidenai}) that he lacks it: \textit{eidenai} does not carry over to the \textit{alla}-clause. Perhaps he avoids saying that he knows (\textit{eidenai}) that he does not know (\textit{epistasthai}) what the craftsmen do, precisely because he \textit{does not} take this to be something he \textit{knows}. If that is right, then presumably \textit{suneidenai}, in (T3a), is awareness that falls short of knowledge.

7. Socrates and wisdom: (T4) and (T5)

(T1) expresses Socrates’s pre-oracle belief about his cognitive condition. (T2) and (T3) express his belief about his cognitive condition once he has heard the oracle, but is still trying to figure out what it means. (T4) and (T5) describe the belief he arrives at after deciding what the oracle meant. Let us now look at them.

In (T5), Socrates tells us he has human wisdom.\(^49\) In (T4), he says his human wisdom consists in his realization that in respect of wisdom, he is worthless.\(^50\)

One might think that these passages involve a contradiction. On the one hand, Socrates says that he has human wisdom, which might suggest that he takes himself to have some wisdom. On the other hand, he says that he is worthless in respect of wisdom, which might suggest that he takes himself to lack wisdom altogether.

\(^{49}\) He says that he probably (\textit{kinduneuô}) has human wisdom. Once again, one might argue that he is distancing himself from the claim; once again, I doubt that he is doing so. I think Socrates’s human wisdom consists \textit{only} in his realization that he lacks wisdom, which, in turn, is closely related to the claim that, when he doesn’t know something, neither does he think he does. Cf. T. Irwin, \textit{Plato’s Ethics} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), sect. 17; Benson, \textit{Socratic Wisdom}, 170. In \textit{Socrates in the Apology}, 34–6 and 53, Reeve argues that there must be more to human wisdom than this, since ‘[o]therwise it seems that anyone who recognized that he lacked such knowledge would possess human wisdom and be as wise as Socrates, even if his recognition was a result of general skepticism or below-normal intelligence’ (35). I agree that to have human wisdom, one must realize the extent of one’s lack of wisdom in an appropriately reflective way and for the right reasons (though, as I go on to say, this realization can, and in Socrates’s case may well, fall short of any sort of knowledge). Merely having the true belief that one lacks wisdom is not sufficient for having human wisdom, if the belief is based on e.g. general skepticism about the possibility of knowledge or just on general modesty. However, Reeve thinks Socrates’s human wisdom also includes low-level knowledge of various moral truths, whereas I do not think it includes this. Indeed, 29a–c seems carefully to distinguish his having an instance of human wisdom (viz.: given that he does not know whether death is the greatest of all blessings for a human being, he thinks he doesn’t know this) from his knowledge (\textit{eidenai}) that it’s bad and shameful to do wrong, to disobey one’s superior be he man or god: the \textit{de} at b6 is very telling on this point.

\(^{50}\) Strictly speaking, he says that the god says this; but he thinks that whatever the god says is true.
One way to resolve this seeming inconsistency is to say that Socrates does not mean that he has no wisdom at all. Rather, he means that the wisdom he has is worth a lot less than the god’s wisdom.⁵¹

One might object that if we say this, (T4) and (T5) would conflict with (T1). For as we have seen, in (T1) Socrates claims to lack wisdom altogether. However, it would be unfair to call this a contradiction. After all, (T1) is Socrates’s pre-oracle belief. (T4) and (T5) express his settled post-oracle belief. Perhaps, after hearing and coming to understand the oracle, he decided that he has some wisdom after all.⁵²

On an alternative I prefer, Socrates continues to believe that he lacks all wisdom. For he says in (T4b), not that he’s worth a lot less than the god in respect of wisdom, but that he’s worth nothing in respect of wisdom. A natural explanation of this claim is that he takes himself to have no wisdom at all.⁵³ This explanation receives support from the fact that in 38c, Socrates repeats that he

⁵¹ The view that Socrates disclaims only divine wisdom has a long and distinguished pedigree. See, for example, the Anonymous Commentator on the Theaetetus, who suggests, as one interpretation of Tht. 150c, that if “having no wisdom” is to be understood in an absolute sense, it will be that he [Socrates] is not wise in the wisdom which he attributes to god, or the one which other people attribute to the sophists’ (54.31–8). The translation is by D. Sedley, in his ‘Three Platonist Interpretations of the Theaetetus,’ in C. Gill and M. M. McCabe, ‘Three Platonist Interpretations.’ The translation is again due to Sedley, ‘Three Platonist Interpretations.’ The author of the Prolegomena does not say what passage(s) he has in mind.

⁵² So Kraut: ‘Socrates is significantly modifying . . . [(T1)]. His initial reaction to the oracle is that he has no reason whatsoever to be considered wise. But in [(T2, 4, and 5)] he conceives that he is wise after all—though in a small way’ (Socrates and the State, 271; cf. 272, n. 44). (Where I have inserted ‘(T2, 4, and 5),’ Kraut mentions just (T2), but the surrounding discussion suggests he thinks (T4 and 5) make the same point.)

⁵³ In (T4a) Socrates says that human wisdom is worth little or nothing; in (T4b) he says that he is worth nothing in respect of wisdom. There are two differences between (T4a) and (T4b). First, (T4b) omits ‘or (kai) little.’ However, (T4a) might mean that human wisdom is worth little, even (kai) nothing, taking kai epexegetically. (Contrast J. Riddell, The Apology of Plato (New York: Arno Press, 1973; reprinted from the 1877 ed.), who takes kai to be disjunctive.) So read, (T4a) does not mean to leave open the possibility that human wisdom is worth at least a little. Secondly, (T4a) says that human wisdom is worth little or (alt: even) nothing, whereas (T4b) says that Socrates is worth nothing in respect of wisdom. As I go on to say in the text, (T4b) leaves open the possibility that human wisdom is worth something, even a great deal; it is just that it is worthless as wisdom. (T4b) expresses what Socrates wants to say more clearly than (T4a) does.
is not wise. Rather than saying that he has a little wisdom, he reiterates his pre-oracle belief that he is not wise.\footnote{Contrast Stokes, Apology. At Ap. 29a4–5, Socrates again at least implies that he does not take himself to be wise, though one might take him to mean just that he does not take himself to be wise with respect to the matter at hand. In 23a (= T4a), he says that as a result of his investigations, many slanders about him arose—including the claim that he is wise. If he thinks it is slanderous to claim that he is wise, then he does not take himself to be wise. However, the rest of (T4a) might be taken to suggest that the claim is restricted to the areas where he disproved others’ claims to wisdom. (T4b–c), however, suggest a complete disavowal of wisdom.}

But how can that be? Doesn’t he say that he has human wisdom? Yes, but it is not genuine wisdom. He calls his human wisdom \textit{tis sophia}, a kind of wisdom. ‘\textit{tis F}’ can mean ‘a kind of F,’ that is, a species of F.\footnote{As it does in, e.g., \textit{Meno} 73e1, where Socrates distinguishes virtue as such from particular kinds of virtue; cf. 73e4–5.} But it can also mean ‘something like F, but not genuinely F.’\footnote{In the second case, \textit{tis} functions as an \textit{alienans} qualification. See Stokes, Plato: Apology, n. on 20d7, though I am not sure whether he in the end endorses this reading. On the one hand, he says that if human wisdom does not imply knowledge, that ‘would suit the second alternative [= \textit{alienans}] better.’ On the other hand, he also says that the \textit{Apology} contains ‘at least three different applications of the words “wise” and “wisdom”, \textit{sophos} and \textit{sophia}. In just one of them [= Socrates’s human wisdom] “wisdom” does not imply knowledge’ (19). He goes on to say that in ’23a–b there are three different “wisdoms”: god’s wisdom, ordinary human “wisdom,” and Socrates’s human wisdom, which does not imply knowledge. (On 124, n. on 23b5–6, Stokes speaks of uses of ‘wise,’ rather than of applications; he also here mentions senses of the term.) This might mean that, though Plato uses the word ‘wisdom’ here, he is not using it for a kind of wisdom. But it might instead mean that human wisdom is a kind of wisdom that does not imply knowledge. For possible \textit{alienans} uses of \textit{tis} in Plato, see Eud. 285b1; Phd. 69b7; Rep. 583b5. The first of these references is due to M. F. Burnyeat, ‘Enthymeme: Aristotle on the Rationality of Rhetoric,’ in A. Rorty (ed.), Essays on Aristotle’s Rhetoric (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 88–115, at n. 8. He also cites Ap. 20d7.} On this latter reading, \textit{tis} and so, presumably, ‘human’ have a canceling force: Socrates has something like wisdom; but he does not have the real thing. On this reading, he is not saying that he has genuine wisdom. On the contrary, he says that he has something like wisdom, but lacks the real thing. If this is what he means, he is not retracting his earlier claim that he entirely lacks wisdom. Nor is he distinguishing different senses of ‘wisdom’ or different kinds of wisdom. Rather, he distinguishes wisdom from something that is like wisdom, but is not wisdom at all.

One advantage of this reading is that it allows us to solve the following puzzle: Socrates plainly thinks he is better off than others are, precisely because he has, but they lack, human wisdom. How, then, can human wisdom be worthless? The answer is that it’s worthless as \textit{wisdom}: because it is not wisdom. It does not follow that it is worthless, or even that it is worth just a little.\footnote{It is true that he says his human wisdom makes him wiser than others in just a small way (21d6); so one might argue that human wisdom is worth just a little. But even if his human wisdom makes him only a little wiser than others, it might be worth a great deal: it might be worth a lot to come a little closer to genuine wisdom. Whether his human wisdom is worth a lot or just a little, the point is that it’s worth \textit{nothing}—as \textit{wisdom}. That allows it to be worth something (in either a large or a small way, as the case may be), as something other than wisdom that, however, brings him closer to wisdom.} It may be worth a lot—as something other than wisdom. Fake fur is worthless if what you want is genuine
fur. But a fake fur coat might still be quite expensive. And if one is opposed to killing animals to make fur coats, but likes the feel and warmth of fur, one would prefer a fake fur coat to the real thing.⁵⁸

One might think that if human wisdom is not genuine wisdom, the oracle turns out to be wrong. For doesn’t it say that Socrates is wise, where that means that he has genuine wisdom?

In fact the oracle does not clearly say that Socrates is wise.⁵⁹ Chaerephon went to the oracle and asked if anyone was wiser than Socrates; the oracle said that no one was (21a).⁶⁰ To say that no one is wiser than Socrates is not to say that he is wise. Just as one person can be richer or healthier than another without being rich or healthy, so one person can be wiser than another without being wise; one might just be closer to being wise than the other person is.

Nor does (T4) unambiguously represent the oracle as saying that Socrates is wise. Rather, the oracle is represented as saying that Socrates is wisest.⁶¹ To say that he is wisest need not imply that he is wise.⁶² Someone might be the healthiest

⁵⁸ This might make it sound as though, by analogy, one should in some cases prefer non-genuine wisdom to genuine wisdom. And there is a way in which Socrates thinks this, though there is also a way in which he does not do so. In his view, one should prefer genuine wisdom about moral virtue over mere human wisdom about it. On the other hand, he says he is better off with his ignorance than he would be with the wisdom the craftsmen have (22e1–5). For though they have genuine wisdom in their domains, they lack both genuine and human wisdom with respect to the most important things (ta megista, 22d7)—that is, with respect to moral virtue. So though the craftsmen have some genuine wisdom whereas Socrates has none, his human wisdom (which covers at least the moral sphere but may be more extensive), which isn’t genuine wisdom at all, gets him closer to genuine wisdom about the most important things, which is more important than having genuine wisdom about less important things. See further below.

⁵⁹ Contrast Lesher, ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,’ 283.

⁶⁰ Perhaps Chaerephon went to the oracle because he thought Socrates was wise; it doesn’t follow that the oracle agreed.

⁶¹ Actually, it is not clear that Socrates says in (T4) that the oracle said that Socrates is wisest. For he is paraphrasing the oracle: it’s as if it were saying that Socrates is wisest. However, in 21b6 he says the oracle claimed that he is wisest. This comes right after 21a6–7, in which Socrates says that the oracle said that no one was wiser than Socrates. One might wonder whether any difference is intended between the comparative and the superlative. Thanks to Brad Inwood for suggesting that there is no difference when, as here, the comparison is with all other members of a group: if one member of a group is wiser than all the others, that amounts to his being the wisest of them all. Even if Socrates should find someone who is at his cognitive level, they could be equal wisest: they would be the wisest of all; that is, they would be equally close to being wise. And (T4b) seems to leave open the possibility that others are at Socrates’s cognitive level: for the oracle says that anyone who, like Socrates, realizes he is worthless in respect of wisdom (in an appropriately reflective way: see n. 49), is wisest. See also Reeve, Socrates in the Apology, 22. Though he differs from me in thinking that being wiser and wisest imply being wise, we agree that Socrates does not intend any difference between being wiser and wisest, and that both claims leave open the possibility that others (who, however, are not discovered in the Apology) are at the same cognitive level as Socrates.

⁶² A scholium to Aristophanes’s Clouds 144 cites the oracle as saying: ‘Wise Sophocles, wiser Euripides, but Socrates is the wisest of men’ (sôphos Sophoklês, sophôteros d’Euripedês, andrôn de pantôn Sôkratês sophôtatos). (See Parke and Wormell, The Delphic Oracle, vol. 2, p. 170, no. 420.) On this wording (in contrast to Plato’s in the Ap.), the oracle implies that Socrates is wise. For it says he is wiser than others, who are themselves said to be wise. Parke and Wormell argue that for chronological reasons the scholium is unlikely to be accurate, since Euripides might not have written any plays at the time when Chaerephon questioned the oracle. They give more credence to Plato’s version than to others. The oracle is more often cited in a one-line, than in a two-line, version: andrôn hapantôn
or richest person around, without being healthy or rich; he might just be the closest to being healthy or rich. Similarly, someone might be the wisest person there is, without being wise; he might just come the closest to being wise. What Socrates learned from the oracle is not that he has some wisdom after all. Rather, he learned that he is closer to being wise than others are. He is closer to being wise than others are because, unlike them, he realizes that he lacks wisdom. This brings him closer to genuine wisdom for a reason already mentioned: it enables him to inquire in a more open-minded way; he is therefore in a better position to acquire moral knowledge, and so virtue, than others are in.⁶

We have now reached the following paradoxical conclusion: Socrates is closer to being wise than others are because, though he lacks all wisdom, he has human wisdom, which consists in his realizing that he lacks genuine wisdom. Yet he has said that the craftsmen have genuine wisdom in their domains. How can he be closer to being wise than others are, if he lacks all wisdom but the craftsmen have some wisdom? The answer, I think, is that the craftsmen he discusses are wise only in their respective domains: they are wise only qua craftsmen. What Socrates is interested in is being wise as such, or as a human being.⁶⁴ No one is wise in this way.⁶⁵ Though his human wisdom is not genuine wisdom, it gets him closer to being a wise person than the craftsmen’s wisdom does. This explains why he says at 22e that he is better off with his ignorance (amathia) than the craftsmen are with their wisdom. For the latter are not wise about the most important things (ta megista, 22d7). Nor is Socrates; but he is closer to being wise about them than the craftsmen are. This doesn’t mean that he uses ‘wise’ in different senses or ways. At most, he acknowledges that one can in principle be wise about different things (about crafts; about moral virtue); and that being wise about some things matters more than being wise about others does.

So far I have argued that Socrates continues to believe that he lacks all genuine wisdom: that is why he says he is worthless in respect of wisdom. But he credits himself with something else: human wisdom. Let us now look at it. It consists, we are told, in his realization that he lacks wisdom.

Sôkratês sophôtatos; see, e.g., DL 2.37. (In DL, there is no de, which suggests he isn’t omitting a first line. However, in the two-line version cited above, there is a de.) The one-line version does not imply that Socrates is wise.

⁶ Even if saying that someone is wisest generally has the conversational implicature that the person is wise, the phrase does not have to be so understood. Perhaps Socrates initially took the suggestion that he is wisest, or wiser than others, to imply that he is wise: hence his initial surprise. He then came to understand that the oracle meant instead just that he was closer to being wise than others are. Thanks to Lesley Brown for this suggestion.

⁶⁴ Cf. Rep. 428b1ff., where Socrates asks what sophia in the ideally just polis consists in: not, he says, in the epistêmê that carpenters or farmers have, but in a particular sort of epistêmê that only the guardians have. Similarly, a person is sophos (as a person, not as e.g. a carpenter), not in virtue of having any old epistêmê, but in virtue of having epistêmê of what is advantageous for each part of the soul and for the whole soul (442c5–8). Cf. Aristotle, EN 6.7.

⁶⁵ Which is not to say that it’s impossible to be wise as such or as a human being. Though no one, so far as Socrates knows or believes, is wise in this way, it doesn’t follow that no one can be.
What exactly is involved in realizing that he lacks wisdom? One might argue that to realize something is to know it.66 And, I have argued, to be worthless in respect of wisdom is to lack all wisdom, which, in turn, implies lacking at least a sort of knowledge. One might then conclude that Socrates’s human wisdom consists in his knowing that he knows nothing.67

As against this, we should first note that even if there is a way in which we can represent Socrates as saying that he knows that he knows nothing, it is again misleading to do so. For, again, the English has just one word—‘know’—where the Greek has two, this time forms of *gignôskein* and *sophia*. Hence, at the very least, the passage is not explicitly self-contradictory.

Nor do we need to take it to be implicitly contradictory. To be sure, Plato often uses *gignôskein* (*gnôsis*) for knowledge.68 But even if he so uses it here, it need not imply wisdom: it can be knowledge of a lower-level sort. Since we can easily understand *gignôskein* in this way, and since doing so avoids contradiction, it would be reasonable to do so—if we take *gignôskein* to indicate knowledge here.

But it is not clear that *gignôskein* is being used for knowledge here. Plato sometimes uses *gignôskein* and its cognates for a cognitive condition that is weaker than knowledge.69 If *gignôskein* is so used in (T4), then, in saying that he *eignôken* that he lacks *sophia*, Socrates does not mean that he *knows* that he knows nothing. He means that he *realizes*—where that falls short of knowing—that he lacks wisdom.

If we say this, it is then tempting to say that *suneidenai* is likewise used for less than knowledge in (T1) and (T3): there too, Socrates is *aware* that he is not *sophos* and doesn’t *epistasthai* anything; but he does not claim to *know* this fact. Similarly, we saw that in (T2) he says just that when he does not know something, neither does he *think* he knows it. Socrates reiterates the same claim throughout: he’s aware or realizes that he lacks wisdom, that is, a high-level knowledge most people lack (whereas others do not realize that they lack it). He need not be taken to say

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66 So Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato’s Socrates*, 33 n. 11. Vlastos, ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,’ 91, thinks Socrates has elenctic knowledge that he lacks certain knowledge. Cf. Kraut, *Socrates and the State*, 267–8, 271–3, though 271 also says that Socrates ‘now thinks he has a certain form of wisdom’ (emphasis added).

67 Stokes, *Plato: Apology*, 19, considers something like this line of argument; like me, he rejects it.

68 See, for example, the end of Rep. 5. I discuss this passage in ‘Knowledge and Belief in Republic V’ and in ‘Knowledge and Belief in Republic V–VII,’ both reprinted in my *Plato on Knowledge and Forms: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 66–84 and 85–116, respectively.

69 So also Stokes, *Plato: Apology*, 19. For example, in *Apology* 25d9 and 33d3, *gignôskein* need not mean anything more than ‘realize’ or ‘recognize.’ Similarly, in the *Meno* the slave is said to recognize (gignôskei) what a square is like (82b9). I do not think Plato is attributing knowledge to him; rather, the slave has just a true belief about what a square is like. For he doesn’t satisfy Plato’s conditions for having knowledge: the slave’s true belief isn’t tied down by an *aitias logismos*. Cf. *Republic* 375e3 (*gnôrimon*) and 376a6 (*gnôrimon*), where dogs are said to be gentle to, and welcome, those they ‘know.’ Presumably dogs lack knowledge in the sense at issue here; the point is just that they recognize certain people. On Plato’s use of *gnôrizein* and the cognate noun, see Lyons, *Structural Semantics*, 202; cf. 177 (d).
that he knows, even in a low-level way, that he lacks wisdom or a high-level kind of knowledge.

Just as there are two readings of (T1) and (T3a), so there are two readings of the last part of (T4): either Socrates knows, in a low-level way, that he lacks wisdom; or else he realizes, in a way that falls short of knowing, that he lacks wisdom. Either way, (T4) is not explicitly or implicitly self-contradictory any more than are the other passages we have explored. It is true that, on one reading, there is a sense in which Socrates can be taken to imply that he knows that he knows nothing: he knows (εγνώκεν), in a low-level way, that he lacks high-level knowledge (σοφία). As before, though, it would be misleading to say that he uses ‘know’ in two different ways or senses. Rather, he uses two different words—this time, forms of γιγνώσκειν and σοφία—for two different cognitive conditions. Once again, then, though a case can be made for taking Socrates to say that he knows that he knows nothing, doing so involves a controversial interpretation of his cognitive vocabulary. It is also misleading, given that Socrates uses different cognitive terms, where the English uses just one.

8. Conclusion

I began by noting that some people take Socrates to say that he knows that he knows nothing, whereas others deny that he says this. I have argued that there is something to be said on both sides. A case can be made for saying that there is a sense in which he claims to know that he knows nothing. For if suneidenai and gignōskein are used here for knowledge, then he claims to know that he lacks sophia and epistêmê. Epistêmê is often translated as ‘knowledge’; however it is translated, it is a kind of knowledge, as knowledge is conceived of here. And, though sophia is generally translated as ‘wisdom,’ if someone is sophos, he has epistêmê, and so a kind of knowledge. And, as I have said, I see no decisive way of ruling out the view that suneidenai and gignōskein indicate knowledge here.

But even if they do, it is misleading to represent Socrates as saying that he knows that he knows nothing. For putting his point this way makes it sound as though he uses just one word, and we then have to figure out whether it is used in the same way or sense, or in different ways or senses. However, in the relevant passages, Socrates uses different cognitive words for different cognitive conditions. The English introduces an air of paradox that is not present in the

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70 Contrast Vlastos, ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,’ 91.
71 I suggested above that Socrates uses eidenai in more than one way in the Apology. But I am not convinced that, in the Apology, any of the other key cognitive terms we have considered are used in more than one way. Even if eidenai is used in more than one way, that does not help with our main concern: see the last paragraph of n. 41.
72 Like the use of forms of scire: see n. 1.
Greek. If *suneidenai* and *gignôskein* indicate knowledge, we should take Socrates to say, not that he knows that he knows nothing, but that he knows, in a low-level way, that he lacks wisdom (*sophia*), that is, a high-level kind of knowledge (*epistêmê*). This no longer sounds so paradoxical.\(^{73}\)

But it is not clear that *suneidenai* and *gignôskein* indicate knowledge here; they might be used instead for a sort of awareness or realization that falls short of knowledge. On this reading, which I prefer, Socrates says, not that he knows that he knows nothing, but that he’s aware, or realizes, that he lacks genuine wisdom.

Whichever of the two interpretations we favor, it takes considerable work to explain Socrates’s cognitive stance. Among other things, we need to read the text in a holistic way, paying careful attention to his use of cognitive terms and to his general epistemological commitments. And insofar as there is dispute about the meanings of the relevant words, and about Socrates’s implicit epistemological commitments, any attempt to explain his position is bound to be somewhat insecure.\(^{74}\)

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\(^{73}\) But one can raise serious questions here; and I take it that one point of the *Charmides* is to raise such questions. For example, one might ask whether one can really have low-level knowledge that one lacks high-level knowledge. Above, I sketched a way one might argue that one can. But accepting this argument requires accepting controversial epistemological views.

\(^{74}\) Thanks to Lesley Brown, Terry Irwin, and audiences at Marquette University, Oxford University, and St. Andrews University for helpful discussion; and to Christopher Taylor, Brad Inwood, Alex Long, Gary Matthews, and Hayden Pelliccia for helpful written comments.
3

Knowledge and True Belief in the *Meno*

1.

In *Meno* 97aff., Plato, for the first time, explains how, in his view, knowledge differs from true belief;¹ he also notes some similarities between them. This is often thought to be the first passage in Western philosophy to say that knowledge is true belief plus something. Some commentators think it is also the first passage to say that knowledge is justiﬁed true belief: that is, that justiﬁcation is what must be added to true belief so as to yield knowledge.² However, both the view that the *Meno* says that knowledge is justiﬁed true belief, and the view that the view that it says that knowledge is true belief plus something, have been challenged.³ Those who challenge these views disagree among themselves about what alternative view of knowledge the *Meno* articulates. Indeed, as we shall see, there is also dispute about whether it even discusses knowledge.

Despite the importance of the passage, there has been surprisingly little detailed, systematic discussion of it; and, as the foregoing makes clear, such discussion as there has been has not issued in consensus. Since the passage is

¹ The (probably earlier) *Gorgias* explicitly distinguishes knowledge (both epistêmê and eidenai are used) from belief *(pistis)*, but not from true belief; see 454c7–e9. Cf. Ch. 168a. *Meno* 85b–d (which I discuss below) makes it clear that he thinks knowledge differs from true belief. But it’s not until 97aff. that he says how they differ. Plato speaks interchangeably of true *(alêthês)* doxa and of correct *(orthê)* doxa; contrast, for example, 97b1 with 97b9. I use ‘belief’ to translate ‘doxa’; others sometimes use ‘opinion’ or ‘judgment.’ 96e–100c uses various forms of gignôskein, epistasthai, eidenai, phronein, noein, and sophia. So far as I can see, he uses them all interchangeably here (though he does not always do so elsewhere). I render them all by ‘know.’


brief and terse, this is not surprising; and perhaps what Plato says is too indeterminate to sustain any particular interpretation. But before we conclude this, we should look at the passage carefully, both on its own and as part of the broader context in which it occurs, to see what if any light we can shed on it.

2.

Before saying what knowledge and true belief are and how they differ, Plato mentions a point of similarity between them:

If someone knew (eidôs) the way (hodos) to Larissa, or anywhere else you like, and went there and guided others, wouldn’t he lead them well and correctly?—Certainly.
What if someone had a correct belief as to which was the way, but had not gone there and did not know (epistamenos) it—wouldn’t he also lead correctly?—Certainly.
As long as he has the correct belief about that of which the other has knowledge (epistêmên), he will be no worse a guide than the one who has knowledge (phronountos) of this, for he thinks truly, though he doesn’t know (phronôn).—In no way worse.
So true belief is in no way a worse guide to correct action than knowledge (phronéseôs). That’s what we omitted in our inquiry about what virtue is, when we said that only knowledge (phronèsis) can lead to correct action. For true belief can do so as well.—So it seems.
So correct belief is no less useful than knowledge (epistêmês)?
To that extent, Socrates. But the one with knowledge (epistêmên) will always succeed, whereas the one with correct belief will sometimes succeed, but at other times he won’t.
What do you mean? Won’t someone with correct belief always succeed, as long as his belief is correct?
That appears to be so of necessity. (97a9–d11)

Plato contrasts two people, one of whom knows the way (hodos)⁴ to Larissa, and the other of whom has a mere true belief about it. He says they will be equally good

⁴ Plato often speaks of a hodos to knowledge. See, for example, Rep. 435b, 504a, 506c (which may refer back to the Meno), 533b; cf. Tht. 208a9 (diekhodon), 208c6, Phil. 15b5. In some of these passages, the word conveys the notion of doing something systematically, in the right order. It is connected to methodos, a word that apparently occurs first in Plato (Phaedo 79e3, 97b6), and that he often uses, sv methodos in L. Brandwood, A Word Index to Plato (Leeds: Maney, 1976). See e.g. Rep. 596a5–7 (‘our customary method’); 533c7 (‘the dialectical method’). Cf. G. Vlastos, ‘The Socratic Elenchus,’ Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy 1 (1983), 27–58, at 27–8. Meno 84a3–4 has hou estin êdê badizôn hode tou anaminnêskethai, which I take to mean that the slave is engaged in recollection, but hasn’t yet
guides about how to get to Larissa. More generally, knowledge and true belief are equally good guides in action. Several features of the passage call for comment.

First, Plato plainly allows both knowledge and belief about at least some of the same things: one may know, or have a mere true belief about, the way to Larissa. (Similarly, at 85b–d the slave has a true belief about how to find a square which is double the area of a given square; and he can acquire knowledge of this if he is questioned further.) Now, the *Meno* is usually classified as a transitional dialogue: transitional between the early dialogues, on the one hand, and the middle dialogues, on the other hand.⁵ It is often thought that in the middle dialogues Plato holds the Two Worlds Theory. There are different versions of this general sort of theory. But on one version often ascribed to Plato, it says that one cannot both know and have beliefs about any of the same things: the objects of knowledge and belief, and the propositions that are the contents of knowledge and belief, are disjoint. In particular, the only things one can know are forms, and the only things one can have beliefs about are sensibles; there are no beliefs about forms, and there is no knowledge of sensibles.⁶ According to this version of the Two Worlds Theory, knowledge, so far from implying belief, excludes it.⁷ Since the *Meno* allows knowledge and belief about at least some of the same things, it is incompatible with this version of the Two Worlds Theory. Indeed, if Plato is speaking literally in saying that only the traveler can know the way to Larissa (rather than providing an analogy to illustrate the, or a, difference between knowledge and mere true belief), he explicitly countenances knowledge of sensible particulars.⁸

Secondly, why does Plato say that only the traveler can know the way to Larissa? One familiar answer is that he thinks that to know anything whatever, one must be acquainted with it.⁹ If Plato is merely offering an analogy, we certainly need not have completed the process, since he hasn’t yet acquired knowledge. Contrast Nehamas, ‘Meno’s Paradox,’ 17.


⁷ Hence Plato is often mentioned as an example, not just of someone who thinks that knowledge is true belief plus something, but also as an example of someone who thinks that knowledge excludes belief. Those who do the first typically focus on the *Meno* and *Theaetetus*; those who do the second typically focus on the *Republic* and *Timaeus*.

⁸ For the view that this is a mere analogy, see, for example, Nehamas, ‘Meno’s Paradox,’ 21; cf. N. P. White, *Plato on Knowledge and Reality* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 54 n. 5. Cf. 71b4–8, which mentions knowing who Meno is. Even if these are mere analogies, it does not follow that Plato precludes knowledge of sensibles. But if they are just analogies, one would have to rely on other passages in order to decide whether Plato allows knowledge of sensibles.

accept this familiar answer. The point of the analogy might just be that knowledge requires some sort of first-hand understanding, which cannot be acquired simply by relying on someone’s say so.¹⁰ But even if Plato literally believes that one must in some sense be acquainted with the way to Larissa to know it,¹¹ it does not follow that he takes all knowledge to require, let alone consist in, acquaintance. Rather, as Burnyeat puts it, Plato’s point is that:¹²

for any case of knowledge there is some privileged route by which alone it is to be acquired, not that there is some one privileged route by which all knowledge whatsoever is to be acquired. I suggest that the characteristic Platonic thought is that to know a mathematical proposition, say, one must have good mathematical grounds for it, to know a proposition stating a perceivable fact (if, or alternatively, in the sense in which Plato will allow that knowledge of such a thing is possible) one must have good perceptual grounds for it, and so on: each type of proposition can only be known on the basis of reasons appropriate to its subject matter.

Meno and middle dialogues, thinks knowledge consists in or requires some sort of acquaintance is widely held. However, it’s not clear that everyone who holds this view understands acquaintance in exactly the same way; and the differences may matter. See White, Plato on Knowledge and Reality, 58 n. 29. For criticism of the view that Plato takes knowledge to consist in or require acquaintance, see J. C. B. Gosling, Plato (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), ch. 8; and M. F. Burnyeat, ‘Wittgenstein and Augustine De Magistro,’ Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 61 (1987), 1–24, esp. 19–21. I touch on this issue briefly in ‘Inquiry in the Meno,’ in R. Kraut (ed.), Cambridge Companion to Plato (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 200–26; see also ‘Knowledge and Belief in Republic V–VII’ and ‘Knowledge and Logos in the Theaetetus,’ Philosophical Review 88 (1979), 366–97. These articles are reprinted, with minor modifications, in Fine, Plato on Knowledge and Forms.

¹⁰ See White, Plato on Knowledge and Reality, 37; Burnyeat, ‘Socrates and the Jury’; Nehamas, ‘Meno’s Paradox,’ 21; D. Scott, Recollection and Experience (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 46. Barnes, in his reply to Burnyeat’s ‘Socrates and the Jury,’ 193–206, challenges the version of this view that Burnyeat proposes in ‘Socrates and the Jury’; in response, Burnyeat provides a more nuanced account in ‘Wittgenstein and Augustine De Magistro.’ A full discussion of this issue would take us too far afield here.

¹¹ Presumably (if he is speaking literally) he thinks that is necessary but not sufficient for knowing the way. If one makes the journey without noticing any distinctive features along the way, one lacks knowledge. It may have seemed more plausible in Plato’s day than it does nowadays to say that one cannot know the way to Larissa without making the journey: for there were no detailed road maps, let alone computer images. On the difficulty of getting to Larissa, see Canto-Sperber, Platon: Ménon, Annexe II. (However, I doubt whether Plato has that point in mind, since he says ‘If someone knew the way to Larissa, or anywhere else you like . . .’) Cf. Theaetetus 201a–c, where Plato says that only an eyewitness to a crime can know who committed it; the members of a jury can at best have true belief. But contrast Gorg. 454a–455a.

¹² Barnes, ‘Socrates and the Jury,’ 183. Actually, I disagree with the first sentence of the quotation. First, I doubt that Plato thinks that, for each item of knowledge, there is just a single route to knowledge of it (though he no doubt believes both that only some routes lead to the appropriate destination, and that some of these routes are better than others). In the Phaedo, for example, having failed to find the sort of teleological accounts he wants, he turns to a deuterous plous: a second way of arriving at the same destination. (So I understand 99c9–d1, though its interpretation is controversial.) Secondly, the first sentence (but not the rest of the passage) suggests that all knowledge is acquired. Yet Plato seems to me to leave open the possibility that at least discernate souls have their knowledge from the outset as it were: they didn’t acquire it, or follow a particular route to it, but were all along at the appropriate destination. See, for example, 86a6–10, though the interpretation of this passage is controversial. Cf. Barnes, ‘Socrates and the Jury, Part II,’ 193–206, at 195–6.
These reasons are of different kinds; and not all of them involve acquaintance.

Thirdly, why does Socrates reject Meno’s suggestion that ‘the one with knowledge will always succeed, whereas the one with true opinion will sometimes succeed, but at other times he won’t’? Armstrong thinks Socrates is wrongly rejecting a version of reliabilism, according to which ‘[k]nowledge is empirically reliable belief.’¹³ Reliabilism about knowledge is a species of externalism. That is, it takes knowledge to depend on factors that are, or may be, external to the knower’s awareness: factors she is not, or may not be, aware of. In Armstrong’s version, for example, I know that p just in case there is a law-like connection between my true belief that p and the state of affairs that makes p true—whether or not I am aware that this law-like connection obtains.¹⁴ Externalism contrasts with internalism, according to one version of which knowledge requires justification, where justification must be something internal to the knower, in the sense that it must consist in reasons or arguments she can herself give or articulate; such reasons are internal to the knower, in the sense that they are available to her.¹⁵

Reliabilism is a controversial view; hence it is not clear that Socrates would be wrong to reject it. (The same is true, of course, of internalism.) Be that as it may, I do not think that Meno is proposing, or that Socrates is rejecting, reliabilism here. Rather, Socrates seems to take Meno to be saying that there are possible worlds in which someone has the true belief that p but nonetheless goes wrong, precisely because, and insofar as, she has that true belief. If that is what Meno means, he is not defending reliabilism, and we should be sympathetic to Socrates’s rejection of Meno’s suggestion. Rather than rejecting reliabilism, Socrates is simply making the reasonable point that someone who, on a given occasion, is guided by a true belief will succeed just as well, on that occasion, as she would have done had she been guided, on that occasion, by knowledge instead. Acting at t₁ on the true belief that p will steer me just as correctly at t₁ as acting on the knowledge that p would do on that occasion. To say only so much is neither to endorse nor to reject reliabilism.

Fourthly, in the passage quoted above Plato seems to move from the claim that ‘true belief is in no way a worse guide to correct action than knowledge,’ to the claim that ‘correct belief is no less useful than knowledge.’ This inference should be challenged. For even if the two are equally useful so far as action on a given occasion is concerned, true belief might be less useful or valuable than knowledge in some other way. Indeed, later we shall see Plato making this point himself. So in saying that ‘correct belief is no less useful than knowledge,’ he presumably means

¹³ Armstrong, Belief, Truth and Knowledge, p. 159. One can be a reliabilist about knowledge, justification, and mental content; and there are different versions of all these sorts of reliabilism. Here I restrict myself to Armstrong’s version of reliabilism about knowledge.
¹⁴ Armstrong, Belief, Truth and Knowledge, 166.
¹⁵ For an internalist account of justification, see C. Ginet, Knowledge, Perception, and Memory (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1975).
only that it is no less useful than knowledge in the sort of case just described, not that it is less useful tout court.

3.

Meno next asks why, if true belief is no less useful than knowledge (that is, no less useful in action on a given occasion), the latter is more valuable. Socrates replies as follows:

Acquiring an untied work of his [i.e. of Daedalus’], like acquiring a runaway slave, is not worth much (axion), for it does not remain (paramenei).¹ But if it is tied down (dedemenon), it is worth very much; for his works are very fine (kala). What am I thinking of when I say this? True beliefs. For as long as true beliefs remain, they are a fine thing and all they do is good. But they are not willing to remain long, and they escape from one’s mind, so that they are not worth much until one ties them down (dêsê) with an aitias logismos. And this (tuito), Meno my friend, is recollection, as we previously agreed. When (epeidan) they are tied down, first, they become (gignontai) knowledge (epistêmai, lit. knowledges, i.e. pieces of knowledge), and then (epeita) they remain in place. That is why knowledge is more valuable (timiôtera) than correct belief, and knowledge (epistêmê) differs from correct belief in being tied down (desmô(i)). (97e2–98a8)

This is the passage that has led some commentators to think that Plato takes knowledge to be true belief plus something; it is also the passage that has led some commentators to think that he takes it to be justified true belief in particular.¹⁷ According to both views, Plato takes knowledge and true belief to have two points in common: both are truth entailing, and both are species of belief. Both views also agree that knowledge is true belief plus something. But the first view takes no stand on what the additional something is, whereas the second view says that it is justification. As I noted at the outset, however, both the view that Plato takes knowledge to be justified true belief, and the view that he takes it to be true belief plus something (which need not be justification in particular) have been challenged. I shall next consider, and attempt to defuse, various challenges to the view that he takes knowledge to be true belief plus something. I shall then ask whether he takes knowledge to be justified true belief. Along the way, we shall also have occasion to touch on some other related issues.

¹⁶ In view of the importance Plato attaches to the stability of knowledge, i.e. to the fact that it remains (paramenein), it is presumably no accident that the leading interlocutor is Meno (Menôn), whose beliefs, however, do not remain. E. S. Thompson, The Meno of Plato (London: Macmillan, 1901), notes that ‘Parmeno’ (‘Trusty’) was a common name for a slave.

¹⁷ See n. 2.
It is generally agreed that in 98a Plato says that knowledge (epistêmê) implies truth. Since I too think he says this, I shall take this point for granted. Certainly it is a claim about knowledge that he makes elsewhere.¹ It is also a claim about knowledge—or, at least, about propositional knowledge—that is generally accepted.¹

Although this point is generally accepted, it has an implication that has not always been noted: namely, that Plato is concerned with propositional knowledge. Yet it has been argued that the Meno is interested, not in propositional knowledge, but only in knowledge of things.² And that, in turn, has been mentioned as a reason for thinking that he does not take knowledge to be either justified true belief, or even true belief plus something, on the ground that these are accounts of propositional knowledge, not knowledge of things.²¹

I agree that Plato is interested in knowledge of things; for example, we have seen that he mentions knowing the way to Larissa. But we need not choose between saying that he is interested either in propositional knowledge or in knowledge of things, as though one cannot be interested in both. Nor need we say (as is sometimes done) that he confuses the two notions.²² Rather, in his view, knowing things requires knowing propositions that are true of them. Knowing the way to Larissa, for example, requires knowing that this, not that, is the way. So far from confusing propositional knowledge with knowledge of things, or being interested only in the latter to the exclusion of the former, Plato has the deep insight that one

¹ Gorgias 454d6–7; Tht. 186c9–10. Cf. Republic V, 477e10ff. and Tht. 152c5–6, though these latter two passages use esti and its cognates rather than alêthes. I discuss the Republic V argument in ‘Knowledge and Belief in Republic V’ and in ‘Knowledge and Belief in Republic V–VII.’

¹² Generally, but not always. Some challenges to the truth condition are discussed and rebutted by Shope, in The Analysis of Knowing, 197–201. Although it is generally agreed that propositional knowledge implies truth, there is considerable controversy both about what truth is and about what propositions are. For my purposes here, I needn’t assume any particular view of them.

²² In Plato: Theaetetus (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), J. McDowell says that Plato speaks interchangeably of knowing x, and of knowing what x is. He views this as ‘dangerous’ (115), since he thinks it inclines Plato to treat all knowledge ‘as a matter of acquaintance with an object . . . More generally, Plato’s idiom would be an obstacle in the way of his achieving clarity about the distinction between knowing objects and knowing that something is the case’ (115–16). Cf. White, Plato on Knowledge and Reality, 37 and n. 8. I discuss McDowell briefly in ‘Knowledge and Logos in the Theaetetus.’
can know a thing only if one knows that it is something or other. In his view, there is no pure *de re* knowledge.\(^{23}\)

4.

Although it is generally agreed that Plato says that knowledge implies truth, there is disagreement about whether he says that it is a species of, or even implies, belief.\(^{24}\) The view that he does so has been challenged in two ways. First, in *The Analysis of Knowing* Shope argues that:\(^{25}\)

the passage only indicates a sufficient condition for knowledge, namely, beginning with true opinion, and then going through a certain process…. [W]hen Plato has Socrates say…that true opinion ‘becomes’ knowledge, he may be inviting readers to think of knowledge as something other than true opinion and to think of having true opinion as one manifestation of knowledge…[Plato] leaves room for the possibility that at least on some occasions knowing might occur without prompting from various true opinions.

On this interpretation, knowledge is not a species of, and does not imply, belief; but neither does knowledge exclude belief. For Plato allows that having a certain sort of true belief is sufficient (but not necessary) for knowledge.

Secondly, Sedley suggests, more strongly, that Plato may mean to say that knowledge excludes belief.\(^{26}\) For Plato says that when true beliefs are tied down,

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\(^{23}\) This counts against some, but not all, versions of the view that Plato takes knowledge to consist in acquaintance. For a defense of the view that there is in fact no pure *de re* knowledge, see M. Dummett, ‘Frege’s Distinction between Sense and Reference,’ in his *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 116–44, at 124ff. To say that one can know a thing only if one knows a proposition to be true of it is weaker than saying that all knowledge is wholly propositional. It is also compatible with saying that propositional knowledge about a thing counts as knowing the thing only if it is acquired in a certain way, e.g. by acquaintance or interaction with the thing. For example, no matter how much I know about Plato, I don’t, alas, know him. But if there is no pure *de re* knowledge, one could not genuinely *know* him without having some propositional knowledge about him. Thanks to Carl Ginet here.

\(^{24}\) If Plato thinks that knowledge is justified true belief, or true belief plus something, he takes knowledge to be a species of belief. Knowledge could, however, imply belief without being a species of it. One reason that has been given for thinking that even if knowledge implies belief, it is not a species of it, is that they have different objects: facts and propositions, respectively. For this view, see Vendler, *Res cogitans*, ch. 5. However, this view is, to say the least, controversial. Notice, though, that it offers the materials for ascribing a new version of the Two Worlds Theory to Plato! For discussion of whether knowledge implies belief, see Armstrong, *Belief, Truth and Knowledge*, ch. 10; Shope, *The Analysis of Knowing*, 171–92.


\(^{26}\) Sedley, ‘Three Platonist Interpretations of the *Theaetetus*,’ 93. Sedley suggests this view, not in his own right, but as one that might appeal to a unitarian who thinks that in the middle dialogues Plato accepts the Two Worlds Theory. His own view seems to be that Plato defines knowledge as a type of true belief: see p. 93. For convenience, I shall nonetheless speak of ‘Sedley’s interpretation (or view),’ meaning thereby the interpretation he considers.
they become (gignontai) knowledge. When a child becomes an adult, she ceases to be a child; when an acorn becomes an oak tree, it ceases to be an acorn. Perhaps similarly, then, when a true belief becomes knowledge, it ceases to be a belief. On this view, knowledge excludes belief in the sense that A, at t1, cannot both know that p and have the mere true belief that p.

Both interpretations might appeal to those who want to provide a unitarian account of Plato’s epistemology, and who also think that in the middle dialogues he favors the Two Worlds Theory.²⁷ I argue elsewhere, however, that Plato is not committed to the Two Worlds Theory in the middle dialogues. On the contrary, even in the middle dialogues he thinks one can simultaneously know, and have beliefs about, the same things, including sensibles; he also allows that at least some of the same propositions can simultaneously be the contents of both knowledge and belief.²⁸ So if one were motivated by the desire to impose a unitarian epistemology on Plato, one should not import the Two Worlds Theory into the Meno.

Nor does either Shope’s or Sedley’s interpretation even give much comfort to friends of the Two Worlds Theory. According to the Two Worlds Theory, there are no objects that one can both know and have beliefs about, and no propositions that can be the contents of both knowledge and belief, whether at the same time or at different times. Yet Shope’s interpretation allows one simultaneously to know and have beliefs about at least some of the same things.²⁹ And all Sedley’s suggestion requires us to do is to change ‘If A knows that p, A believes that p’ to ‘If A knows that p, A believed that p’: that is, if A knows that p, A believed that p at some earlier point. If Plato accepts that conditional, he thinks that every proposition one knows, one once believed. This is not in the spirit of the Two Worlds Theory.³⁰

Nor am I persuaded by either Shope’s or Sedley’s reasons for thinking that, in the Meno, Plato takes knowledge either to exclude belief or to fail to be a species of or to imply it. First, it is worth pointing out that gignomai can be used nontemporally.³¹ If it is used nontemporally here, Plato is saying that it turns out that

²⁷ This motivates Shope’s interpretation; on Sedley, see preceding note.
²⁸ See Fine, ‘Knowledge and Belief in Republic V’ and ‘Knowledge and Belief in Republic V–VII.’
²⁹ However, on p. 13 he suggests that Plato may restrict knowledge to reasons derived from recollection which, Shope thinks, would preclude knowledge of sensibles.
³⁰ Sedley suggested to me that a defender of the view he considers might say that the true belief that p is replaced by knowledge that q. For example, a belief ranging over individual men one has encountered might be replaced with knowledge about the corresponding form or universal, man. However, autas in 98a3 are clearly true beliefs. Hence it is true beliefs that are tied down. This seems to imply that it is some single propositional content that is first a mere true belief and then knowledge; different propositions are not at issue.
³¹ See, for example, Meno 82d2. Whatever is true of gignontai in 98a6, prōton and epeita in 98a5–6 do not seem to me to be temporal. (Cf. Meno 95a4 and Phaedo 63b6 for further nontemporal uses of prōton and epeita. Thanks to Charles Brittain for the latter reference.) Interestingly, neither Shope nor Sedley seems to put any weight on epeidan (98a5), which (like the English ‘when’) can be temporal or nontemporal, and which can but need not indicate a mere sufficient condition.
knowledge is true belief that is appropriately bound: that is the conclusion of their reasoning. If this is what he means, he is saying that knowledge is a species of belief.

Secondly, even if—as seems likely—gignomai is used temporally here, it does not follow that when true beliefs become knowledge they cease to be beliefs. When I become tall, I do not thereby cease to be female. As Aristotle says in Physics I 7, x comes to be F from having been not-F or something in between. True beliefs come to be knowledge from not having been knowledge. They thereby lose the property of not being knowledge. But they do not thereby lose the property of being beliefs. Nor does the analogy with Daedalus’ statues suggest that true beliefs cease to be beliefs when they are tied down: quite the contrary. For when statues are tied down, they are still statues. Similarly, when runaway slaves are tied down, they are still slaves; they just cease to be runaways. In just the same way, when true beliefs are tied down, they acquire the properties of being knowledge and of being stable; and they lose the properties of not being knowledge and of not being stable. But they don’t lose the property of being beliefs. Otherwise put, if gignomai is used temporally here, it is used for a qualitative, not for an existence, change: true beliefs acquire the new properties of being knowledge and of being stable; but they don’t thereby cease to be beliefs.

Thirdly, suppose for the sake of argument that (as Shope believes) 98a1–6 describes the case in which one first has a mere true belief, and then converts it into knowledge by binding it with an aitias logismos; and suppose too that (as Shope also believes) Plato takes that to be a mere sufficient condition for knowledge. Be that as it may, 98a6–8 makes a more general claim: it says in general terms how knowledge differs from true belief; it does not mention only a sufficient condition for knowledge. Rather, Socrates is here answering the quite general question that Meno asks at 97d1–3, viz. why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief, and how in general knowledge and true belief differ. The answer does not involve a temporal claim. Plato says simply that ‘knowledge differs from true belief in being tied down’ (sc. with an aitias logismos) (98a7–8). That is, knowledge differs from mere true belief in that every case of knowledge, but no case of mere true belief, is tied down with an aitias logismos. Hence, even if Shope is right to say that 98a1–6 mentions only a sufficient condition for knowledge, 98a6–8 says quite generally how knowledge differs from true belief.

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32 They do, of course, lose the property of being mere true beliefs. And if, in the Meno, Plato used doxa for mere belief (rather than generically), then, when true doxai become knowledge, they would cease to be beliefs. Thanks to David Sedley for this point. But if my arguments in this section are correct, they suggest that the Meno uses doxa for belief as such, not for mere belief.

33 See also n. 30. This consideration counts against Sedley, but not against Shope.

34 Thompson, The Meno of Plato, suggests that desmô(i) indicates tô(i) dedesthai, i.e. the state of being bound. I take it that diapherei in 98a7 picks up heteron in 97d2–3, and so expresses a difference claim.
One might argue that 98a6–8, in saying that knowledge differs from true belief by being tied down with an *aitias logismos*, mentions just one difference between them. Perhaps there are others. Perhaps, in particular, knowledge also differs from true belief in not being a species of or even implying belief. But I do not think Plato means to leave this possibility open. For if there were cases of knowledge that were not cases of, or did not imply, belief, that would be such an obvious further difference between knowledge and mere true belief that it would be surprising in the circumstances if Plato did not mention it. It seems more likely that he does not mention it because he does not believe it; and indeed on my reading, the analogy has already made the point that knowledge not only implies truth but is also a species of, or implies, belief. Having made that point, Plato goes on to ask what in that case differentiates knowledge from true belief.

Moreover, if Plato does not mean to say that knowledge is a species of, or implies, belief, his argument has a lacuna that it otherwise does not have. Suppose there are cases of knowledge that aren’t cases of, and don’t imply, belief. Then it is not clear why those cases of knowledge are more valuable than cases of mere true belief. To be sure, every case of knowledge is bound with an *aitias logismos*, and no case of mere true belief is. But equally, on the view under consideration, there are cases of knowledge that are not cases of, and do not imply, belief. Someone might then argue that even if knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief insofar as it is bound with an *aitias logismos*, mere true beliefs are more valuable than the cases of knowledge that are not cases of, or that do not imply, belief, precisely because they are cases of, or imply, belief. But Plato does not argue against this position. He need not do so if he thinks knowledge is a species of, or implies, belief.

Whatever may be true elsewhere, then, here, at any rate, Plato thinks that knowledge implies not only truth but also belief. Having a true belief that is tied down with an *aitias logismos* is not merely sufficient but is also necessary for knowledge. Plato also thinks that the account of knowledge as true belief that is tied down with an *aitias logismos* has explanatory value: it explains why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief. (Hence at least part of the *aitia* of why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief is that knowledge involves an *aitia*.\(^\text{35}\)) If he is offering necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge, which also have explanatory value, then it seems reasonable to suppose that he is giving at least an outline definition of knowledge. That is, he is telling us what knowledge is; he is offering an answer to the ‘What is F?’ question, where F, in this

\(^{35}\) One might argue that what explains why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief is its stability. But as we shall see, Plato thinks that the relevant sort of stability issues from the *aitias logismos*; the latter is therefore more fundamental. I return later to the question of why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief.
case, is knowledge, and the answer, in this case, is that knowledge is true belief that is tied down with an aitias logismos. Another reason to think that Plato is defining knowledge is that, in the Theaetetus, ‘knowledge is true belief plus a logos’ is suggested as an answer to the question ‘What is knowledge?’ One might, to be sure, argue that ‘knowledge is true belief plus a logos’ is not equivalent to ‘knowledge is true belief tied down with an aitias logismos.’ Be that as it may, the two claims are similar enough in shape or form for it to be reasonable to think that, since the former is explicitly offered as an answer to the question ‘What is knowledge?,’ the latter is also intended to answer it.

I conclude, then, that Plato is defining knowledge here, and that he defines it as true belief that is tied down with an aitias logismos. If so, he takes knowledge not just to imply, but also to be a species of, belief.

5.

I have argued so far that, whatever may be true elsewhere, in the Meno Plato thinks that knowledge not only implies truth but is also a species of belief. He also says that knowledge involves more than true belief. Hence he believes that knowledge is true belief plus something. In particular, it is true belief that is tied down with an aitias logismos. What does this mean? Is Plato suggesting that

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56 The nature of definitions in general, and of Platonic definitions in particular, is much disputed. I take it that a satisfactory Platonic definition is a real (as opposed to nominal) definition. Hence, if Plato is defining knowledge, he is telling us what knowledge really is; he is specifying its nature. For a lucid account of Platonic definitions (that is, of satisfactory answers to ‘What is F?’ questions) that focuses on the Meno, see C. C. W. Taylor, ‘Socratic Ethics,’ in B. S. Gower and M. C. Stokes (eds.), Socratic Questions (London: Routledge, 1992), 137–52.

57 Thanks to D. Scott for this point. I shall not ask here whether the two answers are the same. For the view that they are not, see R. Barney, Names and Nature in Plato’s Cratylus (New York: Routledge, 2001), 172. One might attempt to resist the suggestion that Plato is defining knowledge in the Meno, as follows. At 98b1–5, Socrates appears to say that he does not know what knowledge is. Yet 71b implies that if one knows the definition of F, one knows what F is. One might think it follows that if Plato were defining knowledge, he would claim to know what knowledge is; since he claims not to know what knowledge is, he is not defining knowledge. However, Plato might believe he is offering a correct definition, without feeling entitled to claim to know that he has done so. One reason he might disclaim knowledge (though not belief) is that, at 75d–e and 79b, he suggests that one cannot know a definition unless one knows the terms in which it is expressed. Perhaps he thinks he does not know precisely what counts as an aitia, or exactly what sort of logismos knowledge requires. Certainly, as we shall see more fully below, these are issues he does not discuss in detail in the Meno.

58 Gorg. 454e also takes knowledge to be a species of belief (pistis).

59 In ‘Epistêmê and Logos in Plato’s Later Thought,’ Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie 66 (1979), 93–103, Nehamas describes what he calls the ‘additive model,’ which he thinks I wrongly attribute to Plato in my ‘Knowledge and Logos in the Theaetetus.’ If all the additive model says is that knowledge involves more than true belief, I plead guilty. But if that is not all the additive model involves, then I am not sure whether I plead guilty. I confess I’m not entirely sure what if anything more is involved in the charge. Hence in saying that Plato takes knowledge to be true belief plus something, I do not necessarily mean to commit Plato to what Nehamas calls the additive model.
knowledge is justified true belief? Or does he think it bypasses justification altogether? Or does he think it involves justified true belief, but also more than that?

Unfortunately, it is difficult to be sure about this. For one thing, the phrase *aitias logismos* is unusual;\(^40\) Plato does not explain it in detail; nor does he use it elsewhere. However, he often uses both *logismos* and *aitia* (and their cognates) on their own, sometimes in close proximity to one another.\(^41\) Let us look first at each word on its own.

An *aitia* is a reason, cause, or explanation. I find it useful to reserve ‘cause’ for an event sufficient for bringing about change. If we so understand causes, then in the present context ‘explanation’ is a better translation of *aitia* than ‘cause’ is. For Plato is concerned not only with causal but also with noncausal contexts. For example, earlier in the *Meno* Socrates cross-examines one of Meno’s slaves about a geometry problem; the correct answer has an explanation but not a cause.\(^42\)

To say that knowledge requires explanation leaves a lot unsaid. In particular, it does not tell us what counts as an explanation. According to Aristotle, there are

\(^{40}\) It’s worth mentioning that the Anonymous Commentator on the *Theaetetus* has *aitia(i) logismou* (III.1–3), in *Commentarium in Platonis “Theaetetum”*, ed. G. Bastianini and D. Sedley, in *Corpus dei papiri filosofici greci e latini* (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 1995)). On this reading, *aitia(i) functions as a preposition: knowledge differs from true belief because of, on account of (*aitia*), reason or reasoning (*logismos*). For discussion of Anon’s alternative reading, see H. Tarrant, ‘By Calculation of Reason?’, in P. Huby and G. Neale (eds.), *The Criterion of Truth* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1989), 57–82. He thinks that Anon’s reading is more likely to be what Plato actually wrote than is the received text. J. Dillon, in ‘Tampering with the *Timaeus*’, *American Journal of Philology* 110 (1989), 50–72, suggests that Anon might be misquoting, rather than relying on a variant text. This suggestion is supported by the fact that, as Sedley, ‘Three Platonist Interpretations of the *Theaetetus*,’ 94, points out, Anon seems to interpret the phrase as though the text read *aitias logismo(i)*. See also A. Carlini, ‘Plato, *Meno* 98a3’, in L. Belloni, G. Milanesi, and A. Porro (eds.), *Studia Classica Iohanni Tarditi oblata* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1995), 1017–26. I shall assume that the received text is correct.

\(^{41}\) See, for example, Ti. 33a6, cited and discussed below. Cf. Gorg. 501a, which associates *aitia* and *logos*. Plato uses *logismos* at So. 254a8; Pol. 257a7, b7; Phil. 52a8 (where he uses it with a genitive, as at *Meno* 98a); Symp. 207b7; Phdr. 246c7, 249c1 (where, as in the *Meno*, recollection is collected); Rep. 431c6, 439d1, 440b1, 441a9, 524b4, 546b1, 586d2, 587e5, 603a4, 604d5, 611c3; Ti. 30b4, 34a8, 36e6, 47c2, 52b2, 57e1, 72a1, e2, 77b5, 86c3; Laws 64d2 (plus indirect question), 645a1, 5, 805a3 (plus indirect question), 813d (plus indirect question). He also often uses one or another form of the corresponding verb, as well as related nouns such as *analogismata*. Not all of these passages connect *logismos* and its cognates with knowledge in particular; but they all provide evidence of how Plato uses *logismos* and its cognates. *Phaedo* 96a6ff. is an important passage that shows, among other things, that Plato thinks knowledge requires an *aitia*.

four kinds of aitiai: efficient, material, formal, and final.\textsuperscript{43} We explain a thing best when we cite as many aitiai as obtain in its case; and different kinds of aitiai are appropriate in different cases. In the Meno, Plato does not explicitly say whether he thinks different kinds of aitiai are appropriate in different cases. At 72c8, he says that the form of virtue is that because of which (di’ho) all virtuous things are virtuous; so we can explain why something is virtuous only by suitably relating it to the form of virtue. Hence forms are explanatory factors. But he does not say that every explanation involves a form; he leaves open the possibility that different sorts of explanations are appropriate in different cases. Even if we need to refer to the form of virtue to explain why anything that is virtuous is so, it does not follow that we need to refer to a form to explain how to get to Larissa.

One might dispute this as follows: At 71b, Plato says that (i) to know anything about F, one must know what F is. This is his Principle of the Priority of Knowledge What (PKW). One might think he also believes that (ii) to know what F is is to know a definition of F (call this the Priority of Knowledge of a Definition (PKD)); and that (iii) all definitions specify forms. If Plato accepts not only (i) but also (ii) and (iii), then he thinks that, to know anything whatever, one must know a relevant form. Presumably, in this case, all explanations require reference to forms. Plato may hold this view in the Phaedo and Republic. But I do not think he is committed to it in the Meno. For though 71b says (i), I do not think it is committed to (ii) or (iii). To be sure, Plato thinks that one can know what virtue is only by knowing a definition of the form of virtue. But so far as I can see, he leaves open the possibility that, in some cases, one can know what a thing is without knowing a definition, or a relevant form. If this is right, then 71b does not commit Plato to the view that every aitia, or all knowledge, requires reference to a form.\textsuperscript{44}

Logismos is a noun deriving from the verb logizesthai, to calculate or reason. The word and its cognates are often used in a mathematical sense, but they can also be used more broadly; and that is how Plato generally uses them.\textsuperscript{45} I assume that is also how he uses logismos in 98a4. For he is talking about knowledge as such, not specifically about mathematical knowledge. Nor does the Meno suggest that all knowledge is or involves specifically mathematical reasoning.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{43} These are now the conventional labels; they are not Aristotle’s own. I discuss Aristotle’s four kinds of aitiai more fully in ‘Forms as Causes.’ In the Physics, Aristotle tends to use the neuter rather than the feminine, although he occasionally uses the latter. So far as I can tell, he does not intend to mark any systematic distinction through his use of the feminine and neuter.

\textsuperscript{44} See Fine, ‘Inquiry in the Meno,’ n. 6.

\textsuperscript{45} See the references in n. 41. See also Tht. 186a10, c2–3, d3; and Rep. IV’s discussion of to logistikon. The verb is used just once in the Meno, at 82d4, in discussing a geometry problem; so it seems prima facie reasonable to suppose that the word is used there in its mathematical sense. The noun is used twice in the Meno, at 98a4 and at 100b2. In the latter passage, its sense is not mathematical: Socrates undertakes to say what follows from some reasoning (logismos), which has to do with the nature of virtue.

\textsuperscript{46} In Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 120, G. Vlastos argues that, in the Meno, Plato takes geometrical knowledge to be the paradigm of all
Logismos is process/product ambiguous: it can mean the process of reasoning, or the product of that process. When it is used in the product sense, it can simply mean logos, in the sense of an account.\(^{47}\) It can then be used interchangeably with aitia, as at Timaeus 33a6.\(^{48}\) If this is how logismos is used in 98a3, then the genitive is presumably subjective, specifying the sort of logismos or account that is at issue, namely, an explanatory one. Plato, in this case, would be saying that knowledge is true belief that is tied down with an explanatory account.

Although I see nothing to rule out this reading, logismos in our passage is generally thought to refer to the process of reasoning, and the genitive is generally taken to be objective, specifying the product (in this case, an aitia) that the reasoning is directed to or is about.\(^{49}\) I shall follow suit. It is, however, important to distinguish two different processes that might be at issue: the process of discovery, and the process of thinking or reasoning about something already to hand. If logismos is being used in the discovery sense, Plato would be saying that one cannot know that p unless one comes to know it by means of a particular process of reasoning.\(^{50}\) If logismos is being used in the sense of reasoning about something already to hand, he would be saying that one can know that p only if one can reason about p in an appropriate way; nothing would be said about how, or whether, one must acquire one’s knowledge that p.

In the one other passage in which Plato uses logismos with a genitive, it seems to be used for the process of thinking about something already to hand, rather than for a process of discovery or for a product.\(^{51}\) But how should logismos be

knowledge. Even if that is so, it does not follow that all knowledge is literally mathematical; it would follow only that all knowledge is in some way structurally similar to geometry. I do not, however, think the Meno advocates even this latter view (unless one takes so broad a view of the structure of geometrical reasoning as to make the claim nearly vacuous). My main reason is given in section 2: Plato thinks that any given item of knowledge can only be known on grounds appropriate to it; there is no one kind of ground, or type of reasoning, appropriate to all kinds of knowledge. See further below.

\(^{47}\) Cf. l’addition in French, or o logariasmos in modern Greek, for the bill, which is the result of a calculation.

\(^{48}\) dia de tén aitian kai ton logismon: the explanation and account—which Plato then goes on to supply. I take kai to be epexegetic.

\(^{49}\) I do not know of anyone who suggests that the genitive in 98a is subjective. Thompson, The Meno of Plato, followed in their notes by Bluck, Plato’s Meno, and R. McKirahan, Plato’s Meno (Bryn Mawr, PA: Thomas Library, Bryn Mawr College, 1986), all take it to be objective, though none of them defends the claim.

\(^{50}\) Sedley suggested to me that one might argue that Plato would be saying, not that one can know that p only if one acquires one’s knowledge in an appropriate way, but only that one cannot come to know that p unless one comes to know it by reasoning in an appropriate way. However, Plato is defining knowledge, not coming to know. If he defines knowledge as true belief that is tied down by a process of discovery, he would be committed to the view that one cannot know that p unless one comes to know it, that is, unless one acquires one’s knowledge and does not have it all along. Barney, Names and Nature, 172, and Nehamas, ’Meno’s Paradox,’ 9, understand logismos in the discovery sense. I’m not sure whether they mean to commit Plato to the view that one cannot know that p unless one acquires one’s knowledge in a particular way, or only to the view that one cannot come to know that p unless one reasons in a particular way.

\(^{51}\) Phil. 52a8. Cf. Epinomis 974a2 (which is not normally thought to be by Plato), which likewise uses logismos plus the genitive for the process of thinking of something already to hand. Although Thl.
understood in our passage? At 98a4–5, Plato says: ‘And this (tutto), Meno my friend, is recollection, as we agreed before.’ That is, I take it, it was previously agreed that tying true beliefs down with an aitias logismos is recollection. One might think Plato means that one can know that p only if one recollects that p. And one might take that, in turn, to favor the discovery sense of logismos. I doubt, however, that Plato believes that one can know that p only if one recollects it. Indeed, I don’t even think he is committed to the weaker view that one can know that p only if one recollects either p or something suitably related to p. For one thing, he is not committed to the view that discarnate souls acquired their knowledge through recollection. He leaves open the possibility that they acquired it in some other way. He even leaves open the possibility that they did not acquire it at all, but simply had it all along. If so, he presumably would not make it definitionally true that one can know that p only if one acquires one’s knowledge through recollection or through any other method of acquisition (and, I have argued, he is defining knowledge here).

On a more attractive interpretation, 98a4–5 means only that in the case he is referring back to (and in relevantly similar cases), acquiring knowledge, at least for us, constituted as we are, requires recollection. That leaves open the possibility that in some cases, we, constituted as we are, can acquire knowledge without recollecting. It also leaves open the possibility that not all knowledge is acquired and, indeed, that discarnate souls didn’t acquire any of their knowledge but simply had it all along. This is not to deny that Plato is deeply interested in methods of knowledge acquisition: he plainly is. It is just to deny that he defines knowledge so as to imply that one can know that p only if one acquires one’s knowledge in a particular way.

Given all of this, we should not understand logismos, in the definition of knowledge, in its discovery sense. For if we do, Plato would be committed to saying that one can know that p only if one comes to know it in a particular way. But, as we have seen, he does not seem to accept this as a general claim about knowledge as such (though he may accept it for some particular cases of knowledge). He does, however, seem to think that, to know that p at t1, one must be able at t1 to explain why p is so. We should, then, either take logismos to mean reasoning about something to hand, or else construe it broadly so that we need not flatly choose between the two process senses, leaving the context to decide which is at issue.
Knowledge requires reasoning about the *aitia*, then. But can we be more precise about what sort of reasoning is required? Vlastos appeals to Plato’s use of *logismos*, and of *dése* in 98a3, to argue that the relevant reasoning consists in ‘any enlargement of our knowledge which results from the perception of logical relationships.’⁵⁵ But I think this is too narrow. First, we have seen that Plato often uses *logismos* more broadly. He also uses *desmos* more broadly, as in the analogy with Daedalus’ statues. Secondly, I suggested above that we should be careful not to generalize in the wrong way from the discussion of knowing the way to Larissa: even if knowing the way to Larissa requires some sort of acquaintance, not every case of knowledge does so. Similarly here, even if the slave essentially relies on logical deduction, we should not infer that *logismos* is restricted to it. What sort of reasoning is required depends on the matter to hand. Different cases involve different sorts of reasoning.

A question of a different kind is how high level the *logismos* must be: must the *logismos* be such that one has knowledge of the *aitia*, or can *logismos* involve a weaker cognitive condition than knowledge? I discuss this issue in section 9.

Although our discussion so far leaves many questions unanswered, it at least suggests that a good translation of *aitias logismos* is: ‘reasoning about the explanation.’⁵⁶ Plato’s claim is then that to know that p is (a) to have the true belief that p and (b) for that true belief to be bound by reasoning about the *aitia* of p. That is, for one’s true belief that p to constitute knowledge that p, one must bind it properly by being able to explain why p is so.

6.

The fact that Plato requires explanation for knowledge has been taken to show that he does not think knowledge is justified true belief. As Burnyeat puts it, ‘the *Meno*’s leading condition on knowledge, *aitias logismos* (98a), is Greek for working out the explanation of something, *not* for assembling a justification for

⁵⁵ ‘*Anamnēsis,*’ 154–5. For criticism of Vlastos, see also White, Plato on Knowledge and Reality, 59 n. 35.

⁵⁶ The phrase has been translated in many ways. Indeed, some authors (including myself in ‘Inquiry in the *Meno*’) use more than one translation, without comment. Among the translations I have seen are the following: ‘by a chain of causal reasoning’ (Thompson, *The Meno of Plato*); ‘by calculation of cause’ (Bluck, *Plato’s Meno*; Sedley, ‘Three Platonist Interpretations of the Theaetetus,’ has ‘by calculation of the cause’); ‘the calculation of the reason’ (Vlastos, ‘*Anamnēsis*’); ‘working out the explanation’ (Burnyeat, ‘Socrates and the Jury’; R. W. Sharples, Plato: Meno (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1985)); ‘reasoning out the explanation’ (Nehamas, ‘Meno’s Paradox’); ‘reasoning about the explanation’ (Nehamas, ‘Meno’s Paradox’); ‘account of the explanation’ (Nehamas, ‘Meno’s Paradox’). Translations that use ‘calculation’ or ‘cause’ are too narrow, for reasons given in the text. ‘Working out’ or ‘reasoning out’ (as opposed to ‘reasoning about’) might misleadingly suggest that one cannot know that p unless one initially lacks such knowledge but eventually acquires it by discovering, working out, the *aitia* of p, as though one could not have knowledge all along. However, an informal survey suggests that, although some people ‘hear’ ‘working out’ in a discovery sense, not everyone does so.
believing it, which the slave already has at a stage when Plato denies he has knowledge (85c).\textsuperscript{57} Burnyeat makes two points. One is a point about translation: \textit{aitias logismos} should not be translated as ‘justification.’ The second point is that Plato does not take knowledge to be justified true belief.

I agree with the first point: hence I translated the phrase, not as ‘justification,’ but as ‘reasoning about the explanation.’ Indeed, not only is \textit{aitias logismos} not best translated as ‘justification,’ but neither is it clear that Plato uses any word that is best so translated. He might, for example, have appropriated \textit{dikaiôsis}, which is used by Lysias (9.8) and Thucydides (8.66); but he does not do so.

However, the second point does not follow from the first. For even if \textit{aitias logismos} should not be translated as ‘justification,’ Plato might think that justification consists in or essentially involves reasoning about the explanation. Perhaps he takes ‘justified true belief’ to be the nominal definition of knowledge; his project is to provide its real definition, by telling us what justification really is.\textsuperscript{58} Nor does Burnyeat simply infer the second point from the first. Rather, he also argues as follows: the slave, at 85b–d, has justified true belief; but, since Plato says the slave lacks knowledge, he does not take knowledge to be justified true belief, as is also made clear by the fact that, in 98a, he says that knowledge involves working out the explanation of something. There are two quite different ways of understanding Burnyeat’s argument: (i) Plato takes knowledge to be true belief plus working out the explanation; justification does not come into it; (ii) Plato takes knowledge to include not only justified true belief but also working out an explanation. There is evidence to support both interpretations of Burnyeat.\textsuperscript{59} Whichever he intends, he does not think Plato takes knowledge to be justified true belief. On (i), his reason is that Plato does not think justification is necessary for knowledge; on (ii) his reason is that Plato does not think justified true belief is sufficient for knowledge.

Let us first consider 85c in its context. Meno earlier challenged Socrates to say how one can inquire if one lacks knowledge. In reply, Socrates cross-examines one of Meno’s slaves about how to find a square which is double the area of a given square. Initially the slave thinks he knows the answer; upon being cross-examined by Socrates, he realizes he does not. After being questioned yet further, he


\textsuperscript{58} I have suggested that Platonic definitions are real definitions: see n. 36.

\textsuperscript{59} In favor of (i): Plato says that knowledge is true belief that is tied down with an \textit{aitias logismos}. If, as Burnyeat seems to think, \textit{aitias logismos} does not import the notion of justification, then Plato’s account of knowledge in 98a does not do so. In favor of (ii): the slave, according to Burnyeat, has justified true belief but not knowledge. So perhaps Burnyeat’s thought is that 98a says that knowledge is justified true belief that is tied down with an \textit{aitias logismos}. Whether or not this is Burnyeat’s thought, it seems hard to understand 98a in this way. For it does not say that knowledge is justified true belief that is tied down with an \textit{aitias logismos}. It says that it is true belief that is tied down with an \textit{aitias logismos}. 
eventually discovers the right answer. At 85c Socrates says that, though the slave now has a true belief about the answer, he still does not know it.

It is true that, in the course of his discussion with Socrates, the slave acquires not just a true belief, but also a justification for it that he initially lacked. However, it does not follow that Plato does not take knowledge to be justified true belief. To explain why, it may be helpful to say more about justification than I have done so far. In 1963, Edmund Gettier published a famous paper in which he claimed to refute the view that knowledge is justified true belief, by describing cases in which people allegedly have justified true belief, but lack knowledge.⁶⁰ Consider, for example, Adam, who believes that his friend Fred owns a Ferrari. Adam believes this, because in the past Fred has always owned a Ferrari; and, this morning, Fred drove Adam to work in a Ferrari. Hence, Adam’s belief that Fred owns a Ferrari is justified. Adam also has another friend, Betty, of whose whereabouts he is ignorant. However, he realizes that ‘Fred owns a Ferrari’ implies ‘Either Fred owns a Ferrari or Betty is in Barcelona’; so he believes this latter, disjunctive proposition as well. Suppose that, as it happens, Fred sold his Ferrari and is driving a rented car, but didn’t bother to tell that to Adam. And suppose too that, as it happens, Betty is in Barcelona. Since Betty is in Barcelona, Adam’s belief (that either Fred owns a Ferrari or Betty is in Barcelona) is true. It is also justified, since it is correctly inferred from his justified (but false) belief that Fred owns a Ferrari. Although Adam’s belief (that either Fred owns a Ferrari or Betty is in Barcelona) is both justified and true, it does not constitute knowledge. Hence knowledge is not justified true belief.

Many people agree that Gettier succeeded in refuting the view that knowledge is justified true belief. These people disagree, however, about how to avoid Gettier-style counterexamples. One especially popular strategy is to look for a fourth condition over and above truth, belief, and justification. Those who favor this strategy disagree about what the fourth condition is.⁶¹ But not everyone agrees that Gettier succeeded in refuting the view that knowledge is justified true belief. To be sure, he may have refuted the view that knowledge is justified true belief, if we say that A is justified in believing p, in the way necessary for satisfying the justification condition on knowledge, if and only if it’s reasonable for A to believe that p given her other beliefs. But suppose we say that A is justified in believing that p, in the way necessary for satisfying the justification condition on knowledge, only if A has adequate evidence for p. There are different views about what constitutes adequate evidence. If one has a demanding view of what it takes

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⁶⁰ For the reference to Gettier’s paper, see n. 2. In what follows, I sometimes speak of ‘Gettier-like counterexamples’ rather than of ‘Gettier counterexamples,’ since Gettier’s paper spawned many counterexamples with different twists from his own.

⁶¹ In The Analysis of Knowing, Shope canvasses numerous replies to Gettier.
to have adequate evidence, it’s not clear that Gettier refuted the view that knowledge is justified true belief.\textsuperscript{62}

Returning now to Burnyeat, we can see that when he says that 85c shows that Plato does not take knowledge to be justified true belief, he understands justification weakly. I agree that Plato rejects a justified-true-belief account of knowledge, if the conditions for justification are construed weakly enough. But we should not infer that he rejects a justified-true-belief account of knowledge as such. Perhaps he favors such an account, but thinks that the sort of justification that is necessary for knowledge is more demanding than Burnyeat takes it to be.

A better passage for Burnyeat’s purposes than \textit{Meno} 85c is \textit{Gorgias} 508e–509a.\textsuperscript{63} For here Socrates says that his belief that it is always worse to commit than to suffer injustice is bound (\textit{dedetai}; cf. \textit{Meno} 98a1–5) by arguments of iron and adamantine: at least, it appears that way to him so far. Yet he still disclaims knowledge. Socrates seems to take himself to have very good justification for his belief, certainly better justification than the slave has for his belief. Even so, we have two options: (a) he thinks he satisfies the justification condition on knowledge; hence he thinks knowledge requires more than justified true belief; (b) he does not think he yet has the sort of justification that is needed for knowledge. I think (b) is plausible. For Plato does not think he knows what justice is and, as \textit{Meno} 71b makes clear, he does not think one can know anything about F unless one knows what F is. Perhaps he thinks one is not justified in believing that p, in the way necessary for knowing that p, unless one can explain why p is so. It is also worth noting that the \textit{Gorgias} passage is more tentative than it is sometimes taken to be. Socrates does not claim to know that his beliefs are tied down by arguments of iron and adamantine. He says that it appears so far to him that this is so; he believes that this is so. Moreover, he goes on to say that perhaps someone might overturn his arguments. The implication seems to be that he is not convinced that his beliefs have the sort of stability that he requires for knowledge.

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\textsuperscript{62} Gettier may disagree. At least, he claims that the person in his second counterexample (which is the one I have described) has ‘strong evidence’ for thinking Fred owns a Ferrari, and that he is ‘completely justified’ in believing the disjunctive proposition. And at the end of his paper, he says that his argument (with appropriate changes) tells against the view that knowledge is true belief plus adequate evidence. By contrast, J. Cargile, in ‘On Near Knowledge,’ \textit{Analysis} 31 (1971), 145–52, at 145–6, argues that Gettier hasn’t refuted the view that knowledge is justified true belief, if a belief is justified in the relevant sense only if it is based on reasons that are good enough for the belief to count as knowledge. As Cargile notes, circularity then threatens. I discuss Plato and circularity in section 9. See also R. Fogelin, \textit{Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), ch. 1. He argues that Gettier refutes a justified-true-belief analysis of knowledge, if we take justification to consist simply in the person coming to believe that p in an epistemically responsible manner. But he then argues that the sort of justification that is needed for knowledge also requires the person’s grounds to establish the truth of p; and Gettier’s counterarguments do not show that knowledge is not justified true belief, once that is built into the account.

\textsuperscript{63} Thanks to Dan Devereux for this point. He favors (a) (which I go on to mention in the text).
For, at least in the Republic, he says that knowledge-constituting beliefs withstand refutation.⁶⁴ That Plato takes justification to require explanation is suggested by the Euthyphro, where, in an effort to determine whether Euthyphro is justified in prosecuting his father for murder, Socrates cross-examines him about his beliefs about piety. He assumes that Euthyphro is justified in prosecuting his father only if he can explain why his action is pious; and he thinks that an adequate explanation of why it is pious requires an account of the nature of piety.⁶⁵ Hence he assumes that justification requires explanation; and, in this particular case, the explanation is quite difficult to come by, since accounts of the virtues are difficult to come by.

Similarly, Meno opens the eponymous dialogue by asking Socrates whether virtue is teachable. Socrates replies that he cannot know whether virtue is teachable unless he knows what it is (71a4–b8). An account of what virtue is specifies its nature. Knowing its nature enables one to explain whether virtue is teachable and, if it is, why it is. Plato seems to assume that one is not justified in believing that it’s teachable, in the way necessary for knowing whether it is, unless one can explain why it is. Once again, justification requires explanation.

One might argue that it is one thing to say that one can know whether virtue is teachable only if one knows what virtue is, and quite another thing to say that one does not have the sort of justification that is necessary for knowledge unless one can explain why virtue is teachable. That Plato believes the first claim is relatively uncontroversial. One might think, however, that more is needed before committing him to the latter claim.

But consider the context. Socrates is cross-examining Meno about his beliefs about virtue; he uncovers contradictions among Meno’s beliefs, and shows Meno that his beliefs aren’t based on adequate reasons. His idea seems to be that knowledge must be based on good reasons; and these, in his view, must include an account of what F is. Justification (of an internalist sort, at least) is generally thought to require good arguments or good reasons. Insofar as Plato is concerned with the latter, it is reasonable to assume that he is concerned with the former, and indeed takes the former to require the latter. This, in turn, suggests that Plato has a concept of justification, according to which justification requires good arguments or reasons; and the sort of justification that is needed for knowledge requires arguments or reasons that are good enough to convert the mere true belief that p into knowledge that p. That is, he seems to think that justification comes in degrees. One belief can be better justified than another, without either of them

⁶⁴ I cite the relevant passage below.
⁶⁵ See, for example, 15c11–e2. Verity Harte objects that Socrates is concerned, not with the justification of a belief, but with the justification of action. But in Plato’s view, Euthyphro’s action is justified only if it is at least partially caused by an appropriate belief.
being justified in the way necessary for knowledge. Socrates takes his beliefs to be better justified than the beliefs of his interlocutors, indeed well enough justified for him to rely on them, whereas he thinks his interlocutors ought to abandon many of their beliefs. But he thinks an even-higher degree, or better sort, of justification is needed to satisfy the justification condition on knowledge.⁶⁶

On this view, Plato’s claim that knowledge requires explanation does not show that he either bypasses justification or thinks knowledge requires not only justified true belief but also explanation, as though explanation is an additional condition on knowledge, over and above justification. Rather, his thought is that one can satisfy the justification condition on knowledge that \( p \) only if one can explain why \( p \) is so. This is not to say that Plato thinks that knowledge is justified true belief. It’s just to say that his claim that one can know that \( p \) only if one can explain why \( p \) is so does not show that he does not take knowledge to be justified true belief. It shows only that he thinks that the sort of justification that is needed for knowledge is more demanding than it is sometimes taken to be.⁶⁷

7.

There is another view worth mentioning at this point. Some commentators who agree that Plato is interested in explanation have inferred that he is not interested in knowledge, but only in an allegedly different phenomenon, understanding. Nehamas, for example, writes that

[w]e might want to say that Plato insists upon an unduly restricted notion of knowledge; but we would do better, I think, to say that when he is discussing epistêmê he is not producing unreasonable conditions on knowledge, but, rather, quite reasonable conditions on what it is to understand something. For unlike knowledge, understanding involves, in rough and ready terms, the ability to explain what one understands. By contrast, many items of knowledge, for example, particular facts, are not even the sorts of things to which explanation is applicable in this context.⁶⁸

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⁶⁶ See J. Gentzler, ‘Knowledge and Method in Plato’s Early and Middle Dialogues’ (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1991), esp. chs. 2 and 4.
⁶⁷ Which is not to say that he takes all knowledge to be extremely difficult to acquire; see next section.
Another reason that has been adduced for thinking that Plato is interested not in knowledge but in understanding is the thought that 'knowledge can be piecemeal, can grasp isolated truths one by one, whereas understanding always involves seeing connections and relations between the items known.'⁶⁹ Since Plato thinks one cannot have epistêmê of a single isolated truth, epistêmê is understanding rather than knowledge.

According to a weaker version of this general sort of view, Plato is interested in knowledge—but not in ‘knowledge as knowledge is conceived in philosophy today. For modern philosophers typically connect knowledge with the justification of belief or the reliability of information, not with the explanation of some fact that a person believes or is reliably informed about.⁷⁰ We should see Plato ‘not as misdescribing the concept which philosophers now analyze in terms of justified true belief, but as elaborating a richer concept of knowledge tantamount to understanding.’⁷¹

First, we should ask whether Plato’s view of epistêmê has been correctly described: whether or not we want to say that epistêmê, as Plato conceives of it here, is knowledge. We have seen that he requires explanation for epistêmê. I also agree that he conceives of epistêmê holistically. For example, one plausible explanation of why the slave is said, at 85c, to lack knowledge is that he hasn’t mastered a sufficiently broad range of mathematical concepts: so, to know the answer to Socrates’s question, he needs to know a lot of other things as well.⁷² But does Plato also take knowledge to be a difficult cognitive achievement? Insofar as he takes knowledge to require explanation, he certainly takes it to be more difficult to achieve than do some externalists, who typically accord knowledge to children and animals. He also denies that the slave knows the answer to Socrates’s geometrical question; and he clearly thinks that the moral knowledge that eludes them in the Meno and early dialogues is very difficult to achieve. But, though he has a more demanding conception of knowledge than some philosophers do, it’s not clear that he takes all knowledge to be all that difficult to achieve. For example, I think he leaves open the possibility that one can know the way to Larissa simply on the basis of repeatedly making the journey in an appropriately attentive way.⁷³

⁶⁹ Burnyeat, ’Wittgenstein and Augustine De Magistro,’ 20.

⁷⁰ Burnyeat, The Theaetetus of Plato, 217.

⁷¹ Burnyeat, ’Socrates and the Jury,’ 186 with n. 29. Contrast Burnyeat’s claim that knowledge and justification go together, whereas understanding and explanation go together, with Williams’s claim that ‘[a]n interest in understanding implies an interest in justification’ (Problems of Knowledge, 21). And contrast Burnyeat’s claim that modern philosophers analyze knowledge in terms of justified true belief with Vlastos’s claim that this is an account of knowledge that most philosophers nowadays reject (G. Vlastos, ’Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,’ The Philosophical Quarterly 35 (1985), 1–31, at 9 n. 25.

⁷² PKW (discussed briefly above) also suggests some degree of holism: one cannot know whether someone is handsome unless one knows who he is; one item of knowledge therefore depends on another. The claim at 81c9–d1 that ‘all nature is akin,’ so that, if one recollects one thing, one can recollect others as well, might also be taken to suggest some sort of holism. But for a more modest interpretation of the passage, see S. Tigner, ’On the “Kinship” of “All Nature” in Plato’s Meno,’ Phronesis, 15 (1970), 1–4.

⁷³ This suggestion fits well with my suggestion that Plato does not restrict aitias logismos to explanations that mention forms, or to recollection; see section 5. It is true that, at 98b1–5, Socrates says there are few things he would claim to know. This might be taken to suggest that he does not think knowledge is ever easy to achieve. It also challenges my claim that Plato conceives of knowledge holistically. For given holism, if one knows anything, one knows many things. Thanks to David Sedley
But, one might ask, could Plato really believe that making the journey enables one to satisfy the *aitias logismos* condition on knowledge? That perhaps depends on precisely what question is being asked. Certainly the experienced traveler is not especially well placed to answer the historical question, ‘Why was the road built just here?’ For it might have been built where it is for all sorts of contingent reasons that are not accessible to the traveler (such as the existence of a well that no longer exists). But if the question is the normative question, ‘Why is this the way to Larissa?’ that is, ‘Why is this the best way to go?’, then it is plausible to think that only an experienced traveler could answer it. At least, she is especially well placed to say that, if one goes this way, there is a safe and straight path whereas, if one goes that way, one encounters bandits, dangerous ravines, and unexpected fogs.⁷⁴

On the other hand, we have seen that Plato may intend the discussion of knowing the way to Larissa as a mere analogy. If it is a mere analogy, then perhaps he does not think that only the experienced traveler can know the way. Nonetheless, for all the *Meno* says, he might think that empirical knowledge is relatively easy to come by; perhaps explanations, in this domain, are not as difficult to acquire as they are in mathematics and morals.

But even if Plato not only thinks that *epistêmê* requires explanation and is holistic, but also takes it to be difficult to achieve not just in some cases but in every case, we should be reluctant to say that he is not talking about knowledge. After all, *epistêmê* is a word with a history; and in other contexts it seems to mean ‘knowledge.’ Nor does Plato seem to be coining an entirely new sense of the word.⁷⁵ He may have controversial views about knowledge. But then, most views about knowledge are controversial. Having controversial views about knowledge is quite different from not talking about knowledge. Of course, if Plato’s views are different enough from all other views about knowledge, then we might well infer that he is not talking about knowledge.⁷⁶ But in fact his views about *epistêmê* are for these objections. However, I think 98b1–5 is consistent both with holism and with Socrates thinking that some knowledge is relatively easy to achieve. In any given domain in which he knows one thing, he knows many things; and it is easy to acquire knowledge in the domains in which he has some knowledge. But there are many domains in which he entirely lacks knowledge. For example, he claims to have no moral knowledge at all. In such domains, knowledge is difficult to achieve. In saying he knows few things, he means that he knows few among the many possible objects of knowledge. But in the few domains in which he knows any one thing, he also knows many things.

⁷⁴ See n. 11. In thinking about this issue, I have benefited from discussion with Lesley Brown, Michael Frede, and Terry Irwin.

⁷⁵ For these points, see Barnes’s reply to Burnyeat’s ‘Socrates and the Jury,’ 204. It is also worth recalling that Plato uses several epistemic words interchangeably here (see n. 1). If *epistêmê* should not be translated as ‘knowledge,’ presumably these other words shouldn’t be so translated either. Yet one of these words is *eidenai*, which is generally—and, in my view, rightly—translated as ‘to know.’ On the other hand, Plato also uses *phronêsis* here, and it is not generally translated as ‘knowledge.’

⁷⁶ Cf. the so-called fallacy of irrelevance, which Plato is sometimes alleged to commit in the *Republic*: that what he calls ‘justice’ is not really justice, but something else to which he attaches the same name. One reply is to say that he is talking about justice, but has a revisionary account of what it is.
not all that different from some accounts of knowledge. For example, we have seen that Plato asks what *epistêmê* is, over and above true belief; and that is a classic way of asking about the nature of knowledge.

Should we then endorse the weaker view, according to which Plato *is* talking about knowledge—but only about an older, richer concept of it than is familiar nowadays? I do not deny that some earlier philosophers understand knowledge (or a kind of knowledge) in the way just described. But that view is also familiar nowadays. For example, just as Plato is a holist about knowledge, so contemporary coherentists deny that one can know a single isolated truth on its own. Nor is it unusual nowadays to think that justification consists in or requires explanatory connectedness.⁷⁷ And even though, as I have said, Plato has a more demanding conception of knowledge than, for example, some externalists do, still, some philosophers—even some contemporary philosophers—insist that knowledge is a difficult cognitive achievement. BonJour, for example, explicitly says that on his account of justification, which includes explanatory connectedness, we don’t know many of the things we take ourselves to know. Commonsense cases of knowledge, he suggests, ‘are only loose approximations to an epistemic ideal which is seldom if ever achieved.’ He goes on to argue that commonsense criteria for knowledge are not sacrosanct.⁷⁸

Contemporary epistemology is a large umbrella, and Plato’s views fit comfortably under it. The attempt to distance his account of knowledge from contemporary accounts assumes too narrow an understanding of the latter. I therefore prefer ‘knowledge’ to ‘understanding’ as a translation of *epistêmê*: it makes it clearer that Plato is engaged in a familiar epistemological enterprise.⁷⁹

8.

I have argued so far that Plato *is* talking about knowledge, not about an allegedly different phenomenon, understanding. I have also argued that his conception of knowledge, while controversial, is not outmoded. Nor should we infer, from anything we have explored so far, that Plato does not take knowledge to be

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⁷⁷ For example, K. Lehrer, in *Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974) says: ‘It is plausible to suppose that some beliefs are justified because they are so well explained. It is no rare event in science or in everyday life to have some doubt concerning a fact removed by some explanation of it. Such explanations may change dubious beliefs into completely justified ones’ (161). Ch. 8 of G. Harman’s *Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973) is called ‘Knowledge and Explanation’; he argues that every case of knowledge involves an inference to the best explanation.

⁷⁸ L. BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 152. There are also, of course, skeptics, who either deny the possibility of some or all knowledge, or suspend judgment about the possibility or actuality of some or all knowledge.

⁷⁹ By contrast, in ‘Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge,’ Burnyeat says that one reason he prefers ‘understanding’ to ‘knowledge’ as a translation of *epistêmê* is that the latter translation is liable to mislead, given how ‘knowledge’ is understood nowadays (see e.g. 132).
justified true belief. All we should infer so far is that he thinks that one has the sort of justification that is needed for knowledge only if one can explain why what one knows is so. There are, however, at least two other obstacles to thinking that Plato holds a justified-true-belief account of knowledge. I discuss the first in this section, and the second in the next section.

The first objection stems from Plato’s claim that knowledge is more stable than mere true belief. This claim may seem surprising. For aren’t there stubborn people who hold on to their mere true beliefs come what may? Can’t there be a modest knower who abandons claims she in fact knows, when she is confronted by a skillful reasoner or someone she wrongly trusts?

Perhaps Plato means that mere true beliefs can be essentially based on false beliefs; and a rational person will abandon her mere true belief that p if she comes to believe that her reasons for believing it are false. If, however, knowledge cannot be essentially based on false beliefs, then it is more stable than mere true belief in the sense that it will not run away once the falsity of the reasons on which it is based is exposed. For ex hypothesi, knowledge does not essentially rest on any false beliefs. Plato elaborates this point in Republic III (412eff.), where he describes various ways in which one can lose mere true beliefs. One of these is through argument (logos). He seems to have in mind a case in which someone is talked out of her mere true belief by someone she wrongly takes to be knowledgeable. Contrast that with his description of the person who has knowledge or, at least, the best sort of knowledge:

Unless someone can distinguish in account the form of the good from everything else, can survive all refutation (elenchôn), as if in a battle, striving to judge things not in accordance with belief but in accordance with being, and can come through all this with his account intact, you’ll say that he doesn’t know the good itself or any other good. (Rep. 534b8–d1)

Unlike the person with mere true belief, the person with knowledge is invulnerable to refutation; she will not lose her knowledge through argument. This is not to say that knowers are dogmatic. Rather, as Plato says, the knower judges in accordance with being: that is, her knowledge is based on how things are. This gives the knower such a deep understanding of what she knows that she will not be persuaded to abandon her knowledge in the face of arguments that rest on false beliefs. Hence knowledge is more stable than mere true belief, since the latter, unlike the former, can be essentially based on false beliefs.

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80 For this explanation of Plato’s point, see Williamson, Knowledge and Its Limits, 78. He infers that Plato does not take knowledge to be justified true belief.

81 For an interesting discussion of knowledge and stability in the Protagoras, see T. Penner, ‘Socrates on the Strength of Knowledge: Protagoras 351B–357E,’ Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie 79 (1997),
I noted earlier that Armstrong criticizes Plato for rejecting Meno’s suggestion that true belief is just as useful in action as knowledge. For, Armstrong suggests, Meno is advocating reliabilism, a view Armstrong endorses. I argued that Meno was not proposing reliabilism. But one might think that Plato has now done so, in arguing that knowledge is more stable than mere true belief. However, as noted in section 2, reliabilism is a species of externalism. But on Plato’s view, knowledge is stable for internalist reasons. His idea is that the person with knowledge can explain why what she knows is true. This ability involves a deep and synoptic understanding of, and insight into, what she knows. Hence it would be irrational of her to abandon her true beliefs in the face of counterarguments, for she can see that they do not undermine her knowledge. Perhaps this is why Plato says, not that knowledge is stable true belief, but that when true beliefs are tied down (sc. with an aitias logismos), they become knowledge, and then (epeita) they are stable (98a5–6). ‘Then’ suggests that stability is a consequence of knowledge, not what it consists in. Having one’s true beliefs tied down by an aitias logismos—which requires that one be able to explain why what one knows is true—confers stability.  

One might think that, if Plato believes that knowledge cannot be essentially based on false beliefs, he rejects a justified-true-belief account of knowledge. And certainly it is has been argued that, to avoid Gettier-style counterexamples, one must say that knowledge cannot be essentially based on false beliefs; and it is also often assumed that saying this goes beyond a justified-true-belief account of knowledge. However, as we have seen, there is no single view about what it takes to be justified in such a way as to satisfy the justification condition on knowledge. On some accounts, one is not justified in believing that p, in the way necessary for knowing that p, if one’s belief is essentially based on false beliefs. That is part of what it takes to be properly justified; it is not a fourth condition on knowledge.  

I am inclined to think this is Plato’s view. For example, he argues that Meno lacks knowledge about virtue, because he has false beliefs about what virtue is (72a–79e). He is assessing Meno’s reasons for his beliefs; and, as we have seen, on a typical internalist conception of justification, one’s reasons for believing that p are one’s justification for believing that p. Insofar as Plato is assessing his interlocutors’ reasons for their beliefs, it is reasonable to assume he is assessing their justification for their beliefs. In his view, the sorts of reasons one must have, to be justified in believing that p in such a way as to satisfy the justification condition on

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82 This is not to say that epeita is temporal. I take it to be logical: n. 31.

knowledge, cannot be false. If this is right, then, as Plato sees things, the claim that knowledge cannot be essentially based on false beliefs does not involve rejecting a justified-true-belief account of knowledge. Rather, it is part of his conception of the sort of justification that is required for knowledge.⁸⁴

But even if one prefers to say that the fact that Plato thinks that knowledge cannot be essentially based on false beliefs shows that he rejects a justified-true-belief account of knowledge, one should not also infer that he does not take justification to be necessary for knowledge. One should infer only that he does not take justified true belief to be sufficient for knowledge.⁸⁵

9.

I now consider one final objection to the view that Plato takes knowledge to be justified true belief. It stems from the fact that he may believe, not just that knowledge cannot be essentially based on false beliefs, but also, more strongly, that knowledge must be based on knowledge (KBK): one can know that p only if one’s knowledge that p is properly based on a q that one also knows. That Plato believes KBK may be suggested by the beginning of the *Meno*. Meno asks Socrates whether virtue is teachable; Socrates replies that he cannot know whether virtue is teachable unless he knows what virtue is. More generally, one cannot know anything about F unless one knows what F is (71b). This is Plato’s Principle of the Priority of Knowledge What (PKW), which we considered briefly above. PKW shows that Plato accepts KBK in at least some cases: knowledge about F requires knowledge of what F is.⁸⁶ And, as we have seen, one plausible explanation of why the slave, in 85b–d, still lacks knowledge is that he has not mastered a sufficiently

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⁸⁴ One might argue that in this case his account of justification is partly externalist, insofar as it appeals to the truth of one’s beliefs. But that does not affect the crucial point at issue, which is that the view being described counts as a version of a justified-true-belief account of knowledge.

⁸⁵ I argued in section 5 that when Plato says that knowledge is true belief that is tied down with an aitias logismos, he is defining knowledge. If that is right, and if, as I have suggested, he also thinks that knowledge cannot be essentially based on false beliefs, then presumably that claim is built into, or follows from, the definition. And it’s easy to see how it could be. To say that my true belief that p is tied down with reasoning about the explanation of why p is so is to say that my true belief that p is essentially based on reasoning about the explanation of why p is so (and, I take it, is essentially based on no more than that). I succeed in explaining why p is so only if I correctly describe the facts in virtue of which p is so. ‘To explain’ is a success-verb. If I purport to explain why p is so, but the so-called explanation is false, I haven’t succeeded in explaining why it is so. Hence the claim that knowledge cannot be essentially based on false beliefs is implicit in Plato’s definition of knowledge. If, as I argued, the claim that knowledge requires explanation does not (as Plato sees things) go beyond a justified-true-belief account of knowledge, then neither does the claim that knowledge cannot be essentially based on false beliefs. However, it is well-known that one person’s modus ponens is another person’s modus tollens.

⁸⁶ However, one might argue that one could accept PKW without taking KBK to be a general condition on knowledge. For PKW does not say whether knowledge of what F is must similarly be based on something (different).
large range of mathematical concepts: to know the answer to Socrates’s question, he needs to know a lot more as well. One cannot know an isolated proposition on its own; knowledge of one thing is inextricably connected to, and so in that sense is based on, knowledge of other things.

One might view KBK as a fourth condition on knowledge, over and above truth, belief, and justification. One would then infer that, if Plato accepts KBK, he does not accept a justified-true-belief account of knowledge.⁸⁷ My response to this suggestion can by now be predicted: rather than viewing KBK as a fourth condition on knowledge, one might instead build it into the justification condition. The view, in this case, would be that one is not justified in believing that p, in the way necessary for knowing that p, unless one knows its justification.

If, however, one thinks that, if Plato accepts KBK, he rejects a justified-true-belief account of knowledge, one should not infer that, in his view, justified true belief is not necessary for knowledge. One should infer only that he does not think that justified true belief is sufficient for knowledge.

Whether KBK is built into the justification condition on knowledge or viewed as a fourth condition, it raises further issues worth discussing. First, if Plato accepts KBK, he is immune to Gettier-style counterexamples.⁸⁸ That is an advantage of accepting KBK. There might, however, seem to be two attendant disadvantages. Suppose we define knowledge so that one can know that p only if one knows something else q, which is the explanation of p, the knowledge of which justifies one in believing that p. The definition is then circular, since ‘knowledge’ occurs in both the definiens and the definiendum.⁸⁹ Yet as Plato puts it in the Theaetetus, ‘when we’re investigating knowledge (epistêmê), it would be very silly to say that it’s correct belief with knowledge (epistêmê) of difference or of anything else’ (210a7–9).

Secondly, KBK, coupled with Plato’s claim that knowledge requires an aitias logismos, seems to lead to a regress. To know that p, my true belief that p must be tied down with an aitias logismos; this requires providing an explanatory account, say q. According to KBK, I must know that q. To know that q, I must have the true belief that q, and it must be tied down with an aitias logismos, which involves providing an account, r, which, by KBK, I must also know—and so on, it seems, ad infinitum. This is the familiar regress of reasons.

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⁸⁷ I do not know of anyone who appeals to KBK in order to argue that Plato does not have a justified-true-belief account of knowledge. I am not sure whether Armstrong, Belief, Truth and Knowledge, 152–4, views KBK as a fourth condition on knowledge, or as an account of what it is to be justified in the way necessary for knowledge.

⁸⁸ P. Moser, Knowledge and Evidence, 232, seems to think that Plato is vulnerable to Gettier counterexamples. This seems to be because he thinks that Plato takes knowledge to be justified true belief, where justification is construed quite weakly.

⁸⁹ However, though ‘knowledge’ occurs in both the definiens and definiendum, one piece of knowledge (knowledge that p) is being defined in terms of another piece of knowledge (knowledge that q), which is not flat circularity. For this point, see Armstrong, Belief, Truth and Knowledge, 153.
Plato does not explicitly consider either the circularity in the definition of knowledge or the regress of reasons in the *Meno*; but he considers both at the end of the *Theaetetus*. This encourages me to think that the *Meno* is thinking along the lines I suggest. For the *Theaetetus* then raises just the right questions. I suggest elsewhere that, although the *Theaetetus* does not explicitly provide a solution to either the circularity problem or the regress of reasons, it hints at answers to both of them. It indicates, if only indirectly, that one can avoid circularity in the definition of knowledge by eliminating the second occurrence of 'know.'⁹⁰ Instead of saying that one knows that p just in case one knows something else q, one can say that one knows that p just in case one has the true belief that p, plus the ability to relate p appropriately to other propositions in the same field or domain. This is Plato’s interrelation model of knowledge. The interrelation model of knowledge also suggests a way of avoiding the regress of reasons. For again, according to it, in order to know any given proposition one must be able to relate it appropriately to other propositions in the same field or domain; no propositions are known non-inferentially. This suggest a version of holistic coherentism, which Audi describes as follows: ‘beliefs representing knowledge fit a coherent pattern, and their justification emerges from their fitting that pattern in an appropriate way.’⁹¹ Coherentism is a classic response to the regress of reasons; and I think it is suggested by the interrelation model of knowledge.⁹²

Although the *Meno* does not explicitly consider either circularity in the definition of knowledge or the regress of reasons, it contains some suggestive remarks. First, we have seen that, in 98a, Plato says that knowledge requires *logismos*. In using *logismos* rather than, say, *epistêmê*, he adroitly avoids explicit circularity in the definition of knowledge. Perhaps he accepts KBK, and uses *logismos* to convey it; if so, he in effect takes knowledge to be true belief bound by knowledge of an explanation. But he side-steps the difficulties that claim gives rise to, by using *logismos* instead of ‘knowledge.’ Perhaps, in doing so, he anticipates or assumes the solution to the circularity problem that the *Theaetetus* hints at; if so, then perhaps the issue is vivid to Plato as early as the *Meno*. Alternatively, perhaps he uses *logismos* because he is not sure whether KBK is true; hence he chooses a broader term than ‘knowledge,’ one that allows him to be vague about the precise sort of reasoning knowledge must be based on. That, in turn, would fit well with his claim in 98b1–5 that he does not know what knowledge is.⁹³

⁹⁰ See Fine, ‘Knowledge and Logos in the *Theaetetus*,’ sect. VII. This paper also discusses Plato’s response to the regress of reasons, for which see also Fine, ‘Knowledge and Belief in *Republic* V–VII.’
⁹² In Fine, ‘Knowledge and Belief in *Republic* V–VII’ and in Fine, ‘Knowledge and Logos in the *Theaetetus*,’ by contrast, I sometime seem to ascribe linear coherentism to Plato. However, I think holistic coherentism comes closer to capturing his view. Thanks to Lesley Brown for helpful discussion of varieties of coherentism.
⁹³ See n. 37.
The *Meno* may also hint at a response to the regress of reasons. For as we have seen, the *Meno* seems to assume some sort of holism about knowledge: a sort that is at least congenial to the interrelation model of knowledge, even though no such model is explicitly spelled out here. Nonetheless, perhaps its hints of holism suggest that the *Meno* is sympathetic to such a model. If so, the dialogue contains the seeds of a reply to the regress of reasons.

10.

I have argued that in the *Meno*, Plato claims that knowledge is true belief plus something. Contrary to what is sometimes said, he does not think knowledge excludes, or even fails to imply, belief; rather, he takes knowledge to be a species of belief. And, contrary to what is sometimes said, he is interested in propositional knowledge. A true belief constitutes knowledge when it is tied down with an *aitias logismos*: that is, to know that p, one must not only have the true belief that p, but must also be able to explain why p is so. Plato also believes that knowledge cannot be essentially based on false beliefs; he may also accept KBK. Although these views about what must be added to true belief so as to yield knowledge differentiate Plato’s account of knowledge from some versions of a justified-true-belief account of knowledge, they are compatible with other versions of such an account. If, however, one thinks that, in imposing these conditions on knowledge, Plato rejects a justified-true-belief account of knowledge, one’s reason should not be that he bypasses justification, truth, or belief. It should rather be that he thinks they are necessary but not sufficient for knowledge. In the end, the answer to the question ‘Does Plato accept a justified-true-belief account of knowledge?’ largely and unsurprisingly depends on how we understand the justification condition on knowledge.”

But what’s more important than deciding precisely how to label his view is understanding its basic thrust. And I hope to have shed some light on that, while realizing that much more remains to be said.

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94 It also depends on whether we conceive of knowledge narrowly (as Burnyeat and Nehamas seem to do) or more broadly (as I prefer to do). See section 7.

95 Thanks to Charles Brittain, Dan Devereux, Carl Ginet, and David Sedley for helpful written and oral comments; and to Lesley Brown, Michael Frede, Verity Harte, Terry Irwin, Lindsay Judson, Ben Morison, Dominic Scott, and Christopher Taylor for helpful discussion. Thanks too to the audiences at Cornell University and the University of Virginia, where earlier versions were read in, respectively, April and November 2003.
4

The ‘Two Worlds’ Theory in the Phaedo

1. Introduction

At least in some dialogues, Plato has been thought to hold the so-called Two Worlds Theory (TW), according to which there can be belief but not knowledge about sensibles, and knowledge but not belief about forms.¹ The Phaedo is one such dialogue.² In this chapter, I explore some key passages that might be thought to support TW, and ask whether they in fact do so.³ I also consider the related issue of whether the Phaedo takes knowledge to be possible and, if it does, whether it argues that we can have it only when discarnate.

2. 65a⁹–66a¹⁰

I begin by considering 65a⁹–66a¹⁰, a crucial passage in which Socrates asks how, if at all, we can acquire wisdom (phronêsis):⁴

What about the very acquisition of wisdom (phronêsis)? Is the body a hindrance or not, if one enlists it as a partner in one’s inquiry? This is the sort of thing

¹ This is just one of various formulations that can be found in the literature. Not all of the formulations are equivalent; hence an argument that shows that Plato is, or isn’t, committed to TW on one formulation of it might not show that he is, or isn’t, committed to it on another formulation of it. Sensibles and forms don’t exhaust Plato’s ontology: for example, there are also souls. But I focus here just on sensibles and forms. Sensibles include both particulars (e.g. a redness token, or a table) and properties (e.g. redness).
³ In Chapter 5, I also ask whether the Phaedo is committed to TW. That chapter focuses on the Phaedo’s use of two key terms, epistêmê and doxa; and it argues that the dialogue consistently uses them for knowledge and belief; since the dialogue countenances epistêmê of sensibles and doxa about forms, it follows that it allows both knowledge of sensibles and beliefs about forms. Here, though I sometimes draw on the results of that chapter, I focus on other considerations relevant to TW. Further, in the present chapter I focus on the question of whether knowledge of sensibles is possible; I generally leave to one side the question of whether beliefs about forms are possible. I discuss that issue in Chapter 5.
⁴ I’ve inserted numbers into the text that correspond to my reconstruction of the argument in (P1)–(P9) below. Some of the steps in my reconstruction are implicit inferences and so they have no corresponding numbers in the text. All translations are my own, though I often rely on Gallop, Plato: Phaedo; and on D. Sedley (ed.) and A. Long (ed. and trans.), Plato: Meno and Phaedo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). I have also benefitted from C. J. Rowe’s (ed. with notes), Plato: Phaedo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and C. J. Rowe, Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). (Though neither of these last two books is a translation, they both translate individual passages.)
I mean: do sight and hearing contain (echei) any truth (alêtheian) for human beings (P3), or aren’t even the poets always harping on such things, telling us that we neither hear nor see anything accurately (akribes) (P2)? And yet, if these among the bodily senses are neither accurate nor clear (sapheis), the others will hardly be so (P1); for, I suppose, the others are all inferior to these. Or don’t they seem so to you? —Certainly.—So when does the soul grasp the truth (haptetai tês alêtheias) (P5)? Because whenever it tries to consider (skopein) something along with (meta) the body, it’s clear that it is then thoroughly deceived by it (P4). That’s true.—So isn’t it in reasoning (logizesthai), if anywhere at all, that any of the things that are (ti tôn ontôn) become manifest (katadêlon) to it (P8)?—Yes.—And it reasons best (kallista), I suppose, whenever none of these things bothers (paralupêi) it, neither hearing nor sight nor pain nor any pleasure, but whenever it comes to be itself by itself as far as possible, dismissing the body and, to the extent that it can, having neither association nor contact with it, it strives for what is (tou ontos).—That’s so.—So here too, doesn’t the soul of the philosopher especially disvalue the body and flee from it, seeking (zètei) to become itself by itself?—It seems so.—And what about things like the following, Simmias: Do we say that there is a just itself, or not?—We certainly do.—And again, a beautiful and a good?—Of course.—Now did you ever see any among such things with your eyes?—Not at all, he said.—Did you grasp (ephêpsô) them with one of the other senses <that operates> through (dia) the body? I’m talking about all such things: for example, largeness, health, and strength, and, to sum it up, about the being of all the rest, what each of them really is. Is it through the body that what’s truest about them is viewed (dia tou somatos autôn to alêthestaton theôreitai)? Or is the following rather the case: whichever of us especially trains himself with the greatest accuracy to think about each thing itself that he considers will come closest to knowing each of them?—Certainly.—So wouldn’t the one who does this the most purely be the one who, so far as is possible, used his thought in its own right to access each thing, neither adducing sight in his thinking nor dragging in any other sense along with his reasoning, but using his thought itself by itself purely, and so trying to hunt each of the things that is, itself by itself and purely, separated as far as possible from his eyes and ears and, one might say, his whole body, because it confuses the soul and, whenever the soul associates with it, it doesn’t allow it to acquire truth and wisdom. Is this, Simmias, the person who will attain what is, if anyone will (P9)?—What you say is eminently true, Socrates, said Simmias. (65a9–66a10)

This first part of this passage (65a9–c10) can be formulated as follows:

P1. The bodily senses are neither accurate nor clear.
P2. Therefore, we can’t perceive anything accurately or clearly.
P3. Therefore, perception doesn’t contain any truth.
P4. Therefore, whenever the soul inquires into (zêtein, 65a10), or considers (skopein, 65b10), something along with the body, it is deceived by the body.
P5. Therefore, the soul can’t attain truth when it inquires into, or considers, something along with the body.
P6. If one can’t attain truth, one can’t attain wisdom.
P7. Therefore, perception can’t attain wisdom; nor can the soul attain wisdom if it inquires into, or considers, something along with the body.
P8. Therefore, it’s in reasoning, if anywhere, that any of the things that are become manifest to the soul.
P9. Therefore, if the soul can attain wisdom at all, it will be by reasoning.

As the beginning of the passage just quoted makes clear, the purpose of the passage is to explain how, if at all, we can acquire wisdom. P1–7 argue that we cannot do so through perception.⁵ For the senses are not accurate or clear and hence do not contain truth; but, as P6 makes clear, one needs to attain truth to attain wisdom.⁶

Why does Socrates say that we do not perceive or hear anything accurately? One possibility is that he thinks we always misperceive things: we always perceive Simmias as Cebes, or red as green, or large objects as being small.⁷ However, elsewhere in the dialogue he seems to allow us to identify sensibles accurately. For example, in discussing the view that learning is recollection, he seems to allow us to identify lyres, cloaks, people, and pictures correctly.⁸ And in fact, though Socrates initially says that we do not perceive anything accurately or clearly, he goes on to make it clear that he intends only a weaker, or at any rate a different, claim. For in P8 he says that that if the things that are can become clear to the soul, it will be through reasoning: not through perception. Initially, the scope of ‘the things that are’ is unclear. But in 65d4–e5, he makes it clear that they are forms, which are not perceivable.⁹ This suggests that the claim is not that we don’t

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⁵ They also argue that we can’t acquire wisdom through what I call perception-guided inquiry, which is inquiry that is constrained by but goes beyond perception. In this chapter, however, I use the term ‘perception’ to cover both perception proper and perception-guided inquiry. I discuss the difference between them and explain its crucial importance in Chapter 7.

⁶ The argument sounds like a famous argument in Theaetetus 184–6, in which Plato also argues that perception isn’t knowledge. I explore the similarities and differences between the two passages in Chapter 7.


⁸ It’s true that we can recollect x even if we misidentify the reminding item, y. (For this point, see R. Dancy, Plato’s Introduction of Forms (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), ch. 11.) But Plato doesn’t exploit the point.

⁹ ti tôn ontôn in 65c3 (= P8) and tou ontos in 65c9 don’t indicate just forms. Socrates begins by sketching a general view that even the poets maintain (65b3); and they don’t countenance forms. But the general view is indeterminate and can be filled in in different ways. In 65d4–e5 Socrates explains that, on his version of the view, the point is that perception has no access to forms. As Gallop notes
perceive *anything* accurately or clearly, or that perception does not contain *any* truth. Rather, we do not perceive *forms* accurately and clearly; for we do not perceive them at all, and so we cannot grasp any truths about them through perception. Of course, if perception does not contain *any* truth, it does not contain any truths about forms. But I think the latter claim is meant to restrict, and thereby to explain, the former claim: a seemingly radical claim turns out to be a much more moderate claim. The claim is not trivial, since it assumes the existence of forms. But, granting their existence, it is not surprising to learn that perception has no access to them.

By P7 Socrates has argued that we cannot attain wisdom through perception; for, to attain wisdom, we need to grasp truths about forms, which perception cannot do. To say that grasping truths about forms is necessary for having wisdom does not imply that wisdom is restricted to forms.

P8 tells us that if any of the things that are can become clear to us—that is, if we can know forms—it will be through reasoning. To say that it is through reasoning, *if anywhere at all*, that forms will become clear to us is not to say that forms can become clear to us. Similarly, Socrates says that we will come closest (65e4) to knowing forms if we reason about them in the most accurate way. To say that we will come closest to our goal in that way is not to say that we can reach it. We shall need to see whether Socrates thinks we can do so. All we know so far is that if it is possible to acquire wisdom, we will do so by reasoning.

Reasoning and wisdom are not the same. Reasoning is a process whose ultimate goal is wisdom. Even if it is possible to reach that goal, reasoning can, and often does, fall short of it. But reasoning, as it is conceived of here, is not coextensive with everything we might think of as reasoning. For example, it is not just any old use of inference; rather, it is reasoning that is to some extent independent of perception, something the soul strives to do itself by itself. Hence wisdom, on the one hand, and perception, on the other hand, are not exhaustive: reasoning goes beyond perception, but it generally—for all we have seen so far, always—falls short of wisdom.

In 65c5–10, Socrates tells us that we can reason in better and worse ways. We reason best when our souls are as uninfluenced as possible by perception and, more generally, the body. Or again, we reason most purely if we approach forms

*(Plato: Phaedo, 93)*, Plato uses ‘the things that are’ in different ways in the dialogue: sometimes for forms (as at 78d4 and 83b2), sometimes more broadly (as at 79a6 and 99d5), and sometimes in a way that is indefinite, as in 65c. Though the use in 65c is indeterminate, Socrates makes it clear that the range of *onta* he has in mind are just forms.

At 65d11–e4, Socrates says that what’s truest about forms isn’t accessible to perception. This might be taken to suggest that we can perceive forms, though not accurately or clearly, which would require grasping what’s truest about them: presumably what they really are, their essence. Generally, however, Socrates speaks as though forms aren’t perceivable at all. If his only point is that perception can’t grasp truths about forms, he is not committed to the view that perception can’t grasp any truths. In my view, Th. 184–6 makes this latter point; hence, though the two passages sound alike, they in fact make significantly different points. See n. 6 and Chapter 7.
using just our thought (dianoia, 65e7)\textsuperscript{11} as far as possible (65e6–66a8). It is not that we cannot reason at all when we are incarnate. But for the soul to reason as well as possible, it has ‘to be itself by itself’ (65c7, d1–2, 66a1–2).

Here we can distinguish epistemological from ontological separation. My soul is epistemologically separate from the body to the extent that it can reason independently of the body. It is ontologically separate from my body when it no longer animates it; and it is ontologically separate tout court when it does not animate any body.\textsuperscript{12} Neither type of separation is sufficient for the other. Plato makes it clear that some discarnate souls are influenced by bodily desires (81b–82e) and so are not entirely epistemologically separate from the body. But he thinks we can achieve some degree of epistemological separation when we are incarnate. Indeed, later he seems to allow that it is possible to depart in a completely (pantelôs) pure condition (82b10–c1),\textsuperscript{13} which seems to require complete epistemological separation, since degrees of epistemological separation match degrees of purity. But there is a lot of space between being completely pure, on the one hand, and a body-lover (68c), on the other hand, space occupied by those who have achieved various degrees of epistemological separation and so of purity.

There are, then, degrees, or levels, of both epistemological separation and purity. There are also degrees, or levels, of accuracy. For example, Socrates says that whoever examines forms most accurately (65e3) will come closest to knowing them. Degrees of separation, purity, and accuracy march in step with one another: the degree to which one is epistemologically separate corresponds to the degree to which one is pure and can reason accurately.

On the interpretation I have suggested, 65a9–66a10 does not imply TW. Plato argues only that, to have wisdom, we must grasp truths about forms, which we cannot do through perception. That does not imply that wisdom is restricted to forms. The passage leaves open the possibility that we can be wise about sensibles if we understand them in the light of forms. Further, though 65a9–66a10 says that all wisdom implies knowing forms, it doesn’t say that all knowledge requires knowing forms. The passage leaves open the possibility that there is knowledge that doesn’t amount to wisdom and indeed that doesn’t even require grasping forms. The passage doesn’t endorse the view that we can be wise, or have a lesser sort of knowledge, about sensibles; but the passage is not incompatible with that view.

\textsuperscript{11} Dianoia seems to be used interchangeably with reasoning: see 65e6–66a2.


\textsuperscript{13} However, the text here is vexed and the passage is peculiar. Even if Plato doesn’t think anyone can depart in a completely pure condition (complete purity, even of just the epistemological sort, being attainable only after death), the passage supports the view that there are degrees of purity, which is my main concern.
By 66a10, Socrates has argued that we cannot attain ‘truth and wisdom’ (66a6) if we rely on perception: that is, we cannot grasp the truths that constitute wisdom that way.¹ He has also said that if anyone can acquire wisdom, it will be by reasoning that is maximally independent of the body. But he has not yet said whether anyone can acquire wisdom.¹ Rather than taking a stand on this directly, he proceeds to describe a doxa held by ‘genuine philosophers.’¹ He seems reluctant to count himself as one of them. That is not because he does not believe what they say; it is because he is not sure that he is as advanced as they are. He aspires to be like them, but is not sure to what extent he has done so.¹

They begin by developing Socrates’s remarks about how distracting the body is. They then say:

if we’re ever to know anything purely, we must be rid of [the body] and view the things themselves with the soul by itself. It’s then, apparently, that the thing we desire and whose lovers we claim to be—wisdom—will be ours, when we have died, as the argument indicates, though not while we live. Because if we can’t know anything purely in the body’s company, then one of two things must be true: either knowledge is nowhere to be gained or else it’s for the dead. For then, but no sooner, the soul will be itself by itself, apart from the body, and not before that. And while we’re alive, this, it seems, is how we’ll be closest to knowing: if, as much as possible, we avoid the company of the body and don’t go into partnership with it, except insofar as we can’t avoid it, and we don’t fill ourselves up with its nature, but purify ourselves from it until the god himself releases us. And when released, pure like this, from the folly (aphrosunê) of the body, probably then we’ll be in the company of such people, and we’ll know through ourselves everything that is unalloyed. And this, we hazard, is what is true. For perhaps it is not permitted for what is not pure to grasp what is pure.

(66d7–67b2; trans. Rowe, Art, 111–12, rev.)

¹ I take it that ‘and wisdom’ is added to make the scope of the relevant truths clear. Though ‘and wisdom’ doesn’t recur at 66d7, the context makes it clear that the only truths at issue are those that constitute wisdom. Relatedly, I think the force of to alêthes at 67b1 is that what the genuine philosophers say is true, in which case truth is here propositional; Plato is not identifying what is unalloyed (viz. forms) with the truth.

15 If no one can ever acquire it, and if it’s the only sort of knowledge there is, knowledge of sensibles is impossible. But I doubt that most defenders of TW would avail themselves of this route to it; for, on this view, knowledge of forms isn’t possible either.

¹⁶ I discuss this and other uses of doxa in Chapter 5, arguing that, contrary to TW, they suggest that there are mere beliefs about forms.

¹⁷ At 69d, Socrates says he’s tried to practice philosophy correctly, but isn’t sure whether he’s succeeded. If he is cognitively less well off than the genuine philosophers are, then either he has mere belief and they have knowledge; or they all have mere belief and there are levels of belief; or they all have knowledge and there are levels of knowledge. If he or the genuine philosophers have mere beliefs, there are beliefs about forms. If he or they have knowledge, some knowledge is possible in this life.
According to the genuine philosophers, if we cannot know anything purely when
we are incarnate, either knowledge is impossible or else it is possible only for those
who are discarnate.¹ The genuine philosophers endorse not only the conditional,
but also its antecedent, and so its consequent, which is a disjunction. In fact, they
seem to accept the second disjunct.

On one interpretation, they think we cannot have any knowledge at all while we
are incarnate, since the only sort of knowledge there is, is pure knowledge—that is,
wisdom. On a second interpretation, they leave open the possibility that pure
knowledge—the sort of wisdom they describe—is just one level of knowledge and,
though we cannot have it while we are incarnate, we can have other, lower levels of
knowledge then.

Commentators are divided as between these two interpretations.¹⁹ Against the
second interpretation, one might note that, in speaking of knowledge in 66e6,
Plato omits ‘purely.’ But the second interpretation can say that the context, which
has just mentioned knowing purely, makes it reasonable to supply it. One might
also object to the second interpretation that nowhere in the Phaedo does Plato
explicitly use the phrase ‘impure knowledge’ or ‘impure wisdom.’²⁰ However, if,
elsewhere in the dialogue, Plato says or implies that we can have some knowledge
while we are incarnate, that would count in favor of the second interpretation. For
otherwise, we would have to say that Plato is either inconsistent or speaking
loosely. Of course, we might in the end favor one of these options.²¹ But it is worth
asking whether there’s a reasonable interpretation that avoids them.

In Chapter 5, I provide such an interpretation.²² I argue there that all of the
occurrences of epistêmê in the dialogue indicate knowledge as it contrasts with
mere true belief; yet epistêmê plainly extends beyond the scope of phronêsis and is
attainable while we are incarnate. But even if not all of the occurrences of epistêmê

¹⁸ Being discarnate is just a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for the sort of pure knowledge
(= wisdom) that the genuine philosophers describe.

¹⁹ For the first interpretation, see L. Gerson, who says that it is ‘a serious mistake to take “know
purely” to imply that there is a type of knowledge that is “impure”’ (From Plato to Platonism (Ithaca,
Tri-Partite Soul and the Possibility of Non-Philosophical Virtue,’ in R. Barney et al. (eds.), Plato and the
Divided Soul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 9–32, 11. For the second interpretation,
see C. Bobonich, Plato’s Utopia Recast (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 35; Pakaluk, ‘Degrees of
Separation in the Phaedo.’ If the first interpretation is correct, that’s further evidence in favor of the
view that there are mere beliefs about forms. For quite a lot is said about them by those who are
incarnate. By contrast, the second interpretation is neutral as to whether there are mere beliefs about
forms. To decide whether either view allows knowledge of sensibles, we need to know more about how
they conceive of knowledge.

²² See n. 3.
indicate knowledge, still, we shall see shortly that the dialogue countenances a sort of wisdom that we can have while incarnate. There are, then, two levels of wisdom; and since wisdom is a type of knowledge,²³ there are at least two levels of knowledge.

At 67b7, Socrates resumes speaking in his own voice, saying that if what the genuine philosophers say is true, there is plenty of hope that, once dead, one can adequately (hikanôs, 67b8) acquire wisdom. Either he means that we can acquire wisdom only when we are dead. Or else he means to suggest, or to leave open the possibility, that, though we cannot adequately acquire wisdom until we are dead, we can acquire it inadequately when we are incarnate, where that means that there is a lower level of wisdom, or some level of knowledge, that is attainable for those who are incarnate.²⁴ The passage is neutral as between these two interpretations. We should therefore favor whichever interpretation best fits the dialogue as a whole; that is the second interpretation.

Neither the genuine philosophers’ doxa nor Socrates’s comments on it imply that we cannot know sensibles. It is said that we cannot acquire the (best sort of) wisdom through perception or while we are incarnate, and that having it requires grasping forms. But that does not imply that such wisdom is restricted to forms; it leaves open the possibility that, once we have it, we can apply it to sensibles and be wise with respect to them too. The passages just explored also leave open the possibility that there are lower levels of knowledge that are not restricted to forms; they even leave open the possibility that not all knowledge requires knowledge of forms. Wisdom requires grasping forms; but it has not been said that all knowledge amounts to wisdom.

4. The Affinity Argument

Let us turn next to the Affinity Argument (78b4–84b8). One key passage for our purposes is 79c–d:

Now weren’t we also saying this a while ago: that whenever the soul uses the body as a means for considering something, either through seeing or through hearing or through some other sense (for to consider something through the body is to do

²³ At 76c, Socrates says that we had prenatal epistêmê, and he makes it clear that this epistêmê is phronêtis (76c12–13). Hence phronesis is a type of epistêmê (and it’s clear that at least this use of epistêmê indicates genuine knowledge.) But we need not infer that all epistêmê is as exalted as phronèsis is.

²⁴ Similarly, at 68ab Socrates says that we can acquire the only sort of wisdom ‘worth mentioning’ only when we’re dead. This might mean that it’s the only sort of wisdom there is; but it might instead mean to imply, or leave open the possibility, that there is also a lower level of wisdom that we can acquire while we’re incarnate. Later we’ll see that, whatever is meant here, in fact the dialogue posits two levels of wisdom.
through perception), it is then being dragged by the body towards things that
are never in the same state; and the soul itself wanders and is confused and dizzy,
as if drunk, because it is grasping things of a similar kind.

Certainly.

Whereas, whenever the soul considers something itself by itself, it goes off
there towards what is pure and always is and is deathless and in the same state;
and the soul, because it is akin to this, always comes to be with it whenever it is
itself by itself and whenever it is possible for it to do so; the soul is then at rest
from its wandering, and in relation to those entities there, it always stays in the
same condition, because the things it is grasping are similar; and this state²⁵ of the
soul is called ‘wisdom,’ isn’t it? (79c2–d7)

The passage begins with a back reference to 65–7: there, as here, Socrates contrasts
perception and wisdom. And there, as here, he says that we cannot attain wisdom
by relying on perception; for wisdom requires knowing forms, yet perception has
no access to forms.

There is, however, an important difference between 65–7 and 79c–d:²⁶ the
wisdom at issue in 65–7—at least, the wisdom described by the genuine philo-
sophers²⁷—is attainable only when we are discarnate. Here, by contrast, Socrates
describes a sort of wisdom we can have while incarnate. That this is so is suggested
by the fact that he speaks of a soul considering forms ‘whenever it may do so,’
which seems to imply that it cannot always do so.²⁸ Presumably that is because it is

²⁵ *pathêma*. Olympiodorus comments on the use of the word at 13.19; cf. Damascius 2.40.
²⁶ Two further differences are also worth noting. First, 79 doesn’t discuss reasoning that falls short of
wisdom; yet that was of central concern in 65–7. However, though 79 doesn’t mention this sort of
reasoning, neither does it say anything that’s incompatible with its existence. Secondly, 79c, but not
65–7, says that sensibles are ‘never in the same state.’ Some commentators think 79c espouses Extreme
Heracliteanism, according to which, at every moment, every sensible is changing in every way, a view
that is sometimes thought to imply that there are no truths about sensibles. If this were Plato’s view, it
would preclude knowledge of sensibles, since knowledge implies truth. For the view that the *Phaedo*
espouses Extreme Heracliteanism, see e.g. R. Bolton, ‘Plato’s Distinction between Being and Becoming,’
Forms* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 54–61, I argue that the dialogue doesn’t hold, but in fact
rejects, this view. So we shouldn’t follow that route to TW.

Dancy thinks 83a–b says that there are no truths about sensibles; he infers that there is no knowledge
of sensibles: *Plato’s Introduction of Forms*, 262. 83a–b does say that sensibles aren’t *alêthes*, but I take
this to mean, not that there are no truths about sensibles, but that sensibles aren’t real in that they aren’t
the fundamental entities (though they exist: see 79a6–7). Of course, one might argue that Plato thinks
that only what’s real can be known. For this view, see R. Ketchum, ‘Plato on the Unknowability of the
Sensible World,’ *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 4 (1987), 291–305, though he focuses on the *Philebus*
and *Rep.* 5, which fall outside my present scope.

²⁷ In 65–8, Socrates doesn’t make it clear what sort of wisdom he has in mind when he speaks in his
own voice.
²⁸ 94b5 also suggests that we can have some wisdom when incarnate. So too does the famous
exchange passage (69a–d). It seems to take this lower level of wisdom to be sufficient for virtue
(presumably for a lower level of virtue than the one those who achieve the best sort of wisdom attain),
and it is attainable in this life by those who practice philosophy correctly and, presumably, make
enough progress.
incarnate and so needs to spend some time attending to the body’s needs: we need to sleep and eat, for example. If we can attain some wisdom when we are incarnate, there are two levels of wisdom: a higher level that can be acquired only by those who are discarnate, and a lower level that can be acquired by those who are incarnate. The two levels are alike in that both involve grasping forms as they are in themselves; and both involve some degree of stability.²⁹ They differ in that the sort of wisdom the genuine philosophers describe involves grasping all the forms: when we have it, ‘we shall know (gnôsometha) through our very own selves all that is unsullied’ (67a8–b1; emphasis added).³⁰ So presumably lower-level wisdom is more piecemeal: to have it, one needs to know forms, but one does not need to know all of them.³¹

Since wisdom is a type of knowledge, and since we can have one level of wisdom when we are incarnate, we can have at least some knowledge when we are incarnate. Further, since there are two levels of wisdom, there are at least two levels of knowledge. Earlier I contrasted two interpretations of the genuine philosophers’ commitments. On one of them, they think all knowledge amounts to wisdom, which we can have only when we’re discarnate. On the other, they leave open the possibility that the sort of wisdom we can have only when we are discarnate is just one level of knowledge; other levels are possible for us when we are incarnate. 79d favors the second interpretation.³²

Though 79d requires a grasp of forms for all wisdom, it does not restrict wisdom to forms.³³ It leaves open the possibility that we can be wise about sensibles if we understand them in the light of our wisdom with respect to forms. It also leaves open the possibility that we can know sensibles in a way that falls short of being wise about them. 79c–d contrasts just two possibilities:

At 85c3–4, Plato says that ‘to know clearly (saphes eidenai) about such things in this life is either impossible or very difficult’ (‘such things’ are what happens to us when we’re dead). Though this just mentions a disjunction, it would be odd to mention the second disjunct if it has already been argued that we can’t know anything in this life. However, it’s not clear from this passage whether knowing clearly is wisdom, or a level of knowledge that falls short of wisdom. At 96c3, Plato uses the same phrase, where the relevant knowledge seems to involve a grasp of aitai; but it’s not clear whether that confers wisdom. If knowing clearly is having wisdom, wisdom isn’t restricted to forms, since the things at issue in 85c are the things that happen to us in the afterlife and, in 96c, why things here are as they are; the latter plainly include sensibles.

²⁹ Meno 98a also says that knowledge is stable.

³⁰ This anticipates the Rep.’s description of the highest level of the Divided Line, which one attains only when one can say what each form is, and can explain the forms’ relations to one another and to the form of the good (533b, 534b–c). Cf. Phd. 97b8–d1.

³¹ Plato doesn’t make it clear how many forms one needs to know to have the lower level of wisdom. At 74b3, Simmias says that he knows what the form of equality is (a claim Socrates doesn’t challenge). Suppose that’s the only form he knows: is that enough to make him wise? Or does he have knowledge that falls short of wisdom? I discuss this passage in Chapter 5.

³² As I’ve already noted, if we take all the occurrences of epistêmê to indicate knowledge, that also favors the second interpretation; it would also follow that not all epistêmê is wisdom. 79 is neutral as to whether all epistêmê is wisdom.

³³ This is so even if Plato is defining wisdom. All that would follow in that case is that we can be wise without being wise about sensibles.
perceiving sensibles and having wisdom about forms. It does not say that these two possibilities are exhaustive, and we know that they are not: there is also reasoning that goes beyond perception but falls short of wisdom.

Here a comparison with the Sun image from Republic 6 might be helpful. The Sun contrasts just two conditions: knowing forms when they are illuminated by the form of the good, and having mere beliefs about sensibles. It does not mention two further possibilities: having a grasp of forms when they are not illuminated by the form of the good, and knowing sensibles. Though the Sun image does not mention these possibilities, neither does it preclude them; and elsewhere in the dialogue Plato countenances them. Indeed, the Sun image is introduced precisely because Socrates claims to have mere beliefs, not knowledge, about the form of the good, and so must resort to an image (506b–e). Further, 520c countenances knowledge of sensibles.³⁴

Similarly, though 79c–d mentions just perceiving sensibles and having wisdom about forms, it does not say that these two conditions are exhaustive. And just as the Sun image does not preclude the possibility of knowing sensibles, neither does 79c–d do so. It leaves open the possibility that we can apply our wisdom to sensibles in such a way as to be wise with respect to them. It also leaves open the possibility that we can have knowledge of sensibles that falls short of wisdom.

## 5. Noêta and anoêta

A further passage in the Affinity Argument should also be considered. In 80b, Socrates says that:

soul is most similar to what is divine, immortal, intelligible (noêtôi), uniform, indissoluble, unvarying, and constant in relation to itself; whereas body, in its turn, is most similar to what is human, mortal, multiform, not-intelligible (anoêtôi), dissoluble, and never constant in relation to itself. (80b1–5)

He is contrasting forms and sensibles. One difference between them is that forms are noêta (80b1), whereas sensibles are anoêta (80b4).³⁵ The claim that sensibles

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³⁴ I discuss TW in Republic 5 in G. Fine, ‘Knowledge and Belief in Republic V,’ Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie 60 (1978), 121–39. I discuss TW in Republic 5–7 in ‘Knowledge and Belief in Republic V–VII,’ in S. Everson (ed.), Companion to Ancient Thought 1: Epistemology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 85–115. Both are reprinted in my Plato on Knowledge and Forms: Selected Essays (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), chs. 3 and 4, respectively. I argue there that Republic 5 isn’t committed to TW, and that elsewhere in the dialogue he says things that are incompatible with it.

³⁵ The translations of these terms vary. For the former term, Gallop, Plato: Phaedo, and Sedley and Long, Plato: Meno and Phaedo, have ‘intelligible’; R. Hackforth’s Plato’s Phaedo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955) has ‘accessible to thought.’ For the latter term, Gallop has ‘non-intelligible’; Sedley and Long have ‘resistant to intelligence’; Hackforth has ‘inaccessible to thought’; Rowe has ‘unintelligible.’
are anoêta is unique to 80b4. Elsewhere in the dialogue, rather than contrasting noêta with anoêta, Socrates contrasts noêta with aisthêta or horata (the perceptible or visible). So, for example, 83b4 contrasts what’s aisthêton and horaton with what is noêton and aides.⁶ Similarly, the beginning of the Affinity Argument contrasts what is invisible and grasped by ‘reasoning of thought’ (tô(i) tês dianoias logismô(i)) with horata (79a4). Though noêta is not used here, horata is; indeed, it is used several times in 79b. But it is then abruptly replaced with anoêta in 80b4; and, at 80b1, being grasped by ‘reasoning of thought’ is replaced with noêta. 81b then contrasts ‘what can be touched and seen, drunk and eaten, or used for sexual enjoyment’ with what’s invisible but noêton and grasped by philosophy.

How should we interpret the contrast between noêta and anoêta? Let us consider the former term first. The Phaedo uses nous/noësis/noein in various ways.⁷ At 63e3, Socrates contrasts someone who has nous (is intelligent) with someone who lacks it and so is anoêtos (62d8)—silly, foolish, or stupid. 82b3 couples philosophy with nous. 93b8 says that some souls have nous and virtue and are good, while others are anoian—they lack nous (93b8). In 97–8, Socrates describes Anaxagoras’ view that nous orders all things for the best, though he adds that in the end Anaxagoras did not make use of his nous.³⁸ The terms therefore sometimes seem to be used just for being intelligent and thoughtful, but sometimes more narrowly, for having knowledge. For example, presumably the nous that orders all things for the best has a very high level of knowledge. The nous that goes along with virtue and goodness also involves some level of knowledge.

In the Affinity Argument, Plato suggests that forms are noêta in that they are graspable only by ‘reasoning of thought’; they can’t be perceived. As we have seen, that is a familiar claim in the dialogue.⁹

Let us turn now to the claim that sensibles are anoêta. Usually the term is used in the active sense, for a foolish, silly, or stupid person, action, or thing; and that is how it is used elsewhere in the dialogue.⁴⁰ Here, however, it is used in the passive sense. 80b4 seems to be the only occurrence of the passive sense not just in the Phaedo, but in Plato.⁴¹ Further, according to LSJ and TLG, prior to Plato the

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⁶ A-ides, the unseen; but Plato evidently means to allude as well to Hades. See Rowe, Art, 106.
⁷ So too does the Republic. For example, at 511d8 noësis is used for the highest level of the Divided Line; but at 509d2 and 534a3, the two highest levels of the Line are collectively said to belong to the realm of the noëtou, of the intelligible (nous, noein, and noësis all refer to cognitive states or agents broadly conceived, whereas noêta are things graspable by nous. Nonetheless, it’s useful to look first at the terms that refer to cognitive states and agents).
⁸ See also 99a8, 102a4, 114d2.
⁹ At Rep. 511a1–2, Plato says that such things as the square itself can be seen (idein) only by dianoia; in 511a4, he calls such things noêta. Here too, noêta are things that can be grasped only by thought.
⁰ See e.g. 62d8, 81a6, 88b4, 93b8 95b5, 95c4. Cf. aphrosunês at 67a7.
¹¹ LSJ cites Parmenides 132c, but I don’t think this occurrence of the term is the passive. Plato is considering whether forms are thoughts. He says that, if they are, then either everything that
passive occurs only in the Homeric hymn to Hermes, line 80, and in Parmenides, Fr 8, line 17. Parmenides uses the term for the rejected path of what is not, saying that it should be left anoêtos and unnamed because it is not a true (alêthes) path. It is disputed whether he means just that it cannot be known or, more strongly, that it cannot even be thought of.

Whatever Parmenides means, Plato is not saying that sensibles cannot be thought of at all (if we understand thought broadly enough); for he thinks we can have at least beliefs, including true beliefs, about them. (For example, we can have the true belief that this is Simmias’ cloak; or that sensibles are not real.) He has also made it clear that we can reason about sensibles: that is how we learn that they are not real (82e–84b). Nor do I think Plato uses the term to indicate that sensibles are unknowable. Here it is worth noting that the contrast in the Republic between noêta and horata or aisthêta is not the contrast between what can be known but not believed, and what can be believed but not known. For example, noêta and horata are contrasted at 507, just after Socrates says that he has mere beliefs about the form of the good; and in 520c he allows knowledge of sensibles. Of course, that does not mean the same is true in the Phaedo. But it should caution us against too readily assuming that the distinction between noêta and horata/aisthêta is the same as, or even coextensive with, that between knowledge and belief.

But what, then, does the claim mean? Well, if I am right to say that forms are noêta just in the sense that they can be grasped only by reasoning of thought, then it is reasonable to think that, in saying that sensibles are anoêta, Plato means only that they are a-noêta: they are not noêta; for they are not the objects just of thought, since they can also be perceived. As Burnet, among others, suggests, perhaps Plato is also hinting at the usual use of the term to indicate that sensibles are foolish or stupid in the sense that, if we rely just on them, we will not achieve wisdom. He is just reiterating already-familiar points, albeit in a somewhat arresting way.

participates in forms thinks, or else they are thoughts that are anoêta (132c11). In citing this passage as involving the passive, LSJ seems to assume that the second option is that participants in forms aren’t thought of. But a more plausible alternative is that Plato means that participants are thoughts that don’t think.

LSJ doesn’t mention either the Phaedo or Parmenides, but TLG cites them under the passive use.


I discuss these passages in the articles cited in n. 34.

J. Burnet (ed. with notes), Plato’s Phaedo (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911). 80. He is followed by Gallop, Plato: Phaedo; and by Rowe, Plato’s Phaedo, 188. Contrast Hackforth, Plato’s Phaedo, 84 n. 1. It is perhaps some evidence in favor of Burnet’s suggestion that in Rep. 509d1–4, Plato contrasts noêta with horatou (‘of the visible’), saying he’s using that word rather than ouranou (‘of the heaven’), noting the similarity between the two words, but also perhaps indicating that ouranou, unlike horatou, contains nou (of the intelligible) as a part. (So G. M. A. Grube, Phaedo, in John Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (eds.), Plato: Complete Works (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997). There is, then, some word play involved here, in a context that contrasts noêta and horata. Maybe he is alluding to Phd. 80b4, but
6. Philosophers and non-philosophers

According to Gallop, Plato’s contrast between philosophers and non-philosophers implies TW. In favor of this view, he cites 82a11–b3:

And aren’t the happiest among these, and the ones who go to the best place, those who have practised popular and social virtue, which they call ‘temperance’ and ‘justice,’ which has come about from habit and practice, without either philosophy or intelligence (nous)? (82a11–b3)

Unfortunately, Gallop does not say why he thinks this passage implies TW. But does it do so? The passage Gallop quotes is part of Plato’s account of what happens to the souls of those who have achieved demotic virtue when they die. They are the happiest—that is, they come the closest to being happy—among those who are not genuinely virtuous. They are not genuinely happy or virtuous because their so-called virtue is ‘devoid of philosophy and intelligence (nous).’ Accordingly, they will be reincarnated as bees, wasps, or ants—or as humans. But, Plato says, ‘the company of gods is not permitted for anyone who didn’t pursue philosophy (philosophêsanti) and has not departed in a completely pure condition, but only for the lover of learning (philomathei)’ (82b10–c1; cf. 80d5–81a11).

This might seem to imply that only philosophers have knowledge. But in fact it implies only that non-philosophers lack the knowledge that’s necessary for virtue. That leaves open the possibility that they can have some knowledge. That would be possible, for all that is said here, if, as it seems reasonable to assume, the knowledge that is necessary for virtue does not exhaust the scope of knowledge. Further, Plato thinks wisdom is necessary for virtue (69a–d). If there are lower levels of knowledge than wisdom, then, for all that has been said, non-philosophers can have them.

But even if non-philosophers do not, or cannot, know anything, it does not follow that knowledge of sensibles is impossible: perhaps philosophers have, or can have, it. They could not have it if it is the case both that one needs to attain wisdom to be a philosopher and wisdom is restricted to forms. However, neither is explaining that this time, in describing sensibles, he’s avoiding using any part of the word nous. Perhaps his joke wasn’t well understood. Plato’s pun in the Rep. is nicely captured by Griffith, who has: ‘The other is the ruler of what can be seen—of the heavenly scene, I could say.’ See G. F. R. Ferrari (ed.) and T. Griffith (trans.), Plato: The Republic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

In 524c, after explaining that there are some things that perception can explain (e.g. what it is to be a finger) and others that it can’t explain (e.g. what it is to be large or small), Plato says that it’s ‘because of this’ (houtó(i)), 524c13) that some properties—e.g. largeness and smallness—are called noêta whereas others—e.g. being a finger—are called horata. So x is noêton if it can’t be explained in perceptual terms. If it can be explained in perceptual terms, it’s horaton (or aisthêton). This doesn’t imply that only noêta can be known.

Plato: Phaedo, 146.
the case. To be a philosopher is not to have wisdom, but to love it, to value it properly and to do one’s utmost to live a life geared to achieving it.\textsuperscript{47} One can love wisdom without having acquired it. Nor has Plato committed himself to the claim that wisdom is restricted to forms. But even if (contrary to my view) he thinks wisdom is restricted to forms, he has not committed himself to the claim that knowledge is restricted to forms.

7. Conclusion

We have now looked at the main passages in the \textit{Phaedo} that might be thought to imply \textit{TW}, and found that they do not so; they leave open the possibility that we can know sensibles. In Chapter 5, I provide reasons for thinking that the \textit{Phaedo} admits both beliefs about forms and knowledge of sensibles. But, I say there, we would need to revisit that view if other passages in the dialogue commit Plato to \textit{TW}. We have now seen that the passages we have explored here do not do so; so, unless there are further passages that do so (though I am not aware of any), we should conclude not only that the \textit{Phaedo} is not committed to \textit{TW} but also that it rejects it. Along the way, we have been able to resolve a standing problem posed by the \textit{Phaedo}, of whether we can have knowledge or wisdom while incarnate. On the view defended here, though we cannot have the highest level of wisdom while incarnate, we can have lower levels of wisdom and knowledge while incarnate.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{47} See also R. Weiss, ‘The Right Exchange: \textit{Phaedo} 69a6–c6,’ \textit{Ancient Philosophy} 7 (1987), 57–66. However, though we agree that not all philosophers have knowledge, we disagree about the implications for being virtuous. She thinks it’s sufficient for being virtuous that one be a philosopher, and so she denies that knowledge is necessary for virtue. In my view, by contrast, Plato thinks knowledge is necessary for virtue (where the relevant level of knowledge must be at least the low-level of wisdom described above), and so not all philosophers are virtuous.

\textsuperscript{48} Talks based on earlier versions of this chapter were given at a seminar in the University of Paris, Nanterre (March 2014); as the J. L. Ackrill Memorial Lecture in Oxford (March 2014); as the Keeling Lecture in University College, London (March 2014); as a plenary talk at the British Society for the History of Philosophy in York (April 2015); and at a workshop on the \textit{Phaedo} held in Harvard (October 2015). Thanks to the audiences on these occasions for helpful comments; and to Lesley Brown, David Charles, Zeyu Chi, Terry Irwin, and Rachana Kamtekar for helpful discussion and written comments.
5

Epistêmê and Doxa, Knowledge and Belief, in the Phaedo

1. Introduction

Lately, some commentators have argued that, as Plato understands epistêmê, it isn’t knowledge as we understand it nowadays; and that, as he understands doxa, it isn’t belief as we understand it nowadays.¹ One reason that’s been given for thinking this is the view that Plato individuates epistêmê and doxa by their objects, whereas knowledge and belief are not individuated by their objects. In particular, it’s been argued that Plato thinks that there is epistêmê but not doxa about forms, and that there is doxa but not epistêmê about sensibles. This is a version of what is often called the Two Worlds Theory (TW).² So, for example Jessica Moss writes that ‘[i]f we cannot have beliefs about intelligibles, then Plato does not mean by doxa what we mean by belief.’³ Since, in her view, Plato doesn’t allow doxai about intelligibles, she infers that doxa isn’t belief. She also argues that, at least in Republic 10, doxa is broader than belief, though she thinks that, at least in the Theaetetus, it is too narrow to count as belief.⁴ Similarly, it’s been argued


² There are many formulations of TW, not all of which are obviously equivalent. In G. Fine, ‘Knowledge and Belief in Republic V,’ Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie 60 (1978), 121–39, and ‘Knowledge and Belief in Republic V–VII,’ in S. Everson (ed.), Cambridge Companion to Ancient Thought I: Epistemology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 85–115, I argue that Republic V is not committed to TW. Both articles are reprinted in my Plato on Knowledge and Forms (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003, chs. 3 and 4, respectively). In Chapter 3 of the present volume, I argue that the Meno isn’t committed to it. In Chapter 4, I argue that the Phaedo isn’t committed to it. The present chapter is a companion to Chapter 4.

³ ‘Plato’s Appearance-Assent Account of Belief,’ 217.

⁴ ‘Plato’s Appearance-Assent Account of Belief.’ See also Moss and Schwab, ‘The Birth of Belief.’ Neither of these papers discusses the Phaedo which, however, is my focus here.
that epistêmê isn’t knowledge because it is more difficult to attain than knowledge is—though, as we shall see, it has also been argued that Plato sometimes conceives of epistêmê too broadly for it to count as knowledge.⁵

To decide about this, we need an account both of how Plato conceives of epistêmê and doxa and also of how ‘we’ understand knowledge and belief nowadays. But doing this is difficult: for commentators differ not only about how Plato conceives of epistêmê and doxa, but also about what knowledge and belief are. Hence two commentators could agree about how Plato describes epistêmê but disagree about whether it’s knowledge, because they have different views about what knowledge is. Or they might agree about what knowledge is, but disagree about how Plato describes epistêmê. Similarly, mutatis mutandis, for belief.

These aren’t just abstract possibilities. For example, I’ve mentioned that one reason Moss gives for thinking that epistêmê and doxa aren’t knowledge and belief is that the former but not the latter are individuated by their objects. Ralph Wedgwood agrees with Moss (and many others) that Plato takes epistêmê and doxa to have different objects and so favors TW. Wedgwood nonetheless takes epistêmê to be knowledge, and to have several important features characteristic of knowledge, as some epistemologists conceive of it nowadays.⁶ Moss and Wedgwood agree that Plato accepts TW; but they disagree about whether that implies that, as he conceives of epistêmê, it isn’t knowledge.

Or, to take another example, Whitney Schwab has recently argued that, as Plato conceives of epistêmê in the Meno, it isn’t knowledge, but a different phenomenon, understanding.⁷ Several commentators agree that epistêmê, for Plato, is understanding. But it’s sometimes thought that understanding is either knowledge as such or a kind of knowledge.⁸ This is disagreement about how to understand understanding, not about how Plato conceives of epistêmê.

Here I find it helpful to distinguish the concepts of knowledge and belief from particular conceptions of them.⁹ A concept of knowledge or belief specifies an

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⁵ For the view that epistêmê is more difficult to attain than knowledge is, see the articles cited in n. 1. For the view that it is sometimes conceived of too broadly to count as knowledge, see my discussion of Gerson in section 5.


⁷ Schwab, ‘Explanation in the Epistemology of the Meno.’

⁸ Schwab (25) describes R. Foley, *When is True Belief Knowledge?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 8, as holding the first view, for which see also P. Sliwa, ‘Understanding and Knowing,’ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 115 (2015), 57–74. Burnyeat sometimes seems to favor the second view: see the articles cited in n. 1. See also e.g. J. Greco, ‘Episteme: Knowledge and Understanding,’ in K. Timpe and C. Boyd (eds.), *Virtues and Their Vices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 285–302. For the view that understanding isn’t even a kind of knowledge, see e.g. A. Hills, ‘Moral Testimony and Moral Experience,’ *Ethics* 120 (2009), 94–127; and her ‘Understanding Why,’ *Nous* 50 (2016), 661–88. For criticism of the first of these two papers by Hills, see Sliwa, ‘Understanding and Knowing.’

abstract general account of them; different ways of filling in those accounts yield different conceptions of them. Even contemporary epistemologists have different conceptions of knowledge and belief. But we shouldn’t infer from that fact alone that they have different concepts of knowledge and belief.¹⁰ Similarly, even if Plato’s conceptions of epistêmê and doxa differ from some or all contemporary conceptions of knowledge and belief, they might nonetheless be conceptions of shared concepts of knowledge and belief.

For an analogy to this way of proceeding, consider the famous question of whether, when Plato explains justice in the Republic as a certain sort of psychic harmony, he’s explaining justice in the sense in which Glaucon and Adeimantus understand it.¹¹ David Sachs famously answered ‘no’; in his view, Plato is talking about something else altogether and so he commits the ‘fallacy of irrelevance.’ Others have argued that Plato has an unusual view of justice—but, for all that, it is a view of justice. It’s useful to point out how Plato’s view of justice differs from other views of it. But we should be careful before concluding that he’s not talking about justice at all. Similarly, even if Plato’s conceptions of epistêmê and doxa differ from some or all contemporary conceptions of knowledge and belief, they might nonetheless be conceptions of shared concepts of knowledge and belief.

But how, one might ask, can we can tell when A and B have different conceptions of a single concept rather than different concepts? Plato addresses this, if only briefly, by applying ‘commonplace tests’ (Rep. 442e), arguing that the account he’s provided preserves enough of our intuitions or generally shared beliefs about justice; he also argues that his account does the right sort of explanatory work.

Perhaps there is no completely uncontroversial account of the concepts of knowledge and belief (not much is completely uncontroversial!). Still, I’ll take the concept of belief to be that of taking something to be true; this is, at any rate, a familiar view of belief.¹² On this concept of belief, if one merely entertain the


¹¹ See, for example, E. Schwitzgebel, ‘Belief,’ in Zalta, E. (ed.), the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2015 Edition). Moss and Schwab in ‘The Birth of Belief,’ also favor this account of belief. One might argue that taking p to be true is not sufficient for believing that it is true; for one
possibility that the oar is bent in water, or wonders whether it is, or acts as though it is, or accepts that it is as a hypothesis about whose truth one suspends judgment, one doesn’t thereby believe that the oar is bent in water. But if one takes it to be true that the oar is bent in water—if one thinks it is the case that the oar is bent in water—one believes that it is. There are disputes about whether, to believe that x is F, one must actively consider whether it is and then on that basis decide that it is; about whether beliefs can be passively acquired; and about the extent to which belief is sensitive to reasons. Different ways of resolving these disputes yield different conceptions of belief, not different concepts of it.

I can now be more precise about why Moss thinks that in some dialogues doxa is too broad to count as belief, whereas in others it is too narrow to do so. She thinks it is too broad because she thinks that in Republic 10 it includes non-doxastic appearances, as when it seems to me that the oar seems bent in water but I don’t take it to be bent. And she thinks it is sometimes too narrow because she thinks that in e.g. the Theaetetus it requires actively considering and answering a question. Since belief requires taking to be true, non-doxastic appearances aren’t beliefs; since it doesn’t require actively considering a question, restricting doxa to such cases makes it narrower than belief.

As to knowledge, I’ll take the concept of it to be that of a truth-entailing cognitive condition that goes beyond and is cognitively superior to mere true belief.¹ This leaves open the question of precisely how knowledge differs from

might take p to be true (say, because a trusted expert tells one that it is) without at all understanding what it means; yet to believe that p, one must understand what p means. Here it might be helpful to distinguish levels of understanding. If a trusted expert tells me that p, using a foreign language I don’t at all understand, that’s not enough for me to believe that p. If, however, a trusted chemist tells me, in a language I understand, that water is H₂O, then, even if I’m ignorant of chemistry, I might thereby believe that water is H₂O: I have enough understanding for that if I have some beliefs about water (e.g. that it’s liquid and can be found in lakes and rivers) and grasp that H₂O is a chemical compound. However that may be, the correct account of belief should be robust enough to preclude non-doxastic appearances from counting as beliefs, but not so robust as to require that one know that p in order to believe that p. Thanks here to discussion with David Charles.

¹ Cf. H. Lorenz, The Brute Within: Appetitive Desire in Plato and Aristotle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Moss and Schwab, in ‘The Birth of Belief,’ think that doxa is too narrow to count as belief because it isn’t the genus, taking to be true, but just mere belief, belief that falls short of knowledge.

¹⁴ See Chapter 3 and Chapter 9. One might object that my account of the concept of knowledge is an account just of propositional knowledge, and that there are other sorts of knowledge that aren’t truth-entailing (e.g. knowing-how, or knowing a person, place, or thing). Similarly, one might object that my account of the concept of belief is just an account of what it is to believe that p, and that there are other sorts of belief that aren’t like that (e.g. believing in someone or something). I won’t enter into these issues here.

The account of knowledge that I suggest leaves open the possibility, but doesn’t imply, that knowledge is a species of, or at least implies, belief. Both the view that knowledge is a species of belief and that it implies belief are controversial. In Knowledge and its Limits (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), for example, T. Williamson denies that knowledge is a species of belief, though he thinks it implies it. In ‘Some Considerations about Belief,’ in A. Phillips Griffiths (ed.), Knowledge and Belief (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 41–59, at 42 (originally published in Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 35 (1934–5), 229–52), H. H. Price argues that knowledge doesn’t even imply belief. (However, in Belief (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), 86, he notes that what he really
mere true belief (i.e. from true belief that falls short of knowledge); different ways of answering that question yield different conceptions of knowledge, not different concepts of it. Some think the key difference is justification—either some justification or other, or justification of a certain sort or level. Others think the key difference is having acquired one’s knowledge in a certain way. Many other suggestions have also been offered. But these are all different conceptions of a single concept of knowledge.

I can now be more precise about why epistêmê is sometimes thought to be too demanding to be knowledge. We’ve already seen that it is sometimes taken to be understanding; and it is sometimes thought that understanding is more difficult to attain than knowledge is because, for example, understanding is holistic, whereas one can know a single thing or proposition on its own. Relatedly, it’s been thought that, to have any epistêmê at all, one must grasp both why something is so and also that there are forms. But it’s often thought that there is knowledge-that, that falls short of knowledge-why; the latter is thought to be required for understanding but not for (all) knowledge. Nor would most people say that all knowledge requires a grasp of Platonic forms.

With these concepts of belief and knowledge in mind, we can now ask whether, when Plato discusses doxa and epistêmê, he is discussing belief and knowledge as such, or just particular kinds or species of belief and knowledge, or something else altogether. If he’s discussing belief and knowledge as such, or particular kinds or species of belief and knowledge, we can ask what his conceptions of them are and how they contrast with this or that contemporary conception of them.

Here, however, we should proceed piecemeal, asking how he conceives of them in a given dialogue: for he might conceive of them differently in different dialogues. In what follows, I restrict myself to the Phaedo. Interestingly, though Plato’s views about epistêmê and, to a lesser extent, doxa, have often been discussed in connection with, say, the Meno, Republic, and Theaetetus, they have not been much discussed in connection with the Phaedo. Presumably this is because they are not there the focus of explicit theoretical discussion, in contrast to Republic 5 and the Theaetetus, both of which aim to say what epistêmê is and how it differs from doxa or true doxa.¹⁵ Still, the Phaedo uses the terms doxa and

mean is that knowledge doesn’t imply mere belief, a claim that is not controversial if ‘mere belief’ is belief that necessarily falls short of knowledge.) Moss and Schwab think it would be a ‘complete non-starter’ to say that knowledge doesn’t imply belief, when belief is just taking to be true; but they argue that since for Plato doxa is ‘mere belief,’ it follows that knowledge doesn’t imply belief.

¹⁵ As C. Kahn remarks, ‘[t]he contrast between knowledge and true opinion is not as conspicuous in the Phaedo as are the other three anticipations noted from the Meno (essences, recollection, and hypothesis)’ (Plato and the Socratic Dialogue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 339 n. 13). I touch on essence and recollection below.
epistêmê several times; and Plato says, or implies, various things about them. It’s worth asking what we can infer about his understanding of them.

2. Doxa in the Phaedo

The Phaedo uses forms of doxa eight times (at 66b2, 69d2, 70b9, 82c6, 95a9, 96b7 (two occurrences), 99a2); and forms of doxazein seven times (67b4, 68b3, 83d6, 83d7, 84a8, 92a7, 108c7). Let’s begin by asking about these occurrences of the terms.

It also uses other cognitive terms that might (or might not) be thought to indicate knowledge and belief: e.g. (for the first) forms of eidenai, gignôskein, and phronein; and (for the second) of oiesthai, hêgêisthai, and dokein. Even if Plato doesn’t use any specific words to mean ‘knowledge’ or ‘belief,’ he could indicate in some other way that he is talking about knowledge or belief. Be that as it may, I focus on the dialogue’s use of epistêmê and the associated verb, and its use of doxa and doxazein. I generally leave dokein to one side. However, so far as I can tell, in the Phaedo Plato seems to speak interchangeably of having a doxa, doxazein, and dokein. So, for example, 81b4 has dokein; 83d–e3 makes the same point as does the passage of which 81b4 is a part, but it has doxazousan and homodoxeine. 98e2 has edoike, 99a2 has doxa, 99a7 has ta doxanta; no difference is intended. 69d2 has doxa; 69d6 makes the same point, but it has hôs emoi dokei. It’s not surprising that the terms should at least sometimes be used interchangeably, since they are cognates.

One might argue that, if the dialogue doesn’t explicitly theorize about the terms, it provides no evidence of how Plato really understands them. That would, however, be a controversial claim. Consider the following methodological suggestion by J. Lyons, in his influential book Structural Semantics: An Analysis of Part of the Vocabulary of Plato (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969): ‘Plato himself was very much concerned with examining what some would call the “concepts” of sophia, technê, and epistêmê and with their explication and redefinition in terms of his own philosophy; and commentators discussing Plato’s use of these lexemes have tended to concentrate their attention on the passages where he seeks to do this. [Footnote 1: For criticism of scholars’ tendency to concentrate on the particular passages when terms are being defined, rather than to base their conclusions on the whole, cf. C. W. R. Larson, “Platonic synonyms.” It might almost be said that explicit definition of a term by an author is evidence that it does not generally mean what he says it does!] The principle I have adopted, with regard to the interpretation of the passages in which Plato explicitly defines or discusses the lexemes that fall within the scope of the inquiry, is the following: I attempt to elucidate them in terms of other passages in which the lexemes in question are used, as it were, unconsciously. This is in accord with a principle familiar in linguistics: to accept everything that the native speaker says in his language, but to treat with reserve anything he says about his language, until this has been checked’ (139–40). Thanks to Huw Duffy for the reference. I think the ‘principle familiar in linguistics’ goes too far. But it would also go too far to say that, in attempting to understand how Plato conceives of doxa and epistêmê, we should discount all uses of the terms except those that occur in passages in which he is explicitly theorizing about them. How Plato uses the terms when he is not theorizing about them provides some guidance at least about what he takes the concepts of epistêmê and doxa to be and that, in turn, imposes constraints on his conception of them. It would be undesirable if Plato, in theorizing about epistêmê and doxa, or in using the terms in a ‘strict’ sense, committed the fallacy of irrelevance. His precise notion of the terms should, at the minimum, be continuous with, and illuminate, other uses. So it’s worthwhile exploring those uses. Nor, as we shall see, are all the occurrences of forms of doxa and epistêmê in casual contexts, which is another reason not to dismiss them out of hand.

Despite these occurrences, M. Morgan says that ‘there is no mention of belief in the Phaedo’: ‘Sense-Perception and Recollection in the “Phaedo,”’ Phronesis 29 (1984), 237–51, at 249. He also says that ‘there is no support for employing the distinction between belief and knowledge’ in the Phaedo. (Morgan’s point isn’t that doxa isn’t used for belief, or that epistêmê isn’t used for knowledge.)

For a detailed discussion of Plato’s use of doxa and related terms, see Y. Lafrance, La théorie platonicienne de la Doxa (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2nd ed., 2015). However, Lafrance doesn’t discuss the Phaedo.

In what follows I focus on some salient occurrences of the terms, but I don’t systematically discuss all of them. For the record, though, all but one seem to me to use the term for belief in the sense...
According to Michael Frede, in the *Phaedo aisthanesthai*:\(^{20}\)

is restricted to cases of awareness that somehow involve the body and that constitute an awareness of something corporeal. But even now it would be rash to assume that the verb means ‘sense-perception.’ For in these cases it is used almost interchangeably with “dokein” and “doxazein,” “to seem” and “to believe.” The realm of belief, as opposed to the realm of knowledge, is the bodily world with which we are in bodily contact as a result of which this world appears to us in a certain way, as a result of which we have certain beliefs about it. There is no ‘doxa,’ no belief about the ideas, because the ideas are not the kinds of things with which one could have the kind of contact that gives rise to a belief or a perception. But, just as it would be a mistake to infer from this that ‘doxa’ means ‘sense-perception,’ so there also is no need to assume that ‘aisthēsis’ means ‘sense-perception,’ though standards cases of ‘aisthēsis’ will be cases of sense-perception.

However, contrary to Frede, the *Phaedo never uses aisthanesthai interchangeably with doxazein.*\(^{21}\) Indeed, in 96b *doxa* and *aisthēsis* are explicitly contrasted. Here Socrates asks:\(^{22}\)

described in the previous section, as taking to be true. The outlier is 82c6, which uses *adoxian* for dishonor or lack of respect or repute.


\(^{21}\) This is not to say that perception, in the *Phaedo*, doesn’t involve belief. I am commenting only on Plato’s use of *doxa* and *doxazein*. Plato could of course think that perception involves belief even if he doesn’t use *aisthanesthai* (almost) interchangeably with *dokein or doxazein*. Though I don’t think *doxa* and *aisthēsis* are ever used interchangeably in the *Phaedo*, it would do for my purposes if the dialogue countenances *doxai* that are not about sensibles.

\(^{22}\) *Phronoumen* seems to be used here for thinking in general rather than for wisdom in particular, though elsewhere in the dialogue it is generally used for wisdom. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own. However, I rely heavily on D. Gallop, *Plato: Phaedo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); and on D. Sedley and A. Long, *Plato: Meno and Phaedo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). I have also benefitted from C. J. Rowe, *Plato: Phaedo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and his *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). (Though these works by Rowe aren’t translations, they both translate some passages. Further references to Rowe are from his *Plato: Phaedo.*)

In this passage, perception plainly falls short of *doxa*. However, it doesn’t follow that it does so elsewhere in the dialogue: Plato might speak of perception in more than one way (which would not
And is blood that by which we think (phronoumen), or air, or fire? Or is it none of these, but the brain that supplies the senses of hearing, seeing and smelling, from which memory and belief come to be; and is it the case, as they say, that from memory, and belief that has become stable, knowledge (epistêmê) comes to be in these ways? (96b4–8)

It’s true that Socrates is here describing views he was enamored of when he was young, and he makes it clear that he no longer accepts all of them; so we shouldn’t assume that he accepts everything he says in the passage. Nonetheless, the passage shows that he’s aware of a view on which aisthêsis and doxa are not interchangeable; and nowhere in the dialogue does he explicitly reject that view. Let’s look at some sample passages.

At 99a2 Socrates says that his bones and sinews have the doxa that it would be best for him to flee, a doxa Socrates thinks is false. One might think that any doxa bones and sinews have would have to be about what’s perceptible; but even if that’s so, that falls short of saying that doxa and aisthêsis are used interchangeably.

It’s one thing to say that a doxa is about what’s perceptible, another to say that it is itself a perception.

99a2 isn’t the only place where something bodily has a doxa. At 83d the body and some souls are said to homodoxein: they share some doxai, in particular, the doxa that only the body says (phê(i)) is real (or true: alêthê); again, this is a doxa Socrates thinks is false. The doxa, like the one had by his bones and sinews, is about sensibles insofar as it takes only them to be real; but, again, that doesn’t imply that the term doxa is interchangeable with aisthêsis.

But whatever we say about these two passages, there are other passages where doxa and doxazein are clearly not used (almost) interchangeably with aisthêsis and aisthanesthai, for the simple reason that they are about what can’t be perceived. For example, in 66b1–67b5 Socrates describes a doxa (66b2; cf. 68b3, 67b4, doxazein) genuine philosophers (tois gnêsiôs philosophois, 66b2) have; their doxa includes claims about forms.²³ At 69d2, Socrates says that, according to his doxa, certain people (whom he describes) pursue philosophy correctly; as the dialogue makes abundantly clear, anyone who pursues philosophy correctly countenances imply that he is confused about different sorts of perception). As Gallop remarks, ‘Plato’s language for sense experience is often hard to interpret’ (91).

²³ It’s worth noting that the genuine philosophers describe their doxa in somewhat hesitant terms (hôs eoiken, 67a2; isôs, 67b1, though, see Rowe, Plato: Phaedo); and Socrates ascribes it to them rather tentatively as well (66b3, 67b3–5).

Olympiodorus says that the genuine philosophers’ doxa derives its content, not from what’s lower (katôthen), but from thought (dianoia). There are, he says, two sorts of doxai—presumably he means ones derived from perception and ones derived from thought (5.13). Similarly, Damascius (1.103) says that the doxa at issue here doesn’t rely on perception and isn’t about sensibles; rather, he says, it’s like a dogma derived from dianoia and epistêmê. For Olympiodorus and Damascius, see L. G. Westerink (ed. with trans.), The Greek Commentaries on the Phaedo, 2 vols. (Dilton Marsh, Westbury: The Prometheus Trust, 2nd ed., 2009). Originally published by North Holland Publishing, 1976/1977.
(or, if all goes well, will eventually countenance) forms. At 70b9 Cebes says he’d like to hear Socrates’s doxa about the soul. At 92a7, Socrates says that Simmias will have to change his doxa that learning is recollection if he continues to think that the soul is an attunement. The argument for the claim that learning is recollection rests crucially on the view that forms exist; so this passage also suggests that there are doxai about forms.

I noted earlier that one reason that’s been given for thinking that doxa isn’t belief is that it has its own special objects. Whatever is true in other dialogues, in the Phaedo doxa doesn’t have special objects: one can have doxai not only about sensibles, but also about forms and souls.

One passage, however, might seem to count against this view. At 84a2–b4 Plato says:

the soul of a philosophical man would reason in the way said. It would not think that, though philosophy ought to release it, yet, while philosophy is releasing it, it ought to surrender itself of its own accord to pleasures and pains, to bind it again <to the body>, and ought to carry out the endless task of a Penelope, working in reverse at a kind of web. Rather, securing respite from these things, following reasoning and always <engaging> in it, and viewing what is true and divine and not the object of belief (adoxaston), and being nurtured by it, it thinks that it ought to live this way for as long as it lives and that, when it has died, by reaching what is akin and of the same kind as itself, it is rid of human ills.

Gallop takes this passage to say that there can be no beliefs about forms.²⁴ If he is right, either the Phaedo is inconsistent (allowing doxai about forms in some passages, but disallowing them here), or else I have misinterpreted the passages that I took to allow such doxai. (One might say there are doxai but not beliefs about forms. However, that isn’t Gallop’s point and I ignore that issue for the moment.)

But I don’t think we need to accept Gallop’s interpretation. Socrates is describing a philosopher whose soul has secured ‘respite from these things’—that is, from such things as bodily pleasures and pains—so that he can engage in reasoning, that is, in thought that is independent, or relatively independent, of perception, indeed someone who’s engaged in enough such reasoning to be able to ‘view’ forms and be nurtured by them. For such a person, forms are adoxasta; for he has knowledge,

²⁴ Gallop, Plato: Phaedo. See also Kahn, Plato and the Socratic Dialogue, 347 n. 23; 361, n. 35. In the second of these two passages, Kahn says that ‘[i]n every careful statement of the basic dichotomy [of being and becoming], doxa and sense perception belong together as taking to gignomenon as their object (e.g. Tim. 28a2), whereas the reality of the Forms is adoxaston (84a8).’ This leads him to dismiss Rep. 506b–e, where Socrates says he has doxa but not knowledge about the form of the good as a ‘dramatic aside.’ It would also commit him to rejecting as careless many occurrences of doxa in the Phaedo, which likewise are not restricted to to gignomenon. The more occurrences one has to reject, the less plausible is the account that leads one to do so.
not mere *doxa*, about them. The point isn’t that no one can have *doxai* about forms. The point is rather that the philosopher who’s reached the position Socrates describes doesn’t have them.\(^{25}\)

### 3. Belief in the *Phaedo*

So far we’ve seen that Plato allows *doxai* about forms. But does the *Phaedo* use *doxa* for belief? If it doesn’t, then, even though it allows *doxai* about forms, it wouldn’t follow that it allows beliefs about them.\(^{26}\) However, it seems to me that, in the passages we’ve looked at, whoever (or whatever) is said to have a *doxa* takes its content to be true. If so, the *doxai* at issue are beliefs.

\(^{25}\) For a similar interpretation, see Rowe, *Plato: Phaedo*. (It’s not clear, however, whether he thinks the term means ‘mere belief’ or is just being used to indicate mere belief, without that implying that the term means ‘mere belief.’) 84a8 is the only passage in the Platonic corpus that says that forms are *adoxasta*. TLG lists sixty-three occurrences of the term. Only one is pre-Platonic, from an otherwise unknown fragment of Euripides, cited in the Suda without any context. Sextus frequently uses the term for skeptics who live *adoxastôs*: here the term is applied to a person, not (as in the *Phaedo*) to forms.

It might seem to count against my interpretation that the two preceding epithets that are applied to forms—being true and divine—are not person relative in the way I have suggested *adoxaston* is. (Thanks here to Lesley Brown and Raphael Woolf.) However, the claim about nourishment that follows is person relative (though, as Brad Inwood has pointed out to me, grammatically *adoxaston* goes with the preceding epithets). Cf. 84b1 with b4; the latter has ‘such nurture,’ which suggests that one can be nurtured in different ways and to different degrees. Plato is indicating that he has in mind being nurtured *in such a way as to have knowledge*. The passage should be read with 83d4–e4 (discussed briefly above), where some souls are said to have the false *doxa* that only the corporeal is real; these souls have mere *doxa* (and a false one at that), and they are said to become of the same character (*homotropos*) and nurture (*homotrophos*) as the body. In 84a1–b8, by contrast, the soul realizes that forms are what’s real and it is nurtured by them; it engages in the right sort of reasoning and so no longer has the false *doxa* that it has in 83d4–e4. It’s in this sense that forms are *adoxasta*: when one acknowledges their existence and reasons about them in the right way, one no longer has mere *doxa*; and one is nurtured in a different way. In *Rep.*, 409a8–b7 Plato also describes someone who’s been nurtured (*trephoito*, 490b6) in such a way that he has knowledge.

One might argue that *adoxaston* means ‘not the object of *doxa*,’ and that the point is therefore that no one can have any *doxai*, of any sort, about forms. However, even if *adoxaston* means ‘not the object of *doxa*,’ it doesn’t follow that no one can have any *doxai*, of any sort, about forms. The contrast with 83d4–e4 makes it plausible to think that the point is just that the person at issue doesn’t have just beliefs about forms, for that person has knowledge. Cf. *Rep.* 345e, where Thrasymachus says he doesn’t *oiesthai* something; rather, he knows (*eidenai*) it. *Oiesthai* is here used for merely believing something; but that’s not what the word *means*. (Strictly speaking, at 345e3 Socrates asks Thrasymachus whether he *eiei* something; Thrasymachus then says ‘no, but I know it well (*eu oida*),’ by which means that he has knowledge, not just belief.) Similarly, I might say *It’s not raining,* it’s pouring.* In saying this, I don’t mean that it’s not raining, nor am I using ‘not raining’ in an unusually restricted sense; I am using it idiomatically to convey the thought that it’s not raining lightly.

On another possible interpretation of *adoxasta* (suggested to me by Rachana Kamtekar), the -tos ending indicates what’s suitable or characteristic: forms aren’t the proper objects of *doxa* in the sense that that’s not what they are for, which doesn’t imply that one can’t have *doxai* about them. -tos endings can be used in this way. Aristotle, for example, arguably sometimes uses *haires* this way: see e.g. *Top.* 116a13ff. (Thanks here to Terry Irwin.) See also LSJ, sv *haires*.

\(^{26}\) Though neither would it follow that it doesn’t. As I’ve mentioned (n. 16), there are various ways in which Plato could indicate that there are beliefs about forms; he need not use the term *doxa* to do so.
One might argue that, though that’s so, still, all the examples of doxai are of mere beliefs: that is, of beliefs that fall short of knowledge. One might then infer that, at least in the Phaedo, doxa means ‘mere belief,’ not ‘belief,’ where that term names a genus of which mere belief is just one species. If that view is right, doxa in the Phaedo isn’t belief as such but, at best, a species of belief.²⁷

However, even though all the doxai mentioned in the Phaedo fall short of knowledge, we shouldn’t infer, from that fact alone, that doxa means ‘mere belief,’ if only because Plato hasn’t offered a general analysis of what doxa is. The mere fact that the examples he gives are of mere beliefs doesn’t show that he wouldn’t use the term more widely. We need to distinguish the meaning of the term, from its extension or reference in a given context.

And there are dialogues, both before and after the Phaedo, in which Plato uses the term doxa for a genus of which mere doxa is just one species. He does so, for example, in Meno 98a, where he defines epistêmê as a species of true doxa. He also does so in Republic 5. Both dialogues also use the term for doxai that fall short of epistêmê. Plato finds it natural to use the term both ways.²⁸ (Similarly, in English we sometimes speak of knowledge implying belief, though we also say such things as ‘I don’t believe it’s raining; I know it is.’) So the mere fact that all the doxai mentioned in the Phaedo fall short of knowledge, or epistêmê, doesn’t show that, as Plato understands doxa, it doesn’t mean ‘belief.’

²⁷ For the view that Plato takes doxa to be ‘a deficient cognitive attitude,’ see K. Vogt, Belief and Truth: A Skeptic Reading of Plato (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9. (See also Moss and Schwab, ‘The Birth of Belief.’) In her view, doxa involves taking to be true, though its content always falls short of knowledge (10–11); so she seems to think that doxa is a species of belief as ‘we’ understand it. I’m not sure, though, whether she thinks doxa means ‘mere belief’ or is just used that way, though it means ‘taking to be true.’ For, though she says that all doxai fall short of knowledge and are deficient, she also says that ‘Doxa is the technical term for “belief,” understood—minimally—as holding to be true’ (10). Unfortunately, she doesn’t explore the Phaedo.

²⁸ These claims about the use of doxa in the Meno and Republic are controversial. I defend them in Chapter 3, and in ‘Knowledge and Belief in Republic V’ and ‘Knowledge and Belief in Republic V–VII.’ For a different view of the Meno, see e.g. R. Shope, The Analysis of Knowing (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 12–13; D. Sedley, ‘Three Platonist Interpretations of the Theaetetus,’ in C. Gill and M. M. McCabe (eds.), Form and Argument in Late Plato (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 79–103. For a different view of the Republic, see F. Gonzalez, ‘Propositions or Objects? A Critique of Gail Fine on Knowledge and Belief in Republic V,’ Phronesis 41 (1996), 245–75.

Gorg. 487a is another place where doxa seems to be used for the genus: Socrates says that if Callicles agrees with him about what he (Socrates) believes, those beliefs will be true; he doesn’t mean that it follows that the beliefs are mere true beliefs (they might be, but that’s not what is implied). In asking, in the Theaetetus, what needs to be added to true belief so as to yield knowledge, Plato also seems to use the term both generically and for mere belief. (In saying this, I don’t mean to imply that Plato accepts what is sometimes called an ‘additive’ model of knowledge. For recent discussion of it, see S. Broadie, ‘The Knowledge Unacknowledged in the Theaetetus,’ Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy 51 (2016), 87–117.)

In saying that Plato uses doxa both generically and for the species of mere belief (just as we use ‘belief’ in the same two ways), I don’t (pace Moss and Schwab) mean that he uses it in two different senses. In my view, doxa means taking to be true, but is sometimes used more narrowly, with the context making it clear which use is at issue.
To my mind, what’s striking about the doxai that Plato mentions isn’t that they are mere beliefs, but two other facts. First, many, though not all, of them are held for considered reasons and as a result of reflection; they are not all mere ‘superficial seemings,’ nor are any of them non-doxastic appearances. Rather, all the doxai in the Phaedo involve taking something to be true, and so they are all beliefs in ‘our’ sense. Secondly, they are not restricted to sensibles. The scope of doxa in the Phaedo is broader than it is often thought to be: it is not restricted to sensibles but extends to forms. Its nature is also broader than it might have been thought to be: though some doxai (such as those ascribed to the body, or to parts of the body: 83d6–7; 99a2) are superficial and ill-judged, others (such as the genuine philosophers’ doxa) are deeply considered. Despite these differences, they all involve taking to be true, and so they are all beliefs. Nor is there any reason to suppose that all doxai fall short of knowledge or that the term means ‘mere belief,’ in such a way that doxa is just a species of belief, as we understand the term. Rather, doxa means ‘belief,’ though it is used just for cases that are mere beliefs.²⁹

4. Epistêmê in the Phaedo

Let’s now ask how the Phaedo uses epistêmê (epistasthai).³⁰ The term is used relatively frequently in the discussion of the theory of recollection (TR), but less frequently outside it, where there are just a handful of occurrences: 61b6, 90d7, 96b8, 96c4, 97b4, 97d5, 108d8, and 117a8. Let’s begin by looking at these latter occurrences.

At 61b6, Socrates says that he has epistêmê of (êpistamên) Aesop’s fables; and he indicates that he has a high degree of familiarity with them, not just a casual acquaintance.³¹ One might argue that, though all the doxai mentioned involve taking to be true, that doesn’t preclude the possibility that Plato would also use the term for what we would call non-doxastic appearances; and, if he would, doxa doesn’t mean ‘taking to be true.’ That’s true. But the dialogue doesn’t provide any support for the view that doxa includes non-doxastic appearances; and, as we’ve seen, it counts against the view that doxa is restricted to sensibles or to superficial seemings. (These are different: the genuine philosophers have deeply considered views about sensibles; misologists have superficial seemings about arguments, taking them to be bad when they haven’t thought them through. One can have a superficial attitude, or a deeply held view, about anything; neither is restricted to its own objects.)

According to Lyons, Structural Semantics, in Plato the verb is much more specialized than the noun (e.g. 175). This might lead one to think that the use of the noun doesn’t indicate knowledge as opposed to mere true belief. In the theory of recollection, however, the noun and the verb are at least sometimes used interchangeably. For example, 74b2 uses the verb; 74b4 switches to the noun. I shall translate epistêmê as ‘knowledge,’ without meaning to prejudge the issue of whether it’s knowledge as such, a kind of knowledge, or something else again. I ask in due course how we should understand it.

It’s worth noting that at 75d8, Socrates says that to eidenai something is to have epistêmê of it (or to have acquired epistêmê of it: labonta tou epistêmên echein) and not to have lost it. This suggests that to eidenai something is to have (or to have acquired) epistêmê of it; so one might infer that eidenai and epistasthai are synonymous. However, despite 75d8, Plato sometimes seems to use eidenai more broadly than epistasthai. See, for example, 63e6.

Hence Gallop translates épistamên as ‘know by heart.’
In the so-called misology passage, Socrates says that if we dismiss arguments³² (logoi), we deprive ourselves of the opportunity to acquire truth and epistêmê about the things that are (tôn de ontôn tês alêtheias te kai epistêmês sterêtheiê, 90d6–7); to acquire these, we have to become skilled³³ about which arguments to accept and which to reject.³⁴

We looked at 96b earlier, focusing on its contrast between doxa and aisthêsis. The passage also contrasts epistêmê with doxa; indeed, it’s the only passage in the dialogue that explicitly does so. What it says about them recalls the Meno’s account of epistêmê, according to which epistêmê is true doxa that is tied down with reasoning about the explanation (aitias logismô(i)); this confers the sort of stability needed for epistêmê (Meno 98a). There are, however, some differences. For example, unlike the Meno, the Phaedo passage doesn’t say that epistêmê involves reasoning about the explanation—though, as we’ll see, both logos³⁵ and aitia are important later in the dialogue.

At 97b, Socrates says that he can’t persuade himself that he has epistêmê of (epistamai) why one comes to be. He used to think he knew (epistasthai, 96c3; eidenai, 97c6) this; but he no longer thinks he does.

At 97d5, he says that whoever knows (eidenai) the highest good will also know what’s worst, since the best and the worst are objects of the same epistêmê (97d5).

At 108d8 he says that even if he knew (êpistamên) the many things he’s just been talking about (seeming to imply that he doesn’t), still, there isn’t time, given the length of the relevant logos (discussion or argument or account) and the limited time he has left, to convey it all to Simmias—though, he adds, nothing prevents him from telling Simmas what he’s been convinced (pepeismai) of.

At 117a8, Socrates says that his jailer knows (epistêmôn) ‘these things’; presumably that includes knowing how much poison to administer.³⁶

As these passages make clear, the dialogue allows us to have epistêmê of sensibles; epistêmê isn’t restricted to forms or even to intelligibles more broadly conceived.³⁷ It is also, at least in some cases, easy to come by.

³² Gallop, and Sedley and Long, translate logos in this context as ‘argument.’ Logos can also be translated in many other ways, for example as ‘account,’ which is the usual translation when Socrates speaks of logon didonai, to give an account.

³³ meta technês, 89e7; atechnian, 90d3.

³⁴ This suggests that reasoning in a certain way is at least necessary for acquiring epistêmê. Nothing is said about what sorts of objects one must reason about.

³⁵ One might argue that logos and logismos are importantly different, but I won’t explore that issue here.

³⁶ For more on the jailer, see 63e. Interestingly, though Socrates says that the jailer has epistêmê, the jailer himself says that ‘we grind only as much as we think (oiometha) is the right amount to drink’ (117b). Perhaps the jailer is more epistemically modest than Socrates thinks he needs to be.

³⁷ Not all of these passages are about epistêmê of sensibles; but some of them are. Thanks here to Barbara Sattler.
Let’s now ask how epistêmê (epistasthai) is used in the theory of recollection (TR).³⁸ Cebes introduces TR at 72e, whereupon Simmias asks what proofs (apo-deixeis, 73a5) there are of it. Cebes replies:

One especially fine argument (logos) is that when people are questioned, if someone questions them well,³⁹ they state the truth about everything for themselves. And yet they wouldn’t be able to do so unless epistêmê and a correct account were present in them. Then, if one presents them with diagrams or something else of that sort, one shows most clearly that this is so. (73a6–10)

This passage alludes to the *Meno*, where Socrates also defends TR. He does so there by questioning a slave about a geometry problem; eventually the slave is able to answer the question correctly for himself. Socrates argues that if the slave were to be questioned further, he would acquire epistêmê of the answer (by the time Socrates is through with him, he has only a true doxa about it).⁴⁰ He also argues that the slave’s, and our, ability to acquire epistêmê can be explained only by positing prenatal epistêmê of some range of things (81a–86c).⁴¹

Simmias isn’t satisfied with Cebes’s brief account of recollection, so Socrates provides another argument in its favor. From 73a–74a, he lays out general conditions for recollection. He begins by mentioning a necessary condition: ‘We agree, I take it, that if someone is going to recollect something, he must have known (epistasthai, 73c2) it at some earlier time.’ Let’s call this the Prior Epistêmê Requirement. It can be formulated as follows:

PER: If A is reminded of y by x at t₁, A had epistêmê of y before t₁.

He then mentions a sufficient condition:⁴²

Now do we also agree that whenever epistêmê comes in the following sort of way, it is recollection? I mean in some such way as this: if someone, seeing or hearing or having some other perception of one thing, not only recognizes (gnô) it but also comes to think of (ennoêsêi) something else, which is the object not of the


³⁹ Olympiodorus, *Commentary on the Phaedo*, 11.12, comments: ‘That is to say, in the right, Platonic way, not as the Peripatetics handle them, nor with an eye to cheap triumphs, but with the readiness to hold out a hand to one’s interlocutor, if he stumbles’ (trans. Westerink).

⁴⁰ Hence in the *Meno* there can be both epistêmê and true doxa about at least some of the same things.


⁴² Or an allegedly sufficient condition: it isn’t in fact a sufficient condition. See Chapter 6.
Let’s call this the **Different Epistêmê Requirement**. It can be formulated as follows:

**DER:** If A perceives x at t1, and not only recognizes x but also thinks of something else, y, that is the object of a different epistêmê, A recollects y.

Plato’s strategy is to show that the sufficient condition (DER) is sometimes satisfied; hence we can infer that the necessary condition (PER) obtains; and so we had some prior epistêmê.⁴³ One of Plato’s examples is that, on seeing and recognizing Simmias, I might think of Cebes, who is other than Simmias and the object of a different epistêmê.⁴⁴ In this case, I recollect Cebes and so, by PER, I have prior epistêmê of him. If I can have epistêmê of Cebes, epistêmê of sensibles is possible.

Having discussed ‘ordinary’ cases of recollection, such as when, on seeing and recognizing Simmias I recollect Cebes, Socrates turns to another sort of case. First he asks whether we say that there is such a thing as the form of equality; Simmias agrees that we do (74a9–b1). Socrates then asks whether we epistametha what it is; Simmias agrees that we do (74b2–3). This has been thought to conflict with 76b4–c3, where Socrates says that, if someone knows something, they can give an account (logos) of it. Yet, Simmias thinks, no one (except perhaps Socrates) can give accounts of forms. How, then, can ‘we’ know what the form of equality is?

Various ways of resolving this seeming contradiction have been proposed. On one of them, ‘we’ in 74b2 includes all or most people, and ‘knowledge’ is ordinary, garden-variety knowledge: all or most of us can classify things as equal, or ‘know’ the correct use, or the meaning, of the word ‘equal.’ The point in 76b4–c3, by contrast, is that no one (except perhaps Socrates) has philosophical or high-level knowledge of forms. Since the sense of ‘know’ differs (or since the levels of knowledge differ) in the two passages, they do not conflict.⁴⁵

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⁴³ At least, this seems to be one of his strategies. In fact, it’s not clear that it really is; but the issue need not concern us here. See Chapter 6.

⁴⁴ It’s not clear why Simmias and Cebes are objects of different knowledge. For example, both can be perceived and so in that sense are objects of the same knowledge. Ackrill suggests that the point is that to think of Simmias is not eo ipso to think of Cebes; they are objects of different knowledge in that thinking of (or knowing) the first doesn’t imply thinking of (or knowing) the second. Olympiodorus suggests that, in the context at hand, one perceives Simmias and imagines Cebes (who is not at the time before one), and perception and imagination (phantasia) are different kinds of knowledge (gnôsis) (11.5). On the view I favor, x and y are objects of a different knowledge just in case knowledge of one is not ultimately grounded or explained in terms of knowledge of the other. For accounts that are similar to mine, see R. Bolton, ‘On the Argument of Phaedo 73c–75c,’ Philosophy Research Archives 5 (1979), 320–32; and V. Harte, ‘Beware of Imitations: Image Recognition in Plato,’ in F.-G. Herrmann (ed.), *New Essays on Plato: Language and Thought in Fourth-Century Greek Philosophy* (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2006), 21–42.

One difficulty with this interpretation is that 74a9–b1 says that ‘we’ say that there is such a thing as the equal: that is, we think there is such a thing as the form of equality. ‘We,’ here, are clearly we Platonists (or we in the Socratic circle). As Ackrill says, it would be ‘very awkward’ for ‘we’ to have a different reference in 74b2.⁴⁶

On another view, which I favor, ‘we,’ in both 74a9–b1 and 74b2, indicates we Platonists (or we in the Socratic circle); and epistêmê, in both 74b2 and 76b4–c3, involves being able to give an account which, in the case of forms, requires being able to give a satisfactory answer to the relevant ‘What is F?’ question. On this view, there is no shift in the scope of ‘we’ or in the sense of ‘know’ (or level of knowledge). But 74b2 and 76b4–c3 nonetheless don’t conflict, because they concern different forms. The point in 74b2 is that we Platonists know the answer to the ‘What is F?’ question with respect to the form of equality; the point in 76b4–c3 is that we don’t know the answer to that question for various other forms, including e.g. the moral forms.⁴⁷ That’s because it’s harder to know some forms than others.⁴⁸

On the first view, everyone, or nearly everyone, has epistêmê of what equality is. Hence at least some epistêmê is widespread and easy to come by. On the second view, 74b2 doesn’t imply that any epistêmê is easy to come by. And indeed, insofar as it implies that only Platonists know what the form of equality is, it mentions a case of epistêmê that isn’t widely shared. However, the second view doesn’t imply that all epistêmê is difficult to come by. It at most implies that non-Platonists don’t know what any forms are. It doesn’t follow that non-Platonists have no epistêmê.

⁴⁷ For this way of resolving the seeming conflict, see R. Hackforth, Plato’s Phaedo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 75–6; Rowe, Plato: Phaedo; D. Scott, Recollection and Experience: Plato’s Theory of Learning and Its Successors (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
⁴⁸ D. Sedley, ‘Equal Sticks and Stones,’ in D. Scott (ed.), Maieutics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 68–86, in a way splits the difference between the two interpretations: he thinks everyone who’s done some elementary mathematics has epistêmê of the form of equality, where that involves grasping an answer to the ‘What is F?’ question about it (not just being able to classify things as equal), though not everyone is aware that what they are defining is a form. So, even though ‘we’ has broad scope in 74b2, the knowledge at issue is higher level than e.g. Bostock takes it to be. Though Sedley agrees that in 74a9 ‘we’ is restricted to ‘we’ in the Socratic circle, he thinks 74a12 extends it to potentially everyone. He thinks the shift is justified by the fact that Plato uses the indicative in 74a9 but the subjunctive in 74a12. However, the shift from the indicative to the subjunctive seems to indicate just that Socrates first expresses his own view, and then reaffirms it, asking whether Simmias agrees.

On Sedley’s view, ‘we’ in effect have de dicto knowledge that equality is thus and so; and that gives us de re knowledge of the form. That is, we can answer the ‘What is F?’ question about the form of equality, though we don’t realize that that’s what we are doing since we (ordinary people) don’t acknowledge the existence of forms. On my view, by contrast, only de dicto knowledge is at issue. Plato begins by saying that ‘we’ say that there is such a thing as the equal itself (74b2), where that is plainly de dicto; and only then does he say that we know what it is. It’s just those who say that there is a form of equality, where that is de dicto, who know what it is, again de dicto.

⁴⁹ If we Platonists don’t know this, a fortiori neither does anyone else. Plato often suggests that it is harder to know moral forms than it is to know other forms: see e.g. Eu. 7c3–d8; Phdrs. 263. Phd. 65 implicitly separates out the moral forms from others; see also Meno 72d4–e9.
That would follow, however, if, to have any epistêmê at all, one must have epistêmê of forms. But Phd. 74 doesn’t by itself imply this; nor do any of the passages we’ve explored so far do so. Indeed, some of them might seem to have implicitly rejected it. For, as we’ve seen, the jailer, for example, has epistêmê of how much poison to administer; but even if he listened in on Socrates’s conversations, he presumably doesn’t have epistêmê of forms, if that requires having epistêmê that there are forms and being able to answer the ‘What is F?’ question about them. Further, we can recollect our friends, and so have (or had) epistêmê of them; and Socrates says there are many such cases (muria, 73d10–e1). But in recollecting our friends, we don’t seem thereby to have epistêmê of forms.

5. Is epistêmê knowledge?

So far we’ve seen that Plato countenances epistêmê not just of forms but also of sensibles. Indeed, he seems to countenance epistêmê of sensibles even if one doesn’t have it of forms; and some epistêmê is easy to acquire and routinely had. So, if epistêmê is knowledge, Plato, at least in the Phaedo, allows knowledge of sensibles (contrary to TW); allows us to have such knowledge even if we don’t know forms; and takes some knowledge to be easy to come by.

But is epistêmê knowledge? According to Lloyd Gerson, precisely because the Phaedo allows epistêmê of sensibles, we should conclude that the term doesn’t indicate knowledge: ‘[t]he key operative term in this argument [TR] is “knowledge” (epistêmê), but it appears to be used so loosely that it is virtually equivalent to “cognition.”’ For example, it is used for objects of sense-perception as well as for forms (cf. 73C8, D3, 74B2). A self-conscious technical restriction in the use of the term epistêmê such as we shall find in Republic is not in evidence here. Whereas some commentators think that epistêmê, as Plato conceives of it, isn’t knowledge because it’s too high level, Gerson’s concern is the reverse: that, as Plato uses the term epistêmê in TR, it includes cases that are too low level to count as knowledge.

Gerson mentions the Republic but not the Meno. Yet there too, Plato contrasts epistêmê with doxa (and with true doxa that falls short of epistêmê). If he uses epistêmê in a way that contrasts with doxa both before and after the Phaedo, that gives us some reason to suppose that he also does so in the Phaedo.

49 It’s sometimes thought that the claim is made, or is at least implicit, in 65–7 as well as in the Affinity Argument (78b4–84b8). I argue against this view in Chapter 4. In section 6 of the present chapter, I ask whether the aitia passage makes or implies this claim.

Still, let’s explore Gerson’s view. We can break it into two. First, he thinks that epistêmê doesn’t always indicate knowledge in the Phaedo because we’re allowed to have it of sensibles. Here Gerson assumes that the Phaedo endorses TW. However, I’ve argued elsewhere, on grounds independent of the Phaedo’s use of doxa and epistêmê, that the Phaedo isn’t committed to TW. Secondly, he thinks the term is used so broadly that it includes more than knowledge: it (‘virtually’) includes all cognition.

Let’s spend some time with this second point. Gerson doesn’t say how extensive he takes cognition to be. Be that as it may, so far as I can tell, as epistêmê is used in the Phaedo, it is truth entailing or factive: it isn’t used for what’s false. Still, one might think the term is used so broadly that it includes mere true belief, in which case it isn’t used for knowledge in particular. However, I think a case can be made for the claim that all the occurrences of epistêmê in the dialogue are used in a way that contrasts with mere true belief.

Plato provides some hints about what he takes epistêmê to be. In particular, as we’ve seen, at 76b he says that if one knows something, one can give an account (logon didonai; cf. 73a10, orthos logos) of it. To give an account of a form, in such a way as to have epistêmê of it, requires being able to give a correct answer to the ‘What is F?’ question with respect to it. Such an answer specifies the form’s essence. We might infer that, in general, to have epistêmê of who or what something is, we need to have epistêmê of its essence. In that case, we can’t have epistêmê of sensibles unless they have essences.

It’s disputed whether the Phaedo takes, or allows, sensibles to have essences. If (as I think) it does, then, even if having epistêmê of x requires grasping x’s essence, we can, so far as that condition goes, have epistêmê of sensibles. And if it’s easy to grasp their essences, then this condition doesn’t make epistêmê difficult to attain. Perhaps Simmias’ essence, for example, consists in his origins, or in his being human. It’s not obvious that it’s difficult to grasp these.

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51 See Chapter 4.
52 Here I am responding to the members of audiences in various places, especially David Charles, who followed up with helpful written comments and discussion.
53 I take this to be a condition on all epistêmê, not just on epistêmê of forms. In doing so, I give myself the harder case. For if it were a condition just on epistêmê of forms, it would be easier to argue that epistêmê is widespread and (in some cases) easy to come by.
54 Deciding about this is complicated because, among other things, there is dispute both about how to distinguish essential from nonessential properties and also about how if at all Plato draws the distinction. I discuss this briefly in The Possibility of Inquiry, 35–8. In my view, Phd. 102ff. distinguishes essential from nonessential properties, and takes at least some sensibles to have essences. 102 says that Simmias isn’t tall ‘by nature,’ though he is Simmias by nature; this suggests he has an essence (being Simmias)—though Plato doesn’t say what it consists in. Similarly, Phd. 103 is naturally taken to say that snow is essentially cold, and fire essentially hot. Snow and fire are here sensible stuffs, not the forms of snow and fire; so once again, at least some sensibles have essences. Whether one can know anything about them if one doesn’t know their essences, or a relevant form, are further questions.
55 But it might be: if, e.g., knowing his origins isn’t just knowing who his parents are but knowing the particular sperm and egg he comes from (this is Kripke’s view); or if, to know he’s human, one needs to know the form of humanity or at any rate some form or other: see previous note, and n. 73.
However, perhaps, even if the logos of a form specifies its essence, not all logos, of the sort necessary for epistêmê, do so. If that’s so, then, even if sensibles don’t have essences, it wouldn’t follow that there is no epistêmê of them. Perhaps the relevant accounts just need to enable one to distinguish something one has epistêmê of from other things one has encountered with which it might easily be confused. So, for example, if I have epistêmê of Cebes, I can distinguish him from Simmias, even though they look somewhat alike.

One might object that having such a distinguishing mark is necessary, not just for epistêmê, but also for true belief. If it is, then perhaps the relevant sort of logos must not only enable one to distinguish what one knows from something else with which it might easily be confused, but must also be significant in a relevant way. Having heard that Meno is 5’10” isn’t sufficient for having epistêmê of him (or of who he is); but perhaps grasping who his parents are, what sort of person he is, and how he occupies his time, are sufficient.

Perhaps even that isn’t sufficient for epistêmê. But then, Plato doesn’t say that having a correct account is sufficient for having epistêmê; he says that it is necessary for doing so. And his examples suggest a further necessary condition for having it: one must have a sufficient degree of familiarity with what one knows: the jailer, for example, is quite familiar with poison and with how much it takes to be effective; Socrates is quite familiar with Aesop’s fables; I am familiar with my friends. Perhaps having a significant distinguishing mark as well as sufficient familiarity is sufficient for turning a mere true belief into epistêmê. One can satisfy these conditions with respect to things other than forms and without knowing forms. One can also satisfy them without having epistêmê of why something is so, but only having epistêmê that it is.

Plato doesn’t explicitly offer this account of epistêmê. However, he does say that epistêmê requires a correct account; and perhaps it’s significant that he doesn’t explicitly mention forms or aitiai in doing so. (In the context, he’s talking about epistêmê of forms; so in that sense he mentions forms. But he doesn’t say that, in

56 Th. 208c–209e seems to argue that this isn’t sufficient for knowledge, or epistêmê, of x, since it’s necessary even for thinking about x and so for having a true or even a false belief about x. But even if he thinks this, he might also think that there are different kinds of distinguishing marks, and that grasping any one of them is sufficient for belief but not for knowledge, or epistêmê; for knowledge, or epistêmê, one must grasp a special sort of distinguishing mark. Not all distinguishing marks are equal. I discuss the passage in the Theaetetus in G. Fine, ‘Knowledge and Logos in the Theaetetus,’ Philosophical Review 88 (1979), 366–97. Reprinted, with minor modifications, in my Plato on Knowledge and Forms, ch. 10. See also the Introduction to that volume, and The Possibility of Inquiry, ch. 2, sect. 2.

57 This fits well with Foley’s suggestion that what must be added to true belief so as to get knowledge is more true beliefs, where what true beliefs are needed depends on what’s at issue: ‘when someone has a true belief but does not know, there is some significant aspect of the situation about which one lacks true beliefs—something important that she doesn’t grasp or quite “get”’ (R. Foley, When is True Belief Knowledge? (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 1–2). What counts as significant? Essence is sufficient, but not clearly necessary. Perhaps what’s significant depends on the sort of thing at issue, or on what else we want to know about the thing.

58 What counts as a ‘sufficient degree of familiarity’? Is it knowledge or true belief? I discuss this sort of issue in connection with the Theaetetus in ‘Knowledge and Logos in the Theaetetus.’
general, the right sort of logos has to mention forms.) Further, in his examples, the person with epistêmê is familiar with what she has epistêmê of.⁵⁹ Nor is this account merely consistent with what he says: it is suggested by what he says. On this account of epistêmê, all the cases mentioned of epistêmê count as genuine cases of it: the term isn’t being used loosely. Further, according to it, epistêmê is knowledge in the sense I suggested at the outset: it is a truth-entailing cognitive condition that goes beyond and is cognitively superior to mere true belief. But epistêmê is quite extensive and (in some but not all cases) easy to come by: certainly more extensive and easier to come by than it is taken to be by those who think that, in the Phaedo, one can’t have any knowledge, or epistêmê, until one is discarnate.⁶⁰ But it is also more extensive and easier to come by than it is taken to be in the Meno where, as we’ve seen, epistêmê always requires a grasp of why what one has epistêmê of is true.⁶¹

6. The aitia passage

I now turn to an important passage that we haven’t yet considered—the famous aitia passage (95b–107b)—that might seem to be incompatible with the account of epistêmê that I’ve suggested. For one might think the passage argues that one can’t provide an account, of the sort needed for epistêmê, unless one can provide an aitia (explanation) of why what one has epistêmê of is true or is as it is and that, in turn, requires one to have epistêmê of forms. If all epistêmê requires a grasp of why what one has epistêmê of is true or is as it is, all epistêmê is epistêmê-why: there is no bare epistêmê-that something is so. This makes all epistêmê more difficult to acquire than knowledge is often taken to be nowadays, since it’s often thought nowadays that one can know that something is so without knowing why it is so.⁶² If all epistêmê also requires one to have epistêmê of forms, epistêmê is more demanding still; for most people don’t even grasp that there are forms.⁶³

⁵⁹ One might challenge this claim, for doesn’t Plato give, as an example of recollection, seeing a lyre and thinking of a man? Yes, but he doesn’t spell the example out. Perhaps he means that we can recollect the, or a, lyre-player of whom we have epistêmê.

⁶⁰ In Chapter 4, I discuss (and reject) the view that the Phaedo restricts knowledge to (some of) those who are discarnate.

⁶¹ There are also, however, continuities with the Meno. For example, both dialogues take epistêmê to require an account. Both dialogues, in my view, also allow both epistêmê and doxa about both forms and sensibles. (To be sure, the forms discussed in the Meno might differ in various respects from those discussed in the Phaedo. But in saying, in Meno 71, that he doesn’t at all know what virtue is and so lacks all knowledge about virtue, Socrates indicates that he takes himself to lack all knowledge of the form of virtue; yet he expresses various beliefs about it, such as that it is some one thing, the same in all cases. And in allowing that we can have epistêmê of who Meno is, and of the way to Larissa, Plato allows epistêmê of sensibles.)

⁶² If, however, the Phaedo in the end requires an aitia for all epistêmê, it agrees with the Meno on that point. See previous note.

Not only is *epistêmê* so understood more difficult to acquire than knowledge nowadays is often thought to be, but it is also more difficult to acquire than some occurrences of the term in the dialogue suggest. For example, we might think that the jailer has *epistêmê* because, based on his experience, he can explain why this is the right amount of poison to administer. But presumably he doesn’t have *epistêmê* if, to do so, he needs to have an *aitia* that requires having *epistêmê* of forms. For that, as we’ve seen, requires being able to answer the ‘What is F?’ question about forms, which, presumably, the jailer can’t do. Or again, we’re said to have *epistêmê* of our friends when we recollect them. But it’s not clear that recollecting them involves any sort of *aitia*, let alone one involving forms.⁶⁴ And that, in turn, might lead one to think that we should discount some of the occurrences of *epistêmê* in the dialogue—contrary to what I’ve been suggesting.⁶⁵

But does the *aitia* passage imply that all *epistêmê*, or knowledge, requires having an *aitia* and that that, in turn, requires one to have *epistêmê* of, or to know, forms?⁶⁶ Let’s see.

At 95e7–96a4, Socrates says that in order to know, and to give an account (*eidenai*, *logon didonai*, both at 95d7, which 95e7–96a4 then explains) of the fact, that the soul is immortal, one needs a thorough inquiry into the *aitia* of coming and ceasing to be. This suggests that the sort of *logos* that enables one to know that the soul is immortal will specify why it is.

This might seem to imply that all knowledge requires grasping why what one has knowledge of is true or is as it is. But that is not implied. Indeed, it doesn’t even imply that all knowledge about the soul requires grasping an *aitia*. It says only that one needs to grasp an *aitia* in order to know that the soul is immortal. That leaves open the possibility that one can know other things about the soul without grasping an *aitia*. More generally, perhaps whether a *logos* requires an *aitia* depends on what is at issue. The mere fact that to know that the soul is immortal

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⁶⁴ One might argue, however, that even if having *epistêmê* of our friends doesn’t involve having *epistêmê* of any forms, it involves grasping e.g. why they act as they do; and perhaps that’s sufficient for having an *aitia*, even if just a low-level one.

⁶⁵ It’s worth noting that the same problem arises in the *Republic*. Books 5–7 are often taken to argue that one can’t have any *epistêmê* at all unless one has it of forms. Yet in Book 10, Plato says that the user of e.g. a flute has *epistêmê*, whereas the flute-maker, though he looks to a form, has just true belief, in virtue of attending to what the user says. We can’t simply dismiss the remarks in Book 10 as conversational or non-philosophical.

⁶⁶ The passage doesn’t explicitly say that all *epistêmê* requires having an *aitia* or grasping forms; nonetheless, it could imply this. But forms of *epistêmê* and *epistasthai* are rare in the *aitia* passage, though they do occur (see the beginning of section 4 for a list). So far as I can tell, in the relevant parts of the *aitia* passage Plato doesn’t intend any difference between *epistasthai* and *eidenai* (see e.g. 97d4–5). Because *epistêmê* is used so rarely in the passage, I’ll generally speak in terms of knowledge, asking what if anything the passage says it takes to have knowledge, and how that compares both with the account of *epistêmê* that I suggested in the last section and whether it counts as knowledge as I described it in section 1.
requires knowing why it is doesn’t imply that, in general, to know that x is F, one must know why it is. Perhaps there are special reasons why knowledge of forms is necessary for knowing that the soul is immortal that don’t generalize to all knowledge.⁶⁷

Socrates proceeds to say that when he was young, he was keen to acquire the sort of wisdom (sophia) called ‘inquiry into nature'; for he thought it would enable him to know (eidenai, 96a9) the aitia of why each thing comes to be, why it perishes, and why it exists. However, he eventually decided that that sort of inquiry wouldn’t give him the knowledge he wants. His reason isn’t that he decided that one can’t know why sensibles come to be, perish, and exist. It’s that he decided that the sorts of ‘explanations’ he used to favor—such as that if we add one to one, we get two—aren’t genuine explanations. Eventually he settled on the so-called safe aitia (100e) which says (for example)—not, as he used to think, that something is beautiful because of its bright color, but—that something is beautiful if and only if, and because, it participates in the form of beauty. Of course, merely saying this doesn’t confer knowledge of why something is beautiful: one must know what the form of beauty is and be able to explain how something participates in it. But the clear suggestion is that when one can do so, one knows why it is beautiful (if it is).

Here three points are important. First, Socrates might seem to be saying that, to have any knowledge at all, one must know an aitia. However, he seems to be explaining, not how knowledge as such is possible or what it consists in, but, rather, what’s involved in knowing why something is so—why x is F, or why p is true. To say that I can’t know why something is beautiful unless I know both that it participates in the form of beauty and what that form is, doesn’t imply that I can’t know that it’s beautiful without knowing why it is.⁶⁸

Perhaps he thinks that knowing why x is F, or why p is true, is just one level of knowledge, whereas the account of epistêmê that I suggested in section 5 is of knowledge as such, which includes, as another and lower level of knowledge, knowing that x is F or that p is true, without knowing why x is F or why p is true. To have any knowledge at all, one must satisfy the general account. But that leaves room for levels of knowledge. One level involves merely knowing that something is so; we can attain this level of knowledge without knowing forms and without knowing explanations. A higher level of knowledge involves knowing why

⁶⁷ And this is arguably the case. For the final argument for the immortality of the soul relies on the hypothesis that there are forms (100b). In explaining how this is so, Socrates introduces the so-called safe and clever aitiai. The soul figures in the latter, by being that which brings life to whatever it occupies. Socrates proceeds to argue that it can do so only if it is immortal; hence it is immortal. It doesn’t follow that every case of knowledge rests on the hypothesis that there are forms, or requires an aitia that involves forms.

⁶⁸ Socrates might be distinguishing knowing-that from knowing-why in 97d–e: first Anaxagoras would tell him (phrasein) that things are a certain way; then he’d tell him why they are that way. However, perhaps the use of phrasein, rather than e.g. eidenai or epistasthai, is significant.
something is so; and, at least in some cases, one can attain this level of knowledge only if one knows a relevant form. The aitia passage is concerned with this higher level of knowledge. I’ve argued elsewhere, again on grounds independent of the dialogue’s use of epistêmê, that the Phaedo countenances levels of knowledge, as Plato also does elsewhere—most famously in the Divided Line in the Republic, where he posits two levels of knowledge (as well as two levels of belief).

If the aitia passage is limited in this way, we can continue to take all the occurrences of epistêmê to indicate knowledge. We just have to see that there are two levels of knowledge: knowing why something is so puts one at a higher level of knowledge than one is at if one knows only that something is so. Further, one can have this lower level of knowledge without knowing any forms; and perhaps there are also some aitiae that don’t involve grasping forms.

Secondly, Plato doesn’t say that, to know why x is F, one needs to know the form of F. Rather, one can know why x is F only if one knows the form of F if there is such a form. But the range of forms, in the Phaedo, seems to be limited to cases where sensibles exhibit compossence of opposites: there is a form of F only if sensibles are, in the relevant way, F and not F. Bright color ‘makes’ some things beautiful, others ugly; hence beauty can’t be bright color. But the Phaedo isn’t committed to there being a form of, for example, Cebes or even of humanity.

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69 Cf. the three-stage view that David Charles attributes to Aristotle, according to which one can know that something is so without knowing why it is so. However, Charles thinks this is a departure from Plato. Charles develops the three-stage view esp. in Aristotle on Meaning and Essence (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000). I discuss Charles’s view of Plato in The Possibility of Inquiry, 99–103; and in ‘Signification, Essence, and Meno’s Paradox,’ Phronesis 55 (2010), 125–52.

70 Perhaps appealing to levels of knowledge also explains the seeming differences between what Plato says about epistêmê in Rep. 5–7, on the one hand, and in Book 10, on the other: see n. 65. For levels of knowledge, see also Philebus 55c–59d. Damascius, 1.80, says that the Phaedo recognizes levels of truth (bathmous tês alêtheias), both in the objects of cognition (gnôsis) and in cognition itself; here he mentions the Divided Line in the Republic, but in order to explain Plato’s attitude to the senses in the Phaedo, D. Baltzly, ‘Socratic Anti-Empiricism in the Phaedo,’ in E. Benitez (ed.), Dialogues with Plato, Apeiron 29, suppl. 4 (1996), 121–42, at 131, thinks Damascius is wrong to see an affinity between the Phaedo and Republic on this point. In Chapter 4, I side with Damascius. The Phaedo also countenances levels of accuracy (65e3), clarity (83c), reality or truth (83c; cf. 65e2), purity (65e6), and separation (e.g. 65e3–4). It also allows that we can reason in better and worse ways (65c6–9).

71 I discuss reasons for positing forms in G. Fine, On Ideas: Aristotle’s Criticism of Plato’s Theory of Forms (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). The Phaedo doesn’t explicitly deny that there are forms in further cases. But none of its arguments implies their existence; nor are such further forms mentioned. Indeed, their absence is conspicuous in some places. For example, in the so-called clever or sophisti- cated aitia Plato says that snow and fire are explanatory entities. But they aren’t forms; they are ordinary physical snow and fire. (However, a full statement of this sort of aitia will mention forms. Snow, e.g., brings on the form of cold; and fire brings on the form of heat.) See my ‘Forms as Causes: Plato and Aristotle.’

In Rep. 523–5, in the famous ‘finger’ passage, Plato says that in some cases the senses reveal things adequately and clearly, whereas in other cases the soul is puzzled. For example, the soul isn’t compelled to ask what a finger is, since sight doesn’t say that a finger is also not a finger. But the soul is compelled to ask what e.g. largeness and smallness are, because sight mixes them up. On the interpretation I favor, the point is that, though perception (or, more precisely, reasoning based on perception: see Chapter 7) can identify examples both of fingers and of things that are large and small, and can also explain what it is to be a finger, it can’t explain what it is to be large or small. See my On Ideas, 59. If this is also his view in the Phaedo, it would explain why forms are mentioned in only a few special cases.
Perhaps, then, in some cases one can know why x is F without knowing a form of F, and perhaps without knowing any forms at all.\textsuperscript{72}

Thirdly, the passage doesn’t restrict knowledge to forms. We know why the Parthenon is beautiful when we know that and how it participates in the form of beauty, whose definition we know. Socrates isn’t denying that sensibles can be known. He’s explaining what it takes to know why they are as they are, in cases where there are forms.\textsuperscript{73}

Even if Plato had said that all knowledge requires knowing-why and that, in turn, requires knowing forms, knowledge of sensibles wouldn’t be precluded. All that would follow is that all knowledge requires knowing why what one knows is true or is as it is which, in turn, requires knowing forms. This allows knowledge of sensibles; it’s just that such knowledge would require knowledge of forms and would therefore be difficult to come by insofar as most people don’t know any forms. That knowledge is (sometimes) easy to come by whereas \textit{epistêmê} isn’t was one of the objections mentioned at the outset to taking \textit{epistêmê} to be knowledge. One might argue, however, that even if all \textit{epistêmê} is difficult to come by, that doesn’t mean it’s not knowledge as such. For on this account of \textit{epistêmê}, it still counts as a conception of knowledge, as I’ve understood the concept of knowledge here. Perhaps Plato just has more demanding conditions for \textit{epistêmê} than some contemporary epistemologists have for knowledge; that by itself wouldn’t show that \textit{epistêmê} isn’t knowledge as such. Even if one is reluctant to endorse that view, one might still allow that \textit{epistêmê} so conceived is at least a species of knowledge.

But, on the interpretation I prefer, the \textit{aitia} passage doesn’t say that all knowledge requires knowledge of forms or even knowing-why. It says only that some knowledge-why requires knowing forms. That’s compatible with \textit{epistêmê}’s being knowledge, on the account of \textit{epistêmê} I suggested in section 5. On that account, we can continue to maintain that the \textit{Phaedo} not only allows us to have \textit{epistêmê} of sensibles, but also allows us to have it even if we don’t have \textit{epistêmê} of forms or of why sensibles are as they are; we can also continue to maintain that \textit{epistêmê} is knowledge.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{72} However, one might think that even if there is no form of humanity, still, we can grasp why Cebes is human only if we grasp some other form—perhaps the form of life, which the clever \textit{aitia} seems to countenance. Even if this is so, it implies only that we need to grasp a relevant form to have knowledge-why; it doesn’t imply that all knowledge is knowledge-why.


\textsuperscript{74} At 102c, Socrates might be taken to say that ‘Simmias is taller than Socrates’ isn’t true; what’s true is that ‘Simmias is taller than Socrates because of the tallness he has,’ or ‘Simmias has tallness in relation to Socrates’s smallness.’ If he thinks that ‘Simmias is taller than Socrates’ isn’t true, then it can’t be known, since knowledge implies truth. Still, if the suggested rephrasings can be known, knowledge of sensibles is still possible—though, in this case, it seems to require knowing why they are true, and (where there are forms) knowing forms. However, his point might be, not that ‘Simmias is taller than
7. Conclusion

In section 1, I mentioned two reasons that have been given for distancing Plato’s account of *epistêmê* and *doxa* from modern accounts of knowledge and belief: first, that *epistêmê* and *doxa*, unlike knowledge and belief, are individuated by their objects; and secondly, that his conditions for *epistêmê* and *doxa* are either more, or less, demanding than are the conditions for knowledge and belief. I’ve argued that neither view of *epistêmê* or *doxa* fits the *Phaedo*. The dialogue doesn’t individuate *epistêmê* and *doxa* by their objects; in particular, and contrary to TW, both *epistêmê* and *doxa* range over both sensibles and forms. Further, the dialogue takes some, but not all, *epistêmê* and *doxa* to be easy to come by—just as modern accounts of knowledge and belief take some but not all knowledge and belief to be easy to come by.\(^7^5\) The *epistêmê* involved in ‘ordinary’ cases of recollection is easy to acquire; *epistêmê* of moral forms isn’t. The bones and sinews’ *doxa* that Socrates should flee, and the *doxa* that only sensibles are real, are easy to acquire; the philosophers’ *doxa* isn’t.

Further, all the cases of *doxa* in the dialogue are cases of taking to be true; so they are all beliefs, as I’ve understood belief here. And all the cases of *epistêmê* are cases of being in a truth-entailing cognitive condition that goes beyond and is cognitively superior to mere true belief; so they are all cases of knowledge, as I’ve understood it here.

All in all, what the *Phaedo* says about *epistêmê* and *doxa* is closer to some modern views of knowledge and belief than has sometimes been thought. This is perhaps a surprising result about a dialogue that is often thought to be especially ‘other-worldly.’\(^7^6\)

Socrates’ isn’t true, but just that it isn’t perspicuous and is liable to misinterpretation insofar as it doesn’t reveal the explanation of that state of affairs (which, in this case, involves forms) and insofar as it might lead one to think that Simmias is essentially taller than Socrates—that he is taller than Socrates in virtue of who he is, rather than in virtue of having tallness in him. It’s not clear that this point implies that one can know that Simmias is taller than Socrates only if one knows why it is true that he is which, in turn, requires knowing the form of tallness (and the form of smallness).

\(^7^5\) So, for example, one might argue that on many contemporary views of knowledge and belief, it’s easy to believe that slavery is acceptable (many people did believe this at various times in history) but difficult to have beliefs about e.g. quantum mechanics, since in this case acquiring the relevant concepts is difficult. *A fortiori*, it’s difficult to acquire knowledge of quantum mechanics but, one might think, easy to know that it’s sunny outside.

\(^7^6\) Talks based on earlier versions of some of this material were given at the University of Paris at Nanterre (March 2014); as the J. L. Ackrill Memorial Lecture in Oxford (March 2014); as the Keeling Lecture in University College, London (March 2014); and at a plenary session of the British Society for the History of Philosophy (held in York, April 2015). Versions more closely related to the present chapter were given at a workshop on ancient and contemporary epistemology held at NYU in Sept. 2017 (where my commentator was Stephen Grimm); at a working group in ancient philosophy at Yale in Oct. 2017 (where my commentator was Daniel Ferguson); and at Stanford in March 2018 (where my commentator was Huw Duffy). Thanks to the audiences on these occasions for helpful discussion; to my three commentators; and to Lesley Brown, David Charles, Verity Harte, Terry Irwin, and Rachana Kamtekar for helpful discussion and written comments.
Recollection and Innatism in the *Phaedo*

1.

It is generally thought that the *Phaedo* posits innate knowledge. Indeed, according to Dominic Scott, ‘[o]n any interpretation of the recollection passage the overall course of the argument runs as follows. Everyone has in them knowledge of the forms; this knowledge was not acquired since birth but must have pre-existed birth; so the soul must have pre-existed the body.’¹ ‘That is, we are all born with knowledge, and so we all have innate knowledge; the fact that we all have it can be explained only by positing prenatal knowledge (that is, knowledge we had before birth), and so we must have existed prenatally. Whether or not the interpretation I defend in this chapter is correct, it is at any rate a counterexample to the claim that on every interpretation of the recollection passage, it posits innate knowledge. For I shall argue that the passage actually rejects the existence of innate knowledge.

The recollection passage is long (72e3–77a5) and complicated; rather than discussing all of it in detail, I shall focus on the parts that are especially relevant to deciding whether it posits innate knowledge. In doing so, I shall also ask whether the argument is as bad as it is sometimes taken to be: it has been thought to be circular; to beg the question; to involve ‘a notorious fallacy’; and to have a ‘weak’ ending such that ‘[o]n any view, the argument falters at this point.’²

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¹ D. Scott, ‘Platonic Recollection,’ in G. Fine (ed.), *Plato 1: Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 93–124, at 114. (Although the passage quoted from Scott doesn’t explicitly use the phrase ‘innate knowledge,’ when it is read in context it’s clear that’s what he has in mind.) The view that recollection posits innate knowledge and infers from it to prenatal knowledge is widely shared. See e.g. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics* 26. According to David Bostock, 74a9–75c5 ‘aims to show just that we were born with a knowledge of what equal is’: *Plato’s Phaedo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 103.


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The passage begins at 72e3–73a3, where Cebes mentions a view that, he says, Socrates is always discussing. This is the view that ‘our learning is in fact nothing but recollection (anamnēsis)’ (72e5–6);³ hence ‘what we are now reminded of we must have learned (memathēkenai)’⁴ at some previous time. But that would be impossible unless our souls existed somewhere before being born in this human form’ (72e6–73a2).⁵ This says that, since learning is recollection, we had prenatal knowledge: that is, we had knowledge before we were incarnate. Innate knowledge—knowledge we have from birth—is not mentioned. Nor does the existence of prenatal knowledge imply the existence of innate knowledge: perhaps we had knowledge before we were born but lost it at birth in such a way that we no longer have it when we are born. Nor does the existence of innate knowledge imply the existence of prenatal knowledge: perhaps we are born with knowledge, but didn’t exist prenataIy. Of course, one might accept various claims that, when put together with the existence of prenatal or innate knowledge, implies the existence of the other type of knowledge. I ask later whether Plato argues in either of these ways. My present point is just that the two sorts of knowledge are logically independent of one another.

Simmias asks what proofs there are for what Cebes says at 72e3–73a3 (cited above), whereupon Cebes explains that:

When people are questioned, if someone questions them well, they say for themselves the truth about everything <that they are questioned about>. And yet they wouldn’t be able to do this unless knowledge (epistêmê) and a correct account (orthos logos) were in them (enousa). (73a7–10)

It’s been argued that this passage posits innate knowledge.⁶ I’ve argued elsewhere that it doesn’t do so.⁷ Be that as it may, Socrates immediately suggests that if

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³ As Ackrill notes (‘Anamnesis in the Phaedo,’ 16–17), translators tend to use ‘recollection’ for the noun (anamnēsis) and ‘being reminded of’ for the verb (anamnēskëin). I’ll generally use both ‘to recollect’ and ‘to be reminded of’ for the verb, without intending any difference between them (except when I note below that Socrates indicates that being reminded of something by something else is just one kind of recollection).

⁴ This is a perfect infinitive. It might indicate either that we once went through a process of learning or that we were once in a learned condition, i.e. knew, where it is not implied that we went through a process of learning. Cf. memathēka at Meno 86a8 (a perfect participle). For discussion of this issue in the Meno, see G. Fine, The Possibility of Inquiry: Meno’s Paradox from Socrates to Sextus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), ch. 5.


Simmias isn’t persuaded by the argument, he has another one to offer. And though Simmias replies that he doesn’t doubt what Cebes has said and indeed is nearly convinced by it, he also says he would like to hear what Socrates now (nun, 73b9) thinks. The clear suggestion is that Cebes describes an argument Socrates used to favor; but Socrates is now going to give a different argument. Even if the old argument involves innate knowledge, we shouldn’t assume that the new argument also does so. We need to consider it on its own terms.

3.

Socrates begins by laying out general conditions for recollection. First he says that ‘if someone is to be reminded of something, he must have known it at some time previously’ (73c1–2). This is the Prior Knowledge Requirement:

\[
\text{PKR: If A recollects x at t1, A knew x prior to t1.}
\]

This is a necessary condition for recollection. It doesn’t say when, prior to recollecting, the recollector had knowledge: prenataily, from birth, or just at some time or other prior to doing the recollecting.⁸

Next Socrates mentions the Different Knowledge Requirement (DKR):

Whenever knowledge (epistêmê) comes to be present in this sort of way, is it recollection? I mean in some such way as this: if someone, on seeing a thing, or hearing it, or getting any other perception of it, not only recognizes (gnô) that thing but also thinks of something else, which is the object not of the same

⁸ Nor does PKR say that the person retains the knowledge he had at some earlier time. For all it says, the person might once have had the knowledge and then lost it. As against this, Lesley Brown has objected to me that, at least in non-philosophical contexts, proeidenai and proepistasthai are used in such a way as to suggest that whoever has the prior knowledge continues to have it from then on at least through the later time being discussed. In favor of this view, she cites Phd. 85b2; Gorg. 529d6, 7, 459e1, 459e7; Crat. 433e4. But even if, in non-philosophical contexts, the term conversationally suggests this, the terms don’t logically imply continued knowledge; we have to see from the context whether it is being assumed. One might, though, wonder how the prior knowledge is of any help if it’s been lost. One answer is that the content of the knowledge (or part of it) remains, not as something known, but as something believed, or perhaps just as a disposition. See Fine, The Possibility of Inquiry, 140–7, 151–2.

Socrates doesn’t say why he thinks recollection requires prior knowledge; and one might think prior true belief would do. (However, recollection is factive: one can’t recollect what isn’t the case.) Further, so far as proving the pre-existence of the soul goes, showing that we had prenatal true belief, or indeed any sort of prenatal cognition, will do. Dancy may be advertsing to this point when he says that it is ‘a trifle too hard edged’ (260) to say that our prior cognition is knowledge. At 70b3–4 Cebes asks for reassurance that when a person dies, their soul still exists ‘and possesses some power (dunamis) and phronêsis; presumably this is supposed to be true of our soul prenatally as well. It’s not clear whether phronêsis, here, is wisdom, and so an especially high-level cognitive condition (as it is in e.g. 65–7) or intelligence or thought more broadly conceived.

I take it that Plato thinks that, though all recollection requires prior knowledge (or factive cognition of some sort), not all of it requires prenatal knowledge; only recollection of forms does so.
knowledge but of another, don’t we rightly say that he’s been reminded of the object of which he has got the thought? (73c4–d2)

We can formulate DKR as follows:

DKR: If A perceives and recognizes x, and thinks of something else, y, that is the object of a different knowledge, A recollects y.

DKR seems to be offered as a sufficient condition for recollection. But, beyond that, there’s considerable dispute about how to interpret it. Before asking about that, we should look at Socrates’s initial examples of recollection. He begins with some ‘homely’ examples: someone might see and recognize their lover’s cloak, and then be reminded of their lover; or someone might see Simmias and be reminded of Cebe. There are, Socrates says, countless other such cases (73d10).

At 73e1–3, Socrates asks (expecting the answer ‘yes’):

Then is that sort of thing a kind of recollection? Particularly (malista), though, whenever this happens to someone about things he’s since forgotten because of the length of time in which he hasn’t attended to them?

So the cases just mentioned illustrate just one kind of recollection. Ackrill plausibly suggests that Socrates is indicating that he’s concerned—not with every sort of recalling or recollecting, but—just with being reminded of something by something else. (As Ackrill notes, one can recall or recollect something without being reminded of it by some other thing—which is not to say that that sort of recalling is uncaused.) Socrates also says that a feature that is especially characteristic of the sort of recollection he’s interested in (viz. being reminded of something by something else) is that one has forgotten what one is reminded of because one hasn’t attended to it for a long time. Probably he means that every case of being reminded of something involves forgetting, but forgetting is an elastic notion: one might ‘forget’ something just in the weak sense that one isn’t currently thinking of it, though one could easily bring it to mind; or in the deeper or stronger sense that one hasn’t had it in mind for a long time, with the implication that it would be difficult to be reminded of it. The cases he’s mentioned so far involve ‘weak’ forgetting; but later he discusses a deeper sort that, he says in 73e1–3, is especially characteristic of recollection.¹¹

Later we shall see reason to doubt whether that is in fact Plato’s view. But for now I shall assume that it is.


Damascius seems to agree that Plato takes all recollection to involve forgetting, but at 1.262 he takes ‘time’ and ‘lack of attention’ in 73e1–3 to be two different ways of forgetting. However, Plato seems to have just one conjunctive condition in mind, which he says is the type of forgetting that is
In favor of the view that he thinks all recollection (in the sense of being reminded of something by something else) involves forgetting is the fact that, as we shall see, later in the argument Socrates seems to think that, to show that he’s described a case of recollection, he needs to show that we’ve forgotten the item we are reminded of (75c–76e). Further, in Phil. 34b10–c2, Plato says that recollection requires losing what one previously had; and that’s how he explains forgetting at Phd. 76d. It’s true that it doesn’t seem reasonable to say that, when someone sees their lover’s cloak and is then reminded of their lover, they had forgotten their lover in the interim: it’s just that they weren’t thinking of him then. As Rowe says, ‘it would be a poor lover who had actually forgotten his beloved.’¹² But we can accommodate this by saying that Plato is using ‘forgetting’ in a broad sense that includes not attending to something at a time. It’s just that that sort of forgetting isn’t paradigmatic of being reminded of; rather, the deeper sort of forgetting is.

Socrates next notes that one can be reminded of Cebes not only by seeing Simmias but also by seeing a picture of Simmias; seeing Simmias’ picture might also remind one of Simmias. This leads Socrates to distinguish recollection from similars from recollection from dissimilars. Being reminded of something from seeing and recognizing a picture of it is taken to be a case of recollection from similars. In the case of recollection from similars, he imposes a further necessary condition on recollection: one must ask whether the reminding item falls short of what one is reminded of.¹³ This is a necessary condition for just one kind of recollection, not for recollection as such.

Now that we’ve looked at some examples of DKR, I’d like to raise three questions about it.

First, what is involved in two objects, x and y, being objects of a ‘different knowledge?’ It involves more than x and y being numerically distinct. For in 73d3, Socrates says, not that a man and a lyre are different, but that the knowledge of them is. One possibility is that DKR requires one ultimately to know x and y by different types of knowledge. But that doesn’t seem to fit the case of seeing a lyre especially characteristic of recollection. See also 1.253–7, 2.4, 12, 14; and Olympiodorus, 11.3–5. For Olympiodorus and Damascius, see L. G. Westerink (trans. and ed.), Commentaries on Plato’s Phaedo (Dilton Marsh: The Prometheus Trust, 2009). Originally published by North Holland Publishing (1976/1977).

¹² Rowe, Plato: Phaedo.

and thinking of a man; for it seems that one ultimately knows both of them via the same type of knowledge—say, perception.¹

Olympiodorus suggests another possibility: that Socrates is concerned, not with how one ultimately knows x and y, but with how one grasps them when one is recollecting. In the case at hand, one sees the lyre and thinks of or imagines a man (11.5); hence, at t1, we grasp x with one type of knowledge and y with another. However, Socrates says that one not only sees but also recognizes the lyre; recognizing something as being something or other involves thinking about it.¹

What’s crucial isn’t the type of knowledge, or grasp, but something about the connection between grasping x, on the one hand, and y on the other.

Ackrill suggests such an account: that x and y are objects of a different knowledge just in case, in seeing and recognizing x, one is not thereby thinking of y.¹

Another possibility, which I favor, is that x and y are objects of a different knowledge just in case one’s knowledge of x doesn’t wholly ground (i.e. ultimately explain) one’s knowledge of y. Different types of knowledge aren’t required, either at the time of recollection or as grounding one’s ultimate knowledge. Nor does it matter if, in grasping x, one is thereby thinking of y, so long as one’s knowledge of x doesn’t ground one’s knowledge of y.¹ I favor this view because, as we shall see, on it, Plato’s examples don’t violate the condition they are meant to explain. Further, as we shall see in section 5, it seems to do a better job than the other interpretations do of capturing his concerns in a later part of his discussion.

Secondly, doesn’t Plato’s example of seeing and recognizing a picture of Simmias and then thinking of Simmias violate DKR? For if I identify the picture as a picture of Simmias, I am thereby thinking of him. DKR is indeed violated if, in the case Plato describes, one sees and recognizes the picture of Simmias as a picture of Simmias, and if Ackrill’s interpretation of ‘different knowledge’ is correct. But perhaps, in the case Plato considers, we needn’t identify the picture as being of Simmias; perhaps it will do if we identify it as having certain features that lead us to think of Simmias. Perhaps we identify it as being of someone who has a certain height and demeanor, and that leads us to think of Simmias.¹ If that will do, then

¹ Or, if one thinks perception never confers knowledge, some other type of cognition. The point is just that Plato’s examples include cases of being reminded of y by x where it seems that we ultimately know both x and y by the same type of knowledge.
¹ Here it’s relevant to note that Olympiodorus thinks Plato isn’t discussing recollection as such, but only one sort, viz. when one sees (or otherwise perceives) the reminding item but not the item one is reminded of. It’s true that that’s his focus. But the account of ‘different knowledge’ is meant to be quite general.
¹ For a similar view, see R. Bolton, ‘On the Argument of Phaedo 73c–75c,’ Philosophy Research Archives 5 (1979), 320–32; Harte, ‘Beware of Imitations.’
Plato’s example of seeing and recognizing a picture of Simmias, and then thinking of Simmias, doesn’t violate DKR as Ackrill understands it (or as I do).

However, even if this deals with the example of Simmias and a picture of him, it might not do as a general reply. For, as we shall see in more detail later, Plato says that we can recollect the form of equality from seeing and recognizing sensible equals; and here he has in mind recognizing them as being equal. But if I identify some sticks and stones as being equal, aren’t I thereby thinking of the form of equality? If so, DKR is violated as Ackrill understands it (though, as we shall see, not as I understand it). However, perhaps I can identify sensible equals as being equal by applying an ‘empirical’ concept of equality that doesn’t involve thinking of the form. On this view, even if Ackrill’s interpretation of ‘different knowledge’ is correct, Plato’s example of seeing and recognizing sensible equals as equal and then thinking of the form doesn’t violate DKR.¹

However, even if it’s possible to identify some things as being equal without thinking of the form of equality, it doesn’t follow that every time anyone identifies some things as being equal they aren’t thereby thinking of the form. Perhaps someone who’s done some elementary geometry but has never heard of forms can identify some things as being equal without thereby thinking of the form of equality.² But perhaps when a Platonist in a given situation identifies some things as being equal, she is thereby thinking of the form. If Plato were to identify this as a case of recollection, then, on Ackrill’s account but not on mine, DKR would be violated.

Thirdly, isn’t DKR false? The answer to this question is ‘yes.’ To borrow an example from David Bostock: James Watt, on seeing and recognizing steam from a kettle, thought of the steam engine, which he proceeded to invent. He saw and recognized one thing (the steam from the kettle), and thought of something else.

¹ This is not Ackrill’s own view: he thinks the equals example violates DKR.

² Or, at least, without thinking of it as being a form: it’s one thing to think of what is in fact a form; another to think of something as being a form.
(the steam engine) that’s the object of a different knowledge; but he wasn’t recollecting.²¹ For he didn’t have prior knowledge of the steam engine; rather, he was thinking of it for the very first time.

There is an obvious fix, so far as defusing this particular counterexample goes. Plato could revise DKR to DKR*:

DKR*: If A perceives and recognizes x, and thinks of something else, y, that is the object of a different knowledge and of which A has prior knowledge, A recollects y.

James Watt is not a counterexample to DKR*. For he doesn’t instantiate its antecedent, precisely because he didn’t have prior knowledge of the steam engine.

Though DKR* isn’t vulnerable to the James Watt counterexample, it might seem to be vulnerable elsewhere. For Plato’s strategy seems to be to argue that if A satisfies the antecedent of whatever sufficient condition he has in mind, A recollects. We’ve just seen that DKR doesn’t specify a sufficient condition for recollection. Hence we can’t infer from A’s satisfying its antecedent that A recollects and hence has prior knowledge of y. By contrast, if A satisfies the antecedent of DKR*, it follows that she has prior knowledge of y. While that might seem to be an advantage of DKR*, there is a corresponding disadvantage.²² For the reason we can infer from A’s satisfying the antecedent of DKR* that she has prior knowledge of y is that her doing so is built into the antecedent; we’d be inferring p from p, which is circular.²³

4.

Up to now, all the examples of recollection have been drawn from the perceptible realm: lyres, cloaks, people, and pictures. At 74a9, Socrates shifts gear, saying:

We say (phamen), don’t we, that there is something equal²⁴—I don’t mean a stick equal to a stick, or a stone equal to a stone, or anything of that sort, but

²¹ Bostock, Plato’s Phaedo, 64. Dancy, Plato’s Introduction of Forms, 263, uses a similar example to make the same point. So far as I know, the objection is initially due to Ackrill. He argues that DKR is false, precisely because it doesn’t include a prior-knowledge clause in its antecedent (‘Anamnesis in the Phaedo,’ 22).

²² A further disadvantage of DKR* is that it isn’t true, any more than DKR is. For one might satisfy its antecedent without having forgotten y; yet, as we’ve seen, forgetting is a necessary condition of recollection. I return to this point in section 7. But even if we can’t infer from someone’s satisfying the antecedent of DKR* that she recollects, we can infer that she has prior knowledge.

²³ I return to the issue of circularity later. Ackrill (‘Anamnesis in the Phaedo,’ 22–3) says instead that if Plato argues in this way, he begs the question against alternative explanations of how one came to think of y—by e.g. making it up or inventing it.

something else besides all those, the equal itself? Are we to say (phòmen) that there is such a thing, or not? (74a9–12; Gallop, Plato: Phaedo)

Simmias agrees that we are to say this. Socrates then asks: ‘And do we know what it is?’ (kai epistametha auto ho estin, 74b2). Simmias says we certainly do. No defense is given of this surprising claim. Moreover, it seems to conflict with 76b–c, where Socrates says that if one knows something, one can give an account of it. Simmias agrees, adding that in his view only Socrates can give accounts of forms properly. Why, then, does Socrates suggest that we know what the form of equality is? It seems that at most Socrates does so.

Various solutions have been proposed. Ackrill, for example, suggests that, at 74b2, the claim is that we ordinary people know what equality is in an ‘unloaded’ sense: we can classify things as being equal. By contrast, 76b–c means that no one (except perhaps Socrates) knows the forms in a ‘rich’ sense: they can’t answer the Socratic ‘What is F?’ question. On this view, the two passages are compatible because they use ‘know’ differently. However, on it, the scope of ‘we’ in 74b2 is different from its scope in 74a9–12, where it clearly indicates we Platonists. As Ackrill says, that it is ‘very awkward.’

A better solution, I think, is to say that ‘we,’ in both 74b2 and 74a9–12, indicates we Platonists; and that ‘know,’ in both 74b2 and 76c, involves being able to give a Socratic account which, in the case of knowing forms, involves giving a correct answer to the ‘What is F?’ question. The passages are nonetheless compatible because 74b2 claims that we Platonists know what the form of equality is, whereas 76c says that virtually no one (perhaps no one) knows what various other forms are. Though the sense of ‘know’ (or the level of knowledge) and the scope of ‘we’ is the same throughout, the relevant range of forms is not.

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23 For discussion of the phrase, see Gallop, Plato: Phaedo, 119–20 and n. 21; Sedley, ‘Equal Sticks and Stones,’ 73.


25 Ackrill, ‘Anamnesis in the Phaedo,’ 28. He also notes the awkwardness of having the character Socrates use ‘we’ for we Platonists; hence one might prefer to speak of those in the Socratic circle, though that is also awkward, at least for those who think there is a difference between the forms adverted to in what some take to be the early dialogues from those adverted to in the Phaedo. I shall use ‘we Platonists’ despite its dramatic inappropriateness.

26 I take it that for Plato, all knowledge requires giving an account. But what it takes to give an account might differ in different sorts of cases. See Fine, The Possibility of Inquiry, 2.2.

27 For this solution, see R. Hackforth, Plato’s Phaedo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 76; Rowe, Plato: Phaedo; Scott, Recollection and Experience, 67–8; Dancy, Plato’s Introduction of Forms, 279–81. This solution assumes that it’s easier to know what the form of equality is than to know what the value forms are. That Plato thinks this is suggested by Eu. 7b6–d7 and Phdr. 263a2–4, b1–4. Gallop, Plato: Phaedo, 133, seems to reject this solution, saying that 75c10–d2 expressly says that mathematical and moral forms are on a par. But Plato needn’t mean that they are on a par in every way. I ask later what he means in saying the argument applies to all of them.

Sedley agrees with me about ‘know’ but takes the scope of ‘we’ to be broader than I do. He thinks it’s used for anyone who’s done some elementary mathematics: ‘Equal Sticks and Stones,’ 70–5. Since we don’t do mathematics from birth, this interpretation doesn’t imply that we have mathematical knowledge from birth; rather, we acquire it only once we do some mathematics.
It’s important to be clear that even if Plato countenances innate knowledge, he isn’t adverting to it here. Simmias and Socrates are talking about their current condition, as adult Platonists, without taking a stand on their condition at birth, let alone on everyone’s condition at birth. Their claim is that we Platonists now know what the form of equality is: we can now answer the ‘What is it?’ question with respect to it.³⁰ Since 74b2 specifies the initial **explanandum** for which Socrates is going to seek an **explanans**, innate knowledge is not the initial **explanandum**. Of course, for all that it might play some other role in the argument: we shall need to see.

5.

Socrates next asks from where (pothen) we got the knowledge of the form of equality (74b4).³¹ I take it he is asking what ultimately grounds or explains our knowledge. Let’s call this the ultimate-source question. Socrates then says that we got our knowledge of the form of equality from (ek) seeing sensible equals, it being different from them.³² One might think he’s saying that perception answers the ultimate-source question about our knowledge of forms. However, if there’s one

³⁰ I take it that the knowledge ‘we’ now have is conscious and explicit whereas, on the usual view, the innate knowledge Plato allegedly posits is implicit, latent, or tacit. Bostock, by contrast, thinks the knowledge we now have is implicit in the sense that most of us can’t say what ‘equal’ means, though our ability to classify things as equal shows that we know what it means (Plato’s Phaedo, 102). This view doesn’t imply that we have innate knowledge: perhaps we acquire latent knowledge of what ‘equal’ means only once we learn to classify things as equal which, Bostock says (Plato’s Phaedo, 101), the argument doesn’t say is something we can do from birth. Though Bostock seems to agree that 74b2 doesn’t advert to innate knowledge, he thinks that 74a9–75c5 as a whole aims to show that we have innate knowledge: Plato’s Phaedo, 103. I consider his argument in n. 37. For now, my point is just that even if one thinks the knowledge at issue here is latent, one shouldn’t infer, on that basis alone, that it is innate: latent knowledge can be acquired.

³¹ One might think ‘get’ (labontes) implies that the knowledge is acquired. However, lambanein doesn’t have to indicate acquisition. See e.g. Tht. 143b8, where labe doesn’t imply that one at some point acquired the book (as opposed to having always owned it), though it does imply that one doesn’t have it to hand. Similarly, if I tell you to go get your umbrella, I’m not implying that you at some point acquired it (you might have had it from birth), just that you don’t currently have it with you. Thanks to Lesley Brown for the reference and the example. It’s sometimes assumed that in the Phaedo Plato thinks our knowledge must be acquired and that he then argues that since it can’t be acquired for the first time in this life, it must have been acquired prenatally. See e.g. Gallop (Plato: Phaedo, 129) and Bostock (Plato’s Phaedo, 102), both of whom think Plato thinks we must have acquired our prior knowledge in an episode of direct acquaintance with forms, which we can only have prenatally. On the view I go on to suggest, neither acquaintance nor any other sort of acquisition is required; all that’s required is that we had prior (ultimately prenatal) knowledge, where that’s compatible with our having had it for the whole of our prenatal existence without ever having acquired it.

³² First he mentions just ‘the things we were just mentioning’ (74b4–5; cf. 74c7–9). But he makes it clear that it’s not strictly speaking the things themselves (sc. the ‘sticks and stones and other equal things,’ 74b5–6), but our seeing them (and, presumably, recognizing them as being equal) (74b5) that leads us to think of the form of equality. 74e9–75b8 also makes it clear that it’s not sensibles themselves, but our seeing them (or, as he explains, perceiving them: it need not be seeing in particular) that’s at issue (as is recognition).
thing that’s clear in the *Phaedo*, it’s that perception doesn’t confer knowledge of forms. So I take it that Socrates is not yet answering the ultimate-source question; rather, he is building up to it gradually.

Socrates next explains how forms and sensibles differ (74b7–c5). He then repeats the claim that it’s from sensible equals that we got the thought and knowledge of the form; he then infers that we are recollecting (74c13–d2). This suggests that Plato takes himself to have shown not just that forms and sensibles are numerically distinct but also that they are objects of a different knowledge. And, though Plato doesn’t spell this out, it’s not too difficult to see why he thinks this, at least at a general level. For he differentiates sensible equals from the form by saying that the former are both equal and unequal, whereas the latter is not at all unequal. Presumably he thinks that the fact that sensible equals are both equal and unequal means that perceiving them isn’t sufficient for grounding our knowledge of the form. On the account I favor, x and y are objects of a different knowledge just in case knowledge of x doesn’t ground knowledge of y. That condition is satisfied in this case: seeing and recognizing sticks and stones as equal doesn’t ground or confer knowledge of the form. (Nor is knowledge of the form sufficient for being able to see and recognize sticks and stones as being equal, since perception is also needed.) So he isn’t saying—as he might initially seem to

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53 See esp. 65–7; 82–4. These passages are sometimes thought to say that perception is completely unreliable, in every way; and it is then wondered whether that is consistent with the claim made here, that it’s from seeing sensible equals that we got knowledge of the form of equality. However, 65–7 and 82–4 don’t argue that perception is completely unreliable; they argue only that it doesn’t confer knowledge of forms. Nor, as we shall see, does the recollection passage say that perception is sufficient for conferring that knowledge.

54 Perhaps he means to indicate this by shifting from *pothen* to *ek*.

55 For my interpretation of this much-discussed passage, see On Ideals, 167–8.


57 If we can see and recognize sticks and stones as being equal by relying—not on our grasp of the form but—on an empirical concept of equality, then knowledge of the form isn’t necessary either.

As I mentioned in n. 1, Bostock thinks that 74a9–75c5 ‘aims to show just that we were born with a knowledge of what equality is’ (*Plato’s Phaedo*, 103). Now that we’ve considered this passage, we can look at Bostock’s interpretation of it. He says that we manifest our knowledge of the form of equality ‘just as soon as we learn to classify sticks and so on as equal (cf. 74e9–75a3). This is not actually as soon as we are born, as the argument may seem to suggest (75a11–b12), but the point is that there has been no opportunity between birth and our first classification of things as equal to acquire the relevant knowledge. For once we are born perception is the only source of knowledge, and we have agreed that perception cannot explain this knowledge. We must infer, then, that we have the knowledge when we are born, though it somehow remains latent until the perception of equal things triggers it’ (*Plato’s Phaedo*, 101–2). Notice that Bostock doesn’t say that *Plato* infers this; he says that we must do so. But I don’t see why we must infer this. All that follows is that we didn’t first acquire the relevant knowledge between birth and our first classification of things as equal. That doesn’t imply that we are born with the knowledge. Bostock seems to think that if we know the form of equality at t1 (where that is a time after birth), then either we were born with the knowledge (and so didn’t acquire it but simply had it all along) or else we acquired it at some time between birth and t1; since the second option doesn’t obtain, the first one does. But these are not exhaustive options. A third option is that we aren’t born with the knowledge, and don’t acquire it for the first time at some time between birth and t1, but had it prenatally without having it all along between the time when we had it prenatally and t1; when we recollect, we reacquire the knowledge we once had. I discuss this option below.
be doing—that perception grounds our knowledge of the form. On the contrary, he’s explaining why that isn’t the case: because sensible equals and the form are objects of a different knowledge. Socrates’s point is that just as one’s seeing and recognizing Cebes doesn’t ground one’s knowledge of Simmias but merely leads one to recollect him, so one’s seeing and recognizing sensible equals doesn’t ground one’s knowledge of the form but merely leads one to recollect it.

If Socrates takes himself to have shown that DKR is satisfied, we might expect him to invoke PKR. However, he doesn’t immediately do so. Let’s see what happens next instead.

6.

Socrates emphasizes that the argument he’s just given for the claim that we’re recollecting doesn’t take a stand on whether he’s described a case of recollection from similars or dissimilars. Nonetheless, he now suggests it’s the former.³⁸ That allows him to invoke a necessary condition for that sort of recollection: we must ask whether the sensibles fall short of the form; when we do, we will conclude that they do so. Let’s call this ‘The Thought.’ I take it that ‘we’ are still just we Platonists who say that there is a form of equality and who know what it is. If so, Socrates’s claim that we have The Thought is not surprising, though it would be surprising if ‘we’ included everyone, or nearly everyone—for not everyone can think that sensibles fall short of forms since, among other things, not everyone has a concept of forms.³⁹

It’s only now that Socrates says that we have prior knowledge of the form—prior, that is, to when we first have The Thought (74e9–75a3). So here, though not earlier, Socrates says that we have prior knowledge. But he seems to infer this not from DKR, but from our having The Thought. It’s true that The Thought is said to be a case of recollection from similars. But it’s striking that when he describes The Thought and says that we must have known the form of equality before we first had it, he doesn’t mention recollection. He just describes The Thought and says that we must have known the form of equality before we first had it. If we had just

³⁸ This leads Dancy to distinguish what he calls the Core Argument from what he calls the Ancillary Argument. The Core Argument is essentially complete at 74c14–d3, where Socrates concludes that he’s described a case of recollection, though without taking a stand on whether it’s from similars or from dissimilars. Dancy thinks the Ancillary Argument is ‘frosting on the cake’: it doesn’t add anything important to the Core Argument. Ackrill, by contrast, thinks that Plato has come to see that the Core Argument is unsound (since it relies on DKR, which Plato now sees is false) and offers the Ancillary Argument as an alternative: ‘Anamnesis in the Phaedo,’ 23–4. Dancy and Ackrill agree that the Core Argument treats DKR as a sufficient condition for recollection; they disagree about the role of the Ancillary Argument. Below I dispute their shared view that DKR operates as a sufficient condition.

³⁹ For a defense of the view that ‘we’ are still just we Platonists, see Scott, Recollection and Experience, 60. For the view that ‘we’ has a broader scope here, see Kelsey, ‘Recollection in the Phaedo,’ 117–18. I take it that, whatever might be true elsewhere, de dicto thoughts about forms are at issue here.
this stretch of text, we wouldn’t know that Socrates took The Thought to involve recollection. It is tempting to think that, just as the preceding argument doesn’t depend on whether the case it describes is recollection from similars or dissimilars, so the argument he’s about to give doesn’t depend on the fact that having The Thought involves recollection. All that matters is that we have The Thought.⁴⁰ That’s potentially a good thing. For, as we’ve seen, DKR is false. If Socrates is now going to argue for prior knowledge without relying on it, we should be pleased.

Socrates next asks when we first knew the form: he is now asking the ultimate-source question. One possible answer is that we first knew it at some point after philosophy took our souls in hand and led us to realize that there are forms and that they are more real than sensibles (82e–83e); eventually this enabled us to come to know what the form of equality is—say, at the age of 20.⁴¹ If this answer can’t be ruled out, we can’t infer to prenatal knowledge or, therefore, to prenatal existence. So it’s not surprising that Socrates proceeds to rule it out. He does so by saying that, since we perceive from birth, we must have known the form prenatally. Ackrill raises an obvious objection:⁴²

One could admit that we saw and heard from birth, and that referring what one sees and hears to standards implies prior knowledge of the standards, and one could still deny that we had prenatal knowledge of standards. For we may have done a good deal of infantile seeing and hearing before we began to refer what we saw and heard to any standards (in fact we certainly did).

Ackrill seems to think that Plato’s inference to prenatal knowledge would be valid only if Plato assumes that we do the referring from birth; but, Ackrill thinks, we don’t do so. One reply is to say that Plato wrongly thinks we refer what we perceive to standards, i.e. to forms, from birth; and so the inference to prenatal knowledge of forms is valid, even though the overall argument isn’t sound. However, 75b10–11 doesn’t say that we do the referring from birth.⁴³ It says

⁴⁰ Indeed, as we’ll see shortly, actually having The Thought isn’t necessary; all that’s necessary is that we are capable of having it.
⁴¹ Or, if we favor Sedley’s interpretation (see n. 29), according to which everyone, or virtually everyone, who has done some elementary mathematics has knowledge of the form, then that’s when we first got the knowledge—at, say, the age of 5. On Bostock’s interpretation (see n. 30), we first got the knowledge when we became able to classify things as equal—which, as we’ve seen, Bostock says, we can’t do from birth.
⁴² ‘Review of Hackforth, Plato’s Phaedo,’ 108. I mentioned in section 1 that Ackrill thinks 75b4–c6 involves a ‘notorious fallacy’ (‘Anamnesis in the Phaedo,’ 29 n. 13). Though ‘Anamnesis’ doesn’t say what it is, his review of Hackforth does so.
⁴³ This is rightly noticed by Bostock, Plato’s Phaedo, 101–2, and Dancy, Plato’s Introduction of Forms, 276–7. Even if Plato had said that we refer sensibles to forms from birth, it wouldn’t follow that we know forms from birth, hence it wouldn’t follow that we have innate knowledge. But for the view that Plato says that we not only refer sensibles to forms from birth but also know forms from birth, see M. Morgan, ‘Sense-Perception and Recollection in the Phaedo,’ Phronesis 29 (1984), 237–51. He describes the ‘knowledge’ he thinks Plato takes us to have from birth as being pre-articulate and
that we couldn’t do the referring unless we knew forms before we began to perceive; and so, since we perceive from birth, we knew them before birth. That doesn’t imply, and Plato doesn’t say, that we do the referring from birth. It just says that we couldn’t do the referring (whenever it takes place) unless we had prenatal knowledge. But, as we shall see, this doesn’t make Plato’s argument invalid (which is not to say that it is sound).

The *explanandum* at issue here is the fact that we do the referring; and the *explanans* is prenatal knowledge. Since we aren’t said to do the referring from birth, this *explanandum* doesn’t involve innate knowledge. Further, the *explanans* is prenatal knowledge, not innate knowledge.

7.

Since Socrates has argued that we have prenatal knowledge, he’s entitled to infer that we existed prenatally. But he doesn’t explicitly draw that conclusion until 76c11–13. Perhaps that’s because he sees that he hasn’t done enough to justify the inference to prenatal knowledge. So we might hope that the next and concluding section will fill this lacuna. Yet according to Dancy, this part of the argument is ‘weak’ and so ‘we need not stop over it.’ Bostock thinks the passage ‘wholly begs the question,’ and that ‘[o]n any view, the argument does falter at this point.’ According to Gallop, when we put it together with what’s been argued so far, it emerges that Plato reasons in a circle: earlier Plato argued from recollection to prenatal knowledge; he now argues from prenatal knowledge to recollection. Yet recollection ‘cannot function both as premiss and conclusion of the same argument.’

Is the passage as bad as these commentators suggest? We should also ask what the passage says about innate knowledge. For only here is it explicitly mentioned.

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44 75e3 perhaps suggests that we *don’t* do the referring from birth: *husteron*, later on. But perhaps this just means at some time later than when we had the prenatal knowledge.

45 On my view, only Platonists who consciously and explicitly know forms do the referring; hence the referring clearly isn’t done from birth. Sedley and Bostock think the referring is more extensive than I take it to be; but as we’ve seen (n. 41), they don’t think we do the referring from birth. Hence on their views the *explanandum* isn’t innate knowledge.


47 Gallop, *Plato’s Phaedo*. The first quotation is from 61, the second from 103.

48 Gallop, *Plato’s Phaedo*, 134; see also 130, 132.
First Socrates says:

Now if, having got it [knowledge of the form of equality] before birth, we were born in possession of it, did we know, both before birth and as soon as we were born, not only the equal, the larger and the smaller, but also all such things? Because our present argument concerns the beautiful itself, and the good itself, and just and holy, no less than the equal; and, in fact, as I say, it concerns everything on which we set this seal, ‘what it is,’ in the questions we ask and in the answers we give. And so we must have got pieces of knowledge of all those things before birth. (75c7–d5; Gallop, Plato: Phaedo, slightly modified)

Let’s look first at the second part of the passage. The argument so far has focused on ‘our’ knowledge of the form of equality. Plato now tells us that his argument applies to all the forms. Yet we know from 76b–c that virtually no one, perhaps no one, knows all of them; indeed, most people don’t know any of them. So why does the argument apply to all of them? The answer, I think, is that the fact that ‘we’ now know the form of equality—or any other form—isn’t necessary to the argument. What’s essential is that everyone can know them in the way that ‘we’ now know the form of equality.⁴⁹

Let’s now turn to the first part of the passage, where Socrates says that if we not only had the knowledge before birth but were also born with it, we would know both before birth and also as soon as we are born (75c7–9). That conditional is certainly true. And if he endorses its antecedent, he posits innate knowledge. But does he endorse the antecedent? 75c7–9 doesn’t do so; it just states the conditional.⁵⁰ One aim of the passage that follows is to decide whether we know not only prenatally but also from birth.

In deciding about this, Socrates considers two options that he takes to be exclusive: either (a) we know not only prenatally but also when we are born; or (b) we know prenatally and learning is recollection (76a4–7). This summarizes a discussion in which (a) and (b) are phrased in various ways. Initially the first option is phrased as (a1) we know not only prenatally but also when we are born. But at 75d6–11 it is described as (a2)

⁴⁹ Cf. dunaton at 76a1: actual recollection isn’t necessary; all that’s necessary is that recollection is possible. If this is right, then the fact that only ‘we’ philosophers know the form of equality doesn’t imply that only we philosophers existed prenatally. For everyone can recollect, and can come to have the sort of knowledge ‘we’ now have; this is possible only if everyone has prenatal knowledge and so existed prenatally. Similarly, in the Meno Plato considers the cognitive progress of an uneducated slave and argues that he can acquire knowledge, though he doesn’t in fact do so. Here too, what’s crucial is the possibility of knowledge. This answers the charge, leveled by some, that if only philosophers recollect, only they have immortal souls: see e.g. Gallop, Plato: Phaedo, 120; Bostock, Plato’s Phaedo, 67.

⁵⁰ C. Helmig, Forms and Concepts: Concept Formation in the Platonic Tradition (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 302 (cf. 311), thinks Proclus, In Alc. 191–2, takes Phd. 75c–d to posit innate knowledge; and he doesn’t fault Proclus for doing so.
we know not only prenatally but also on being born and throughout our lives. The second option is initially described as (b1) we knew prenatally but forgot the knowledge at birth (75e2–3). Socrates then considers the possibility that (b2) we use the senses to regain knowledge we had prenatally but forgot at birth, in which case learning is recollection of that prenatal knowledge (75e3–7). At 76a1–7 he says that (b3) one can (dunaton, 76a1) perceive something and then think of something one has forgotten that is the object of a different knowledge (76a1–4); in this case too, learning is recollection.

Evidently the different descriptions of (a) are meant to be equivalent, as are the different descriptions of (b). Though Plato doesn’t always explicitly say so, both options include the claim that we have prenatal knowledge. The crucial question is whether we retain that knowledge when we are born (= (a)) or forget it then (= (b)) where, Socrates explains, to forget knowledge is to lose it (75d8–11).

Though both (a) and (b) assume that we have prenatal knowledge, they differ as to whether we retain that knowledge at birth or lose it then. If we retain it, learning is not recollection; rather, we know all along. If we don’t retain it, learning is recollection. (At least, that’s so if it’s also the case that, on seeing and recognizing x we think of y, which is the object of a different knowledge and something we’ve forgotten. Forgetting y is necessary, but not sufficient, for recollection.) Hence, to

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51 Pace Scott (‘Platonic Recollection,’ 111) they do not both include the claim that we retain our knowledge: though (a) includes this claim, (b) does not. If Scott were right, both options would posit innate knowledge and so, since Socrates favours (b), he would favour innate knowledge. However, (b) doesn’t say that everyone retains their prenatal knowledge. It says that everyone had prenatal knowledge but forgot it at birth. Scott thinks that we forgot prenatal knowledge that was conscious and explicit, but retain latent knowledge (see e.g. 112). I argue against this interpretation below. The point for now is just that in describing (b), all Socrates says is that we forgot our prenatal knowledge at birth; he doesn’t say that we retain it at birth, whether as latent knowledge or in some other way. See n. 61 below.

52 Why, in describing the first option, does Plato mention not only prenatal knowledge and knowing at birth, but also knowing throughout our lives? Surely someone could know prenatally and at birth, but not throughout their life? Someone might suffer from amnesia, or have a concussion, or get Alzheimer’s, in such a way that she loses knowledge she once had, even if (let us suppose) she had it not only prenatally but also at birth. In fact, I don’t think (a) is meant to preclude these possibilities. Rather, Plato is thinking about normal rational people, and assuming that if they retain their prenatal knowledge of forms at birth, they also have it throughout their lives—barring some terrible tragedy. For, leaving that to one side, it’s just not plausible to think that we know forms at birth and then cease to know them later on. See Dancy, Plato’s Introduction of Forms, 276–8. (I take it that Plato has in mind just knowledge of forms and thinks that we couldn’t easily lose it, though in special circumstances we can and do; he doesn’t mean his claim to carry over to ordinary empirical knowledge.)

Another possible explanation is that we can’t lose the knowledge because it’s essential to us. This seems to be Damascius’ view: 1.267; 290 (from Plutarch); 307, 308; 2.14ff; 16ff. If he is right, we have innate knowledge. He seems to assume this on the basis of 76e1–2, which he seems to think means that the forms are our ousia, in the sense of being our essence. (One might wonder what the connection is between forms being our essence, and innate knowledge. The answer is that Damascius thinks we recollect forms in the soul (not transcendent forms) and that these are logoi, where that seems to mean that they are or express knowledge. Hence, if the forms or logoi are essential to us, so too is knowledge; and if it’s part of our essence actually to have knowledge, we have innate knowledge.) But I don’t think the passage should be read this way; all it says is that we once knew the forms. See Gallop, Plato: Phaedo, and Rowe, Plato: Phaedo.
defend the view that learning is recollection, Socrates needs to defend (b) and reject (a). This shows that Plato doesn’t think that the antecedent of DKR—or, for that matter, of DKR*—specifies a sufficient condition for recollection. For on both (a) and (b) we have prior knowledge. Yet Plato says that if (a) is true, we don’t recollect; recollection requires (b). Here he is drawing on the claim made in 73e, that forgetting is a necessary condition of recollection.

Socrates is now relying, not on DKR or DKR*, but on DKR**.⁵³

\[\text{DKR**: If A perceives and recognizes x, and thinks of something else, y, that is the object of a different knowledge and that she’s forgotten, A recollects y.}\]

Is there any reason to suppose that anyone satisfies the antecedent of DKR** or, in other words, is there any reason to favor (b) over (a)?⁵⁴ Simmias is initially unsure how to choose between them (76b3). Socrates tries to persuade him to reject (a); in doing so he is rebutting a challenge to his claim that learning is recollection. He does this in a passage we’ve already looked at: in 76b–c he argues that if one knows something, one can provide an account of it. But no one can provide accounts of all the forms and so no one knows all of them. If they don’t know them now, as rational adults, a fortiori they didn’t know them earlier in this life either, let alone from birth.⁵⁵ Hence we’ve all forgotten our prior (ultimately prenatal) knowledge of forms, and so (a) is not a live option: no one knows any forms at birth, and most people don’t know any of them later on either. Hence, we can reject (a) and endorse (b).

Socrates’s account of knowledge is controversial. For example, not everyone thinks that, to know something, one must be able to articulate an account of it. Further, he takes all knowledge to be conscious and explicit in the sense that, if I can’t now readily articulate an account, I don’t now have knowledge. He accepts an accessibility condition on knowledge, according to which, if one has knowledge, one can specify the contents of one’s knowledge relatively easily. Since most

⁵³ At the end of section 3, we considered an objection to DKR: someone might see and recognize x and think of something else, y, that is the object of a different knowledge; but, rather than recollecting y, she might be thinking of it for the very first time. Plato doesn’t explicitly consider that objection. But the reply I offer him to the objection he explicitly considers (viz. that one might know all along, whereas recollecting requires forgetting) responds to it. For since forgetting is built into the antecedent of DKR**, James Watt doesn’t satisfy it.

⁵⁴ DKR** is satisfied in the homely examples that Socrates began with; but the question now is whether anyone satisfies it with respect to forms. Though it’s easy to concede that in the homely examples we have prior knowledge that we’ve forgotten (at least in the weak sense that we weren’t at the time attending to it), it’s harder to agree to this in the case of forms. For one thing, some people don’t even think forms exist. For another thing, most people can’t readily call them to mind: so what is the evidence that we have or had prior knowledge of them? If forgetting is involved here too, it will have to be of the ‘deeper’ sort that involves not attending to it for a long time. Plato’s aim here is to show that that’s the case.

⁵⁵ Here I am indebted to discussion with Lesley Brown.
of us can’t do that with respect to any forms, most of us don’t know any forms.\textsuperscript{56} Given this account of knowledge, not only do most of us not know any forms now; but no one knows any forms at birth; hence no one has innate knowledge of them.\textsuperscript{57}

In defending (b) over (a), Socrates assumes that they are not only exclusive but also exhaustive options. Simmias challenges this assumption. He suggests a third option: (c) we get the knowledge (sc. for the first time) at the moment of birth (76c14–15). Whereas (a) and (b) both assume that we have prenatal knowledge, (c) claims that we have innate but not prenatal knowledge. This view is likely to appeal to contemporary readers more than is the view that we have prenatal but not innate knowledge.\textsuperscript{58} So it might seem disappointing that in reply Socrates just asserts that it’s already been agreed that we lost our prenatal knowledge at birth; and we can’t simultaneously acquire and lose something. Simmias might have responded by saying that, though that’s true, he’s challenging the claim that we lost knowledge we had prenatally. His suggestion is that, rather than having had prenatal knowledge and losing it at birth, we have or acquire the knowledge at birth, without ever having had any prenatal knowledge.\textsuperscript{59} But rather than defending his suggestion in this or any other way, he just accepts what Socrates says and admits that he was talking nonsense. Bostock thinks that, in failing to defend himself against Simmias’ suggestion, Socrates begs the question.\textsuperscript{60} However, Socrates has already defended himself against Simmias’ suggestion. For he has explained that knowledge requires being able to give an account, which most of us can’t ever do and which no one can do at birth; and Simmias agreed. So he is committed to saying that, contrary to (c), we don’t have knowledge at birth. Rather, that’s when we forget our prenatal knowledge.

\textsuperscript{56} I discuss the accessibility condition on knowledge in The Possibility of Inquiry, 5.9.

\textsuperscript{57} One might argue that even if there’s no innate knowledge of forms, we might have innate knowledge of something else. However, those who think Plato posits innate knowledge typically think he restricts it to forms. Be that as it may, he seems to think that all knowledge must be conscious and explicit in the sense that one can readily explain why what one knows is true. That’s something no one can do at birth, for anything; hence, as he sees the matter, there’s no innate knowledge, period.

\textsuperscript{58} Alternatively, Simmias may be suggesting that we somehow acquire the knowledge when we are born; it’s not that we are born that way, with the knowledge somehow hard-wired in. If this is his suggestion, he’s not positing innate knowledge at it is usually conceived of.

\textsuperscript{59} Gallop (Plato: Phaedo, 134), also makes this point, noting that if someone is born blind at birth, we wouldn’t say he’d lost his sight then; we’d say he never had it. And, if he were to become sighted at some point, he’d have acquired it for the first time then; he wouldn’t be regaining something he’d once had and lost. Similarly, then, we might say that we are epistemically blind at birth in that we lack knowledge and didn’t have it earlier either; if we at some point acquire knowledge, we are doing so for the first time, not regaining innate knowledge we once had.

\textsuperscript{60} Bostock, Plato’s Phaedo, 61. A possibility Socrates doesn’t mention is that we had the knowledge prenatally but also lost it prenatally. Perhaps he thinks some special explanation, such as the trauma of birth, is needed to explain the loss; but there is no such explanation when we are discarnate.
One might reply that what we forget at birth is prenatal knowledge that was conscious and explicit; that’s compatible with having latent innate knowledge.⁶¹ I agree. But it’s one thing to say that forgetting conscious and explicit knowledge is compatible with having latent innate knowledge, and quite another thing to say that Plato posits it. And he hasn’t done so. Certainly he doesn’t explicitly distinguish latent from explicit innate knowledge, saying we have the former but not the latter. He just says we don’t know at birth. Why doesn’t he mention latent innate knowledge, if he thinks we have it? We’ve already seen the reason: he doesn’t think it would count as genuine knowledge. In ruling out conscious and explicit innate knowledge, he rules out the only sort of innate knowledge he thinks there could be. Other alleged sorts of innate knowledge don’t qualify as genuine knowledge. For, again, he says that one knows something only if one can give an account of it; since we can’t do that at birth, we don’t know then, period.⁶² If this is right, then Plato, so far from assuming that we have latent innate knowledge without troubling to say so, argues that there is no such thing.⁶³

8.

On the account I’ve suggested, Plato’s argument for prenatal knowledge doesn’t use recollection as a premise.⁶⁴ Rather, it goes as follows. We can all know forms. What explains this remarkable fact? Not perception, for it has no access to forms. Not innate knowledge, for there is no such thing. In general, the resources available to us only in this life are too impoverished to explain how we can acquire

⁶¹ Scott thinks Plato takes us to have lost our conscious prenatal knowledge at birth. But, he says, ‘there is no reason why everyone cannot have the knowledge latently’ (‘Platonic Recollection’ 112). However, Plato’s accessibility condition is such a reason, for it rules out there being such a thing as latent knowledge. See also n. 51.

⁶² Brown, ‘Connaissance,’ 618, thinks Socrates posits latent innate knowledge, but she admits that doing so violates his conditions on knowledge. On my view, there is no such violation. In APo. 2.19, Aristotle also assumes that there is no unconscious, latent innate knowledge, at least not of first principles, which is the sort of innate knowledge we’d have of forms if we had such knowledge. He’s usually taken to be criticizing Plato here. But, on my view, he isn’t doing so; rather, they agree that there is no latent innate knowledge, at least of first principles (that’s all Aristotle explicitly rules out; Plato rules out all latent innate knowledge). Contrast D. Bronstein, ‘Aristotle’s Critique of Plato’s Theory of Innate Knowledge,’ *Logical Analysis and History of Philosophy* 19 (2016), 126–39; and P. Adamson, ‘Posterior Analytics II.19: a Dialogue with Plato?’, in V. Harte et al. (eds.), *Aristotle and the Stoics Reading Plato* (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 2010), 1–19.

⁶³ To say we don’t have innate knowledge isn’t to say that nothing is innate: we might, for example, have innate true beliefs or dispositions. So far as I can see, the *Phaedo* is uncommitted on this issue. I discuss varieties of innatism in connection with the *Meno*, in *The Possibility of Inquiry*, 140–7.

⁶⁴ See also Bostock, *Plato’s Phaedo*, who says that Plato’s main argument ‘does not need’ recollection and that indeed ‘the notion of recollection (anamnēsis) plays no part’, though he thinks it ‘has a minor role to play in the explanation of why our knowledge of the equal cannot be said to be given to us by perception’ (62). See also Kelsey, ‘Recollection in the *Phaedo*,’ 97–8, n. 14. However, neither of them thinks the argument turns on rejecting innate knowledge; and Bostock thinks Plato posits it. (Kelsey doesn’t discuss this issue.) Nor, on my view, does recollection play even a ‘minor part’ in explaining that we can’t know the equal through perception.
knowledge of forms. We must therefore have some further resource that explains how we can do so. This can only be prenatal knowledge; and so we have prenatal knowledge. This is a version of an argument from ‘the poverty of the stimulus.’⁶⁵ On the usual versions of such arguments, the gap is filled by innate knowledge. But Plato rejects the existence of innate knowledge; he fills the gap with prenatal knowledge instead. If we have prenatal knowledge, we have prior knowledge, though we forgot it at birth. But we can nonetheless, when seeing and recognizing sensible Fs, think of the form of F, which is the object of a different knowledge. Hence the antecedent of DKR** is satisfied; and so we are recollecting.

As we’ve seen, Gallop rightly says that Plato can’t use recollection as both a premise and a conclusion in the same argument. But whereas he thinks Plato does so, on my account he doesn’t do so. Rather, though he argues from prior knowledge (for prenatal knowledge is prior knowledge) to recollection, he doesn’t argue from recollection to prior knowledge.

But, one might ask, doesn’t Plato begin by relying on DKR, and then inferring from it to PKR? So it’s often thought—and so I allowed earlier on. But the argument I’ve given suggests an alternative. Perhaps, despite initial appearances, Plato never relies on DKR. Rather, he begins with homely examples that take prior knowledge and forgetting for granted; and he then argues that when we add the antecedent of DKR to those assumptions, we then get a sufficient condition for recollection. The antecedent of DKR isn’t ever offered as a sufficient condition for recollection. Rather, it’s sufficient in the cases he’s described, where it’s assumed that we have prior knowledge and have forgotten. Plato then shows that the antecedent of DKR is also satisfied when we have The Thought. But here it takes more work to show that we have prior knowledge that we’ve forgotten. For one might be tempted to think we can get our knowledge of forms in some other way: from perceiving, say; or from doing philosophy; or perhaps we are just born with the knowledge. Plato devotes the last stage of his argument to arguing that none of these explanations will do; rather, we could have The Thought only if we have The Thought. But here it takes more work to show that we have prior knowledge that we’ve forgotten. For one might be tempted to think we can get our knowledge of forms in some other way: from perceiving, say; or from doing philosophy; or perhaps we are just born with the knowledge. Plato devotes the last stage of his argument to arguing that none of these explanations will do; rather, we could have The Thought only if we had prenatal knowledge. A crucial part of this argument rejects innate knowledge. It’s only once he’s ruled out that possibility (along with some others) that he feels entitled to argue that, in having The Thought, we are recollecting forms. This suggests that his real argument all along relies just on DKR**: the antecedent of DKR mentions only part of his real sufficient condition.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ I discuss Plato’s version of a poverty of the stimulus argument briefly in The Possibility of Inquiry, 5.9, in connection with the Meno, though, see 171–3 on the Phaedo.

⁶⁶ If this is right, then what Dancy calls the Ancillary Argument isn’t just frosting on the cake (see n. 38). Rather, it’s a crucial part of his argument. Nor need we say, with Ackrill, that Plato begins by assuming DKR, decides it’s false, and so offers another argument (see n. 38). It’s not clear why, if Plato’s considered view is that DKR is false, he would, for part of the dialogue, treat it as being true. Still, Ackrill’s interpretation—one on which Plato in effect offers two arguments, one of which relies on DKR and one of which doesn’t do so—allows us to avoid Gallop’s charge of circularity. For though Gallop is right
I don’t know whether DKR** is true; and certainly one might object to Plato’s argument for prenatal knowledge of forms. But as I’ve reconstructed the overall argument, at least it isn’t vulnerable to the objections generally brought against it. Nor does it rely on positing innate knowledge. On the contrary, a crucial part of his argument involves rejecting innate knowledge.⁶⁷

to say that Plato can’t use recollection as both a premise and a conclusion in the same argument, he can use it as a premise in one argument and as a conclusion in another argument.
⁶⁷ Thanks to Georgia Sermamoglou-Soulmaidi and Evan Robert Keeling for helpful comments, and to Lesley Brown and Terry Irwin for many rewarding discussions.
Plato on the Grades of Perception:  
*Theaetetus* 184–186 and the *Phaedo*

**1.**

In a fascinating passage in the Sixth Set of Replies to Objections to the *Meditations*, Descartes distinguishes three grades of perception:

The first is limited to the immediate stimulation of the bodily organs by external objects; this can consist in nothing but the motion of the particles of the organs, and any change of shape and position resulting from this motion. The second grade comprises (*continent*) all the immediate effects produced in the mind as a result of its being united with a bodily organ which is affected in this way. Such effects include the perceptions (*perceptiones*) of pain, pleasure, thirst, hunger, colours, sound, taste, smell, heat, cold and the like, which arise from the union and as it were the intermingling of mind and body, as explained in Meditation VI. The third grade includes (*comprehendit*) all the judgments (*judicia*) about things outside us which we have been accustomed to make from our earliest years—judgments which are occasioned by the movements of these bodily organs. The movement in the brain, which is common to us and the brutes, is the first grade of sensory response. This leads to the second grade, which extends to the mere perception (*perceptionem*) of colour and light reflected from the stick; it arises from the fact that the mind is so intimately conjoined with the body that it is affected by the movements which occur in it. Nothing more than this should be referred to the sensory faculty (*sensum*), if we wish to distinguish it carefully from the intellect (*intellectu*). But suppose that, as a result of being affected by this sensation (*sensu*) of colour, I judge that a stick, located outside me, is coloured; and suppose that on the basis of the extension of the colour and its boundaries together with its position in relation to the parts of my brain, I make a rational calculation (*ratiocener*) about the size, shape and distance of the stick: although such reasoning is commonly assigned to the senses (*sensui*) (which is why I have here referred to it as the third grade of sensory response), it is clear that it depends solely on the intellect.  

(CSM II 294–5/AT VII 436–8)
The first grade takes perception to be wholly and only physiological.¹ The second grade, by contrast, essentially involves the mind, or soul. It seems to consist of sensory states that have representational but non-conceptual content.² The third grade, like the second but unlike the first grade, involves the mind, or soul; and it includes, but isn’t restricted to, sensory judgments (judicia). If, as I think, the second grade has non-conceptual content, then the third grade presumably includes sensory states that have conceptual content. Whether or not this is exactly what Descartes has in mind, it is, at any rate, how I’ll interpret the second and third grades.

In this chapter, I ask which, if any, of Descartes’s three grades of perception is at in Theaetetus 184–6 and in the Phaedo.³ So far as I know, no one thinks it is at the first grade in Tht. 184–6; and, as we’ll see, it’s clear that it isn’t. There is, however, considerable dispute about whether the passage places perception at the second or third grade. As for the Phaedo, I don’t know of anyone who thinks it places perception at the first grade. But there is some evidence that might tempt one to think it does so; so, though I won’t linger over this issue, I’ll discuss it briefly. I’ll spend more time asking whether the dialogue places perception at the second or third grade, a question whose answer is disputed.⁴ Further, since there’s been so much discussion of perception in Tht. 184–6,⁵ I’ll be relatively brief about it.

¹ As A. Simmons explains, ‘it begins with the mechanical stimulation of the sense organs by external objects and terminates in the mechanical stimulation of the pineal gland’ (‘Descartes on the Cognitive Structure of Sensory Experience,’ Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 67 (2003), 549–79, at 553).

² This characterization of the second grade is controversial. For example, not everyone thinks Descartes takes second-grade perceptions to have representational content. There is also dispute about whether the subject in second-grade perception is the mind, or the mind–body compound; rather than taking a stand on this issue, I say instead that second-grade perception essentially involves the mind, which is neutral.

³ In saying that second-grade perception seems both to be representational and to have non-conceptual content, I mean, more precisely, that one seems to have it when one has a perception with representational content but one lacks the concepts needed for articulating that content. This is what R. Heck, in ‘Non-Conceptual Content and the “Space of Reasons,”’ Philosophical Review 109 (2000), 483–523, calls a state view of non-conceptual content, as opposed to a content view of it. See also T. Crane, ‘Is Perception a Propositional Attitude?,’ Philosophical Quarterly 59 (2009), 452–469. I take it that perception so conceived is cognitive, since the soul, or mind, is essentially involved; hence as I shall use the term, being non-conceptual doesn’t imply being non-cognitive. For a helpful general discussion of non-conceptual content, see J. Bermúdez and A. Cahan, ‘Nonconceptual Mental Content’ in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/content-non-conceptual/. See also n. 15.

⁴ I say ‘if any’ because, as we shall see in section 3, there’s a way in which his taxonomy is not exhaustive.

⁵ However, as we shall see in section 3, there’s a way in which putting the matter this way is imprecise.

I’ll consider the *Phaedo* at greater length, since there’s been relatively little discussion of its account of perception: which is somewhat surprising in view of the fact that the dialogue says quite a lot about perception.

2.

I begin by looking at *Theaetetus* 184–6, a famous passage in which Plato argues that perception isn’t knowledge (*epistêmê*). For not only does it draw a number of distinctions it will be helpful to have before us; but, also, commentators disagree about whether it agrees with, or criticizes, the *Phaedo*. And one of my aims in what follows is to ask which, if either, of these views is right.¹

Socrates begins by saying that, strictly speaking, we should say, not that we see with the eyes, but that we see through the eyes (184c5–d5); more generally, we perceive through the sense organs (184c, 184d–e) or through the senses (184d, 184e8–185a2, 185b, e, 186b).⁸ The reason, he explains, is that if we


⁷ I say ’if either’ because the two views are not exhaustive: *Th. *184–6 and the *Phaedo* could have different but compatible views. In that case, they wouldn’t agree in the sense of holding the same views; but neither would they conflict. In *Plato on Perception* I argue that the case is between *Th. *184–6 and Rep. 523–5; but I don’t there discuss the *Phaedo*.

⁸ *Theaet. 184b7–c9: Εἴ ὁν τις σε ἀδιάφροτως τί τὰ λεικὰ καὶ μέλανα ὡρᾶ ἀνθρώπως καὶ τί τὰ ὄξεια καὶ βαρσά αἴκους; εἴποις ὅν οἷς ὁμοία τε καὶ ὕστερον. — Ἑγώγε. — *[184c]* Τὸ δὲ εὐχέρες τῶν ἀνωμάτων τε καὶ ῥημάτων καὶ μὴ δὲ ἀκριβείας ἀξιολογῆσαι τὰ μὲν πολλά οἷς ἄγνωστα, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον τὸ τοῦτο ἐναντίον ἀνελθεῖρον, ἐστι δὲ ὅτε ἀναγκαῖον, ὅν καὶ νῦν ἀνάγκη ἐπιλαβέθαι τῆς ἀποκρίσεως ἦν ἀποκρίσει, ὡς νὰ ὁρθῆ. Ἐκαίνει γὰρ ἀπόκρισιν σοτέρα ὁρθοτέρα, ὃ ἀράμει τοῦτο εἰναι ὀρθάλμοις, ὃ δὲ ὁ ἀράμει καὶ ὃ ἀκοιμηῶν ὡστα, ὃ δὲν ὁ ἀκοιμηῶν—Δι’ ὅν ἐκάστα αἰσθανόμεθα, ἐξαιροῦσα δοκεῖ, ὃ Σάκρατες, μᾶλλον ἡ ὁπὸς—*[184d]* For the text of the *Theaetetus*, I generally follow Burnet’s OCT edition (1905).

Like Levett/Burneyat (in Burneyat, *Theaetetus*) I use ’with’ to render the dative and ’through’ to render *dia* plus the genitive. McDowell uses ’with’ and ’by means of,’ respectively.

As Cooper notes (’Plato on Sense-Perception and Knowledge,’ 359; cf. 360–1 and n. 9), Plato says both that we perceive through the sense organs (such as the eyes) and that we perceive through sensory powers or capacities (*dunameis*, e.g. sight, which is the power or capacity to see); and, at 185e7, Plato speaks of the latter as ’capacities of the body.’ Yet, Cooper says, it’s awkward to say that the mind (or soul: *psychê*) perceives, while locating the sensory capacities in the body: for ’if the mind sees and hears,
perceived *with* the sense organs or senses, they would be in us as if in wooden horses; whereas, in fact, ‘they converge on some one kind of thing, a soul or whatever one ought to call it, something with which we perceive all the perceived things through the senses, as if through instruments’ (184d1–5).

As Burnyeat has well argued, Plato is suggesting that to say that we perceive *with* the soul indicates that the soul does the perceiving; and to say that we perceive *through* the sense organs or senses indicates that they are just instruments that we use in perceiving. The sense organs and senses don’t themselves perceive any more than telescopes or eyeglasses do; rather, they enable us to perceive. Since the soul does the perceiving, perception is not at the first grade. For, as we’ve seen, first-grade perception is wholly *and only* physiological; the mind, or soul, is not at all involved.

...
However, as I’ve mentioned, there’s dispute about whether perception is at the second or third grade. Here’s an argument, which I endorse, for thinking it’s at the second grade. At 186c7–d5, Plato argues as follows:

Well now, is it possible for someone to attain (tuchein) truth if he doesn’t even attain being (ousia)?—No, it’s impossible.—And will someone ever have knowledge of something whose truth he doesn’t attain?—Of course not, Socrates.—So knowledge is located, not in our affections (pathêmata), but in our reasoning (sullogismô(i)) about them. For it’s in the latter, it seems, that it’s possible to grasp (hapasasthai) being and truth, whereas it’s impossible in the former.

Ὤν τε οὖν ἀληθείας τυχεῖν, ὡς μηδὲ οὐσίας;—Ἀδύνατον.—Οὐ δὲ ἀληθείας τις ἀτυχήσει, ποτὲ τοῦτον ἑπιστήμων ἐσταί;—[186d] Καὶ πῶς ἂν, ὁ Σώκρατες;—Ἅν μὲν ἄρα τοῖς παθήμαιν οὐκ ἐνὶ ἑπιστήμῃ, ἐν δὲ τῷ περὶ ἑκεῖνον συλλογισμῷ οὐσίας γὰρ καὶ ἀληθείας ἑνταῦθα μὲν, ὡς ἐσομε, δυνατὸν ἀφασθαι, ἐκεῖ δὲ ἀδύνατον.

He goes on to say (186d7–12) that the former—which, he says, includes seeing, hearing, and smelling—is perception. It ‘has no share in the grasping of truth, since it doesn’t even share in the grasping of being’ (186e4–5). Hence ‘it has no share of knowledge either’; and so ‘perception and knowledge could never be the same’ (186e9–10).

We can formulate this argument as follows:

T1. Knowledge requires grasping truth.
T2. One can’t grasp truth unless one grasps being (ousia).

11 Those who think 184–6 places perception at the second grade include Frede, ‘Observations’; Burnyeat, ‘Grammar’ and Theaetetus; Lorenz, Brute; and Bedu-Addo, ‘Sense-Experience.’ (However, though, they all take perception to be non-propositional and non-conceptual (though see Lorenz, Brute, 82 n. 29), their detailed accounts of the second grade differ in some respects. Burnyeat, for example, says that in 184–6, perception doesn’t include awareness or consciousness (‘Grammar,’ 96; see also 36), whereas Bedu-Addo thinks it includes awareness.) I also defend this view briefly in ‘Plato on Perception’; here I provide a somewhat more detailed, though still brief, defense. Cooper, ‘Plato on Sense-Perception and Knowledge,’ thinks the passage places perception at the third grade; see also D. Modrak, ‘Perception and Judgment in the “Theaetetus,”’ Phronesis 26 (1981), 35–54; and V. Caston, ‘Perception in Ancient Philosophy,’ in M. Matthen (ed.), Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Perception (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 29–50, at 41–2.

12 I take it that the pathêmata mentioned in 186c2 and d2 are perceptions: that is, particular acts of perceiving, e.g. seeing something now. (However, see McDowell’s note on 186c1–2, in Plato: Theaetetus.) Perception is also a dunamis, e.g. the capacity or power of sight. If it’s a dunamis, then, according to Rep. 5, it’s set over something and does some work. Its work is to enable us to perceive (just as the work of belief, in Rep. 5, is said to be to enable us to have beliefs). Presumably it’s set over aisthéta, whatever those turn out to be. This account of the dunamis of perception doesn’t tell us anything about what grade perception is at.

13 Ἡ οὖν ταύτων ἐκείνῳ τε καὶ τοῖτο καλεῖ, ὁποῖας διαφορὰς ἔχοντες;—Οὐκ οὖν δὴ δικαίων γε.—Τί οὖν δὴ ἐκείνῳ ἀπόδοτος ἄνωμα, τῷ ἄραν ἀκοικίω δοὺραίνουσα ὑποστήθαι;[186e]—Ἀδιάκριτους ἔσχως τί γὰρ ἄλλο;—Σύμφαντι ἂρ’ αὐτῷ καλεῖς ἀδιάφορος.—Ἀνάγκη;—Ὤ γε, φαμέν, οὔ μέσατιν ἀληθείας ἐφασθαι οὔτα γὰρ οὐσίας.—Ὁ γὰρ οὖν.—Οὐδ’ ἂρ’ ἐπιστήμης.—Οὗ γὰρ.—Οὐκ ἂρ’ ἐν εἴῃ ποτε, ὡς θεατήτης, ἀδιάφορος τε καὶ ἐπιστήμη ταύτων.—Ὤ γαίνεται, ὡς Σώκρατες. Καὶ μάλιστα γε νῦν καταφανεῖστατος γέγονεν ἄλλο ἐν αἰσθήσεως ἐπιστήμῃ.

14 Plato speaks both of ‘attaining’ (tuchein) and ‘grasping’ (hapasasthai). I take it that these are equivalent, so for the sake of simplicity I mention just one of them.
T3. Perception can’t grasp being.
T4. Therefore, perception can’t grasp truth.
T5. Therefore, perception never amounts to knowledge.

According to this argument, knowledge implies truth; since perception can’t grasp truth, it can’t amount to knowledge. The reason perception can’t grasp truth is that it can’t grasp being, which is a necessary condition for grasping truth. I take it that being, here, is incomplete being: the claim in T3 is that perception can’t grasp that any x is F; we never perceive anything as being something or other.

Perception is non-propositional and non-conceptual: though we can perceive e.g. redness (or a token of redness), we can’t perceive it as being red, since doing that requires grasping being, which perception cannot do. Truth, by contrast, is propositional: one can’t know that p unless p is true. If perception can’t grasp any propositions at all, a fortiori it can’t grasp true ones, and so it can’t be knowledge. On this reading, perception is at the second grade: since the soul perceives, perception isn’t at the first grade; but since propositions and concepts aren’t involved, neither is it at the third grade. There are alternative readings. Let me briefly describe two of them, on both of which perception is at the third grade. One is favored by Cooper. On his view, I

186c9–10 says that if one can’t grasp the truth of something, one can’t know it; my T1 does not capture the Greek relative pronoun. Yet one might think it indicates that truth, here, belongs to things. Here I am indebted to discussion with Lesley Brown and to her ‘Plato on Sense-Perception and Knowledge.’Burnyeat also contrasts and evaluates these three interpretations. So too does Brown, ‘Plato’s Theaetetus and the Hunting of the Proposition.’
15 In saying that perception can’t grasp that any x is F, I don’t mean just that it can’t grasp that e.g. an apple is red. I also mean that, though we can perceive (e.g.) redness (or a token of redness), we can’t perceive it (the quality token) as being red. If, as is sometimes thought, the argument restricts perception to proper sensibles, then of course perception can’t grasp that e.g. an apple is red, since objects like apples aren’t perceived. (I discuss proper sensibles briefly in section 8.) But Plato’s point goes beyond that.

I’ve said that I think 184–6 takes perception to be non-propositional and non-conceptual. On a familiar view, grasping concepts and propositions go hand in hand: one grasps a concept if and only if one also grasps certain propositions. One grasps the concept red, for example, if and only if one grasps that redness is thus and so; and one can identify something as red if and only if one has the concept of redness. I’ll assume this view here. That said, it’s worth noting that there are views on which there are some concepts one can grasp even if one doesn’t grasp any propositions: see e.g. J. Fodor, Concepts: Where Cognitive Science Went Wrong (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). There are also views on which propositions don’t consist of concepts: see e.g. R. Stalnaker, Inquiry (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), who takes propositions to be sets of possible worlds. On these views, it wouldn’t straightforwardly follow from perception’s being non-propositional that it is also non-conceptual, or from its being non-conceptual that it is non-propositional. (But even if propositions don’t consist of concepts, one might hold that one can understand a proposition if and only if one grasps certain concepts, and it’s this latter view that is my concern here.) Be that as it may, I take Plato’s point to be that we can’t perceive anything as being (e.g.) red, or that anything is red; and I’ll take that to imply that perception can’t issue in concepts or formulate propositions, and that it can do one of these things if and only if it can do the other. I’ll also assume—and I think Plato believes—that being able to do both is necessary for having belief.
16 In Theaetetus, Burnyeat also contrasts and evaluates these three interpretations. So too does Brown, ‘Plato’s Theaetetus and the Hunting of the Proposition.’
17 In ‘Plato on Sense-Perception and Knowledge.’
‘being’ isn’t incomplete being, but existence—in particular, objective, mind-independent external existence—and ‘truth’ isn’t all propositional truth, but just objective truth about what exists externally. The point isn’t that knowledge implies truth which, in turn, requires grasping that some x is F. Rather, the point is that knowledge implies objective truth about entities existing in the external world. Perception, on this view, can issue in minimal judgments such as ‘This is red’; and so it is at the third grade. But it can’t ascertain whether what it perceives as red is really, objectively red. Since knowledge requires grasping what is really, objectively the case, perception isn’t knowledge.¹ For, though perception can grasp some truths, it can’t grasp the subclass of such truths that one must grasp in order to have knowledge.¹⁸

Cornford defends a second version of the view that perception is at the third grade. On his view, being and truth are even more restricted than Cooper takes them to be. He suggests that ‘being’ is used—not for incomplete being, and not for everything that objectively exists in the external world, where that includes e.g. a token instance of redness or a particular table or chair, but—for what’s real, that is, the forms. It’s less clear how he understands truth. Sometimes he seems to think that it too indicates reality, that is, the forms. He says, for example, that ‘[t]here is a certain ambiguity about the words “existence” (ousia) and ”truth” (alêtheia): both are commonly used by Plato to mean that true reality which he ascribes to Forms and denies to sensible objects.’²⁰ Certainly Plato often uses ‘truth’ terminology to mean ‘real’ or ‘genuine,’ as we also do in English, as when we say that Joe is a true friend. But if we understand truth that way here, the claim that perception can’t grasp truth just restates in other terms that it can’t grasp being (as Cornford understands that notion), whereas the latter seems to be a reason on behalf of the former.²¹

¹⁸ At one point (‘Plato on Sense-Perception and Knowledge,’ 365), Cooper says that perception can know that something is red; but I assume this is a slip.

¹⁹ Cooper seems to think that, for Plato, there are truths only about what objectively exists in an external world; since perception is ‘altogether subjective and unguided by standards,’ it can’t attain truth (or falsehood) (‘Plato on Sense-Perception and Knowledge,’ 373). At this stage Cooper says that ‘in perception one notices only the colour (etc.) a thing appears to have and says nothing about what its real colour is’ (373; emphases added). But earlier he says that ‘in order to decide whether something is red one does not need to reflect, but to use the mind at the perceptual level only’ (363) (emphasis added). (Lorenz, Brute, 77 n. 17, also notices this shift in what Cooper says.) If there are truths only about what’s objectively the case in an external world, then all propositional truth is at issue after all, but there are fewer truths than one might think. If this is Cooper’s view, he anticipates Burnyeat’s ‘Idealism in Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed,’ Philosophical Review 91 (1982), 3–40. For criticism of the general view, see Chapter 12.

²⁰ Cornford, Plato’s Theory of Knowledge, 108; see also 109. On 106, in discussing the first stage of Plato’s argument, Cornford clearly thinks propositional truth is at issue. 108 also mentions propositional truth, but here it isn’t clearly distinguished from ‘true reality.’

²¹ Perhaps Cornford thinks the point is that for one to grasp truth (where that means to grasp what something really is), one needs to grasp something’s being, i.e. its essence. Or perhaps he means that knowledge requires a grasp of true definitions, and that one has this grasp only if one grasps the real entities, that is, forms. On the former view, perhaps Cornford thinks truth, here, is non-propositional.
I’ve sketched three views, and said that I favor the first of them. One reason to do so is that being, as it’s understood in this part of the Theaetetus, doesn’t seem to indicate (objective) existence or to be restricted to forms or to what’s really real in some exalted sense. For example, Plato says that being and not-being apply to everything (185c4–7). Presumably he doesn’t mean that everything (objectively) both exists and doesn’t exist, or that everything both is and isn’t a form, or is and isn’t real. It’s more reasonable to think he means that everything both is and is not in the sense that, for example, this object (or token instance of, say, redness) is red but is not blue. If so, being is incomplete being.²² Since perception can’t grasp incomplete being, it’s at the second grade (given that it’s not at the first grade, since the soul does the perceiving).

There are, however, various objections to the view that 184–6 places perception at the second grade. I’ll consider two of them. First, at 185e6–7 Plato says that ‘there are some things the soul itself considers (episkopein) through itself, and some things it considers through the capacities of the body.’²³ Cooper takes this to mean that ‘[i]n order to decide whether something exists, is similar to something else, etc., one has to reflect; in order to decide whether something is red, one does not need to reflect, but to use the mind at the perceptual level only.’²⁴ If, as Cooper thinks, perception can episkopein some things, where that includes deciding whether e.g. something is red, it is at the third grade.

However, 185e6–7 doesn’t say that perception can episkopein anything; it says that the soul considers some things through the capacities of the body, which needn’t mean anything more than that, in some cases, considering something requires using the senses.²⁵ As Burnyeat puts it, there is ‘no question so simple that perception alone can answer it,’ though ‘perception remains a necessary part of the procedure for settling many questions; it will often be serving as an indispensable aid to some inquiry initiated by the soul.’²⁶ But that doesn’t imply that the senses do the considering. Hence Plato’s discussion of considering doesn’t show that perception is at the third grade.

Here’s the second objection I’ll consider. At 186b11–c5, Socrates says that infants and animals are able to perceive some things straightforward from birth,
whereas ‘calculations (analogismata) about these things, with respect to being and usefulness, are acquired, by those who do acquire them, with difficulty and over a long time, by means of a great deal of troublesome education.’ It might be thought that perception, on the one hand, and calculations about them with respect to being and usefulness, on the other hand, are exhaustive. According to Cornford, the calculating Plato mentions as being difficult requires grasping forms. If everything short of that is perception, perception is at the third grade. Cooper thinks the calculating at issue is at a lower level than Cornford supposes: in his view, Plato means that expert opinions about what is objectively the case are difficult to acquire, though not so difficult as to require a grasp of forms. Still, if everything short of calculating about being and usefulness, as Cooper understands it, counts as perception, perception is at the third grade.

However, I don’t think the contrast at issue in this passage—between perceiving, on the one hand, and calculating about being and usefulness in a way that requires a long and arduous education, on the other hand—is meant to be exhaustive. Rather, Plato is here contrasting perception, which is at the second grade, with knowledge, where these are not exhaustive. So it already follows, from this passage, that perception isn’t knowledge. But Plato proceeds to drive the knife in further by arguing, in (T1)–(T5), that knowledge implies truth and that perception can’t get even that far. 186c mentions a further necessary condition for knowledge, beyond those mentioned in (T1)–(T5): calculating in such a way as to grasp being and usefulness.¹¹ That leaves room for intermediate cognitive

²⁷ οὐκοῦν τὰ μὲν εἰδός γεγομένος πάρεστι φύσει [186c] αἰσθανέσθαι ἀνθρώπως τε καὶ θηρίως, διὰ διὰ τοῦ σώματος παθήματα ἐπὶ τὴν ψυχὴν τείνει· τὰ δὲ περὶ ποιῶν ἀναλογίσματα πρὸς τε οὐσίαν καὶ ἀνάλογα μόρια ἐκ καὶ χρώμα ἀπὸ πολλῶν πραγμάτων καὶ παθείς παραγίγνεται ὡς ἢ τυχόν παραγίγνησις.

Strictly speaking, Socrates is asking a question; but he clearly expects a ‘yes’ answer. I retain a familiar translation of analogismata as ‘calculations,’ but nothing specifically mathematical is at issue.

²⁸ Cornford, Plato’s Theory of Knowledge, 108.

²⁹ Cooper, ‘Plato on Sense-Perception and Knowledge,’ 372–5.

³⁰ See also Modrak, ‘Perception and Judgment,’ n. 22, though cf. her p. 43.

³¹ For similar suggestions, see McDowell, Plato: Theaetetus, 191–2; and Sedley, Midwife, 111 with n. 36. Frede, ‘Observations,’ 382, by contrast, argues that Plato, like the Stoics, thinks that acquiring even rudimentary concepts and beliefs takes a long time and is difficult to do. See also Lorenz, Brute, 90–1. On their view, the contrast between perception and the sorts of calculations at issue here is exhaustive, but perception remains at the second grade. However, even if it takes a long time to acquire concepts and beliefs—until the age of 7 or 14, according to the Stoics, which, in their view is when one reaches the age of reason—it isn’t difficult and it doesn’t require a lot of education; indeed, the Stoics think we acquire at least some concepts naturally, and so in that sense without education. Further, Socrates suggests that not everyone can do the relevant calculations, whereas everyone (normal) acquires concepts and beliefs, as Plato seems to say at 206d–e. (Lorenz, Brute, 91 n. 51 may suggest that the exception is non-human animals. As against this, it’s worth noting that in Rep. 441a7–b1 Socrates says that some people never acquire logosimos, and that most of those who do acquire it do so only late on. If logosimos is used here as analogismata is used in Tht. 186c, it suggests that animals aren’t the only exception Socrates has in mind.) So I find it difficult to think that 186c–2–5 is about concept or belief acquisition as such. It’s true that Socrates has argued (and will proceed to argue more fully) that, to grasp any concepts or to have any beliefs, one needs to grasp being. But he doesn’t think that, to grasp any concepts or to have any beliefs, one needs to calculate about usefulness (though he might think one needs to do so in order to acquire certain special concepts (such as of good or bad) or to have certain specific beliefs (such as that this is good or bad), which are mentioned in the context, though along with other concepts (or beliefs or predications) where reflecting on usefulness isn’t so obviously
conditions that go beyond perception but don’t involve calculations about being and usefulness.³²

If, as I think, 184–6 takes perception to be at the second grade, it agrees with Descartes. For, though Descartes distinguishes three ways of speaking about perception, he also says that strictly speaking it’s at the second grade: the first grade is too minimal; the third grade intrudes too much.

3.

Let’s now turn to the *Phaedo*. As I’ve said, I don’t know of anyone who explicitly claims that it places perception at the first grade; but, as I’ve also said, there is some evidence that might tempt one to do so. So let’s look briefly at it.

At 65d9 Plato says that we see with the eyes (*tois opthalmois*); and then, at 65d11–12, he says that we perceive with the various senses that operate through the body (*tini aisthēsei tôn dia tou sómatos*).³³ It’s clear that the eyes are bodily required. So either Plato is here talking just about some (not all) concepts (or beliefs or predications); or else bare concept (or belief) acquisition isn’t at issue.

I’ve moved between speaking of concepts, beliefs, and predications partly because I am discussing Frede and Lorenz who, between them, speak of all three; and partly because I think all three are at issue, whatever the precise relations among them are: see n. 15. It’s also worth noting that the Stoics have a more demanding notion of what it takes to have a concept than some people do; at least, there are alternative views on which, even if infants lack concepts, normal humans acquire at least some concepts before the age of 14 or even 7. The Stoics think that, to have a concept, it must be integrated in ‘the space of reasons,’ which one can’t do until one reaches the age of reason. On some other views, being able to make certain sorts of discriminations suffices for having concepts. This issue obviously makes a difference in deciding how robust the second-grade of perception it is. The more robust one’s notion of what it takes to have concepts is, the more one can build into second-grade perception. Perhaps it’s partly because people differ about this issue that they differ as well about the coherence of the second grade.

Though I think 186b11–c5 contrasts second-grade perception with knowledge, it’s less clear what’s going on in 186a2–b10. For contrasting views, see Lorenz, *Brute*, 84–91, and McDowell, *Plato: Theaetetus*.

³² One might wonder why, if this is so, Theaetetus goes on to suggest that knowledge is true belief. For doesn’t 186c2–5, as I interpret it, already imply that knowledge is not mere true belief (since not all true beliefs require calculations about usefulness)? Yes; but the passage is very brief, and it doesn’t spell out exactly what is involved in calculating about being and usefulness. Further, having made this brief remark, Socrates drops this line of thought and offers the argument we’ve explored (T1)–(T5). In suggesting that knowledge is (not perception, but) true belief, Theaetetus focuses just on (T1)–(T5); only when the view that knowledge is true belief is also refuted do they return to (something like) the suggestion briefly mentioned in 186c, although, as Sedley notes (*Midwife*, 111 with n. 36), at this point they talk instead about *logos*. The fact that they next ask whether knowledge is true belief is further support for the view that truth, in 184–6, is propositional. In 187a, when Plato contrasts perception with *doxa*, he characterizes the latter as involving ‘busying itself, by itself, about the things that are’: he doesn’t mention usefulness, which supports my suggestion that the passage that does so doesn’t have concept (or belief) acquisition in mind.

³³ Strictly speaking, he only implies this, for he is asking a question rather than making a statement. In 65d11–12 he asks whether one ‘grasps (ephēpsō) them [the forms] with any of the senses that operate through the body.’ Probably ‘grasps’ indicates perception as such: in 65d9 Plato implies that we don’t see forms with our eyes; he then generalizes, to make it clear that we don’t perceive them with any of our other senses either. This is perhaps supported by the fact that in both passages, Plato uses the dative. For the dative, see also 79a1–2, 81b8, 99e3. However, *thēoretai* in 65e2 seems to be what I shall call perception-guided inquiry, which is inquiry that involves and is guided by, but goes beyond,
And one might think that so too are the senses. For at 65b4–5 Plato mentions ‘the senses that involve the body (ton peri to soma aisthesen);’ and, according to Gallop, this implies that the senses are bodily.\(^3\) In *Tht.* 184–6, as we’ve seen, saying that we perceive with x implies that x does the perceiving: the dative is used to indicate subjecthood. So we might infer that the body does, or that some parts of the body do, the perceiving; and if that’s so, Descartes, at least, would infer that perception is at the first grade.

However, it’s not clear that Plato takes the senses to be bodily; he might mean just that they operate through the body.\(^5\) But even if the *senses* aren’t bodily (except insofar as they operate through the body), plainly the *eyes* are bodily; and, as we’ve seen, Plato says that we see with them. However, though *Tht.* 184–6 uses the dative to indicate subjecthood, it doesn’t have to be used that way. Perhaps, in 65d9 and 11–12, it functions instead as an instrumental dative; if so, it indicates the means by which we perceive, that through which we perceive.\(^6\) In that case, it functions more or less as *dia* functions in *Tht.* 184–6. If that’s how it’s being used, we shouldn’t infer from the claim that we perceive *with* the sense organs, or the senses, that they do the perceiving. Rather, *we* perceive, using them as instruments. Here it’s worth noting that, though Plato says that we perceive, he never explicitly says that the body perceives, or that the sense organs or senses perceive. Perhaps that’s because he doesn’t think they do so; rather, *we* are the subjects

perception. If this is right, then, at least here, Plato uses the dative for perceiving, and *dia* plus the genitive (65e1) for perception-guided inquiry. We need not infer that the senses do the perceiving: perhaps both the dative, and *dia* plus the genitive, indicate instrumentality, but Plato uses the dative to suggest that perception is more closely related to the senses than perception-guided inquiry is. As we’ve seen (n. 10), this is how Campbell understands the difference between the dative, and *dia* plus the genitive, in *Tht.* 184–6. Though I think he’s wrong about that passage, his distinction might explain the present passage.

\(^3\) Gallop, *Plato: Phaedo,* 91.

\(^5\) In 65d11–12, he says that we can’t perceive some range of things with the senses that operate through (*dia*) the body; this falls short of saying that the senses are themselves bodily, since it’s compatible with the view that senses are realized in the body, but are themselves to be explained in functional terms that don’t imply that their constitution is material. (See n. 8.) Perhaps that’s the view at issue in 65b4–5 as well. It’s worth noting that Aristotle thinks that the sensory capacity and the sense organs are extensionally equivalent but differ in being: the former is a logos, whereas each of the latter is a magnitude (*megethos*). Perhaps this means that the former isn’t bodily, though it is realized in bodies. See *De Anima* 424a24–8.

\(^6\) H. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), sv. Instrumental Dative. As we’ve seen, Burnyeat rejects the view that Plato uses the dative in *Tht.* 184–6 as an instrumental dative. I’ve agreed with him about that passage. My suggestion is that we needn’t understand the *Phd.*’s use of the ‘with’ idiom in the same way; here, what Burnyeat calls the grammarians’ notion will do. See n. 10 and n. 33.

Though the *Phd.* doesn’t regiment terminology in the way recommended in *Tht.* 184–6, it does display some sensitivity to the use of the dative in a different context. In 101a, Plato says that we shouldn’t say that one thing is larger than another by a head. The reason is that doing so would imply that ‘a head’ explains that state of affairs but, in Plato’s view it doesn’t; we should say instead that one thing is larger than another because of its participation in the form of largeness. Perhaps ‘we see with the eyes’ is acceptable, not because the eyes do the seeing, but because we have to mention them in explaining how it is that we see. Smyth calls the dative in 101a the dative of manner (sect. 1513).
in perception.\footnote{One might think that to say that we perceive is to say that our soul perceives, since at 115 Socrates seems to imply that he is just his soul (his body can be burned or buried, but he can’t be). However, at 79 he says we are part body, part soul. This perhaps leaves open the possibility that we perceive insofar as our body does so.}

But even if Plato thinks that the senses, and/or their actualizations, are bodily and do the perceiving, or that the sense organs do the perceiving, or that the body does the perceiving,\footnote{Further, as Burnyeat says, ‘[o]ne would not build a theory of independent perceiving subjects on the instrumental dative in passing phrases like “He looked at me with his eyes” [citing Charmides 155cd]… Nor, again, is it inevitable that trouble arise from the syntactic transformation, available in English as well as Greek, which promotes an instrumental position to the subject of the verb (“He looked at me with his eyes” → “His eyes looked at me”) (‘Grammar,’ 34). Here he cites Phd. 79a. However, though this passage uses the instrumental dative, it doesn’t explicitly mention an example of the transformation Burnyeat mentions.} it’s not clear that we should infer that perception is at the first grade. As we’ve seen, as Descartes describes the first grade, the body is the subject of perception and perception is wholly and only physiological; it is not at all cognitive. In his view, if the body perceives, perception can’t be cognitive since, in his view, the body entirely lacks cognitive powers. By contrast, in the \textit{Phaedo} Plato might think that the body is the proper subject of some cognitive states; he might also think that some parts of the body are the proper subjects of some cognitive states.\footnote{As I use the term, if perception is at the second or third grade, it’s cognitive; if it’s at the first grade, it isn’t. Hence, if something is at the first grade, it can’t also be at the second and third grade; for the first grade is wholly and only physiological, whereas the second and third grades are cognitive.}

Whether all the states that we intuitively count as mental or cognitive belong to the \textit{psuchê} as Plato conceives of it in the \textit{Phaedo} is disputed. Those who think that, in the \textit{Phaedo}, Plato takes the body to be the proper subject of some cognitive states include A. Price, \textit{Mental Conflict} (London: Routledge, 1995); Lorenz, \textit{Brute}; and R. Kamtekar, ‘Speaking with the Same Voice as Reason: Personification in Plato’s Psychology,’ \textit{Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy} 31 (2006), 167–202. For the view that Plato doesn’t do so, see J. Beere, ‘Philosophy, Virtue, and Immortality in Plato’s \textit{Phaedo},’ in G. Gurtler and W. Wians (eds.), \textit{Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy} 26 (2010), 253–88; against which, see J. Bailly, ‘Commentary on Beere,’ \textit{Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy} 26 (2010), 289–300.}
body perceives, or that some parts of the body perceive, that perception is at the first grade as Descartes conceives of it. For even if the body perceives, or if some parts of the body perceive, perception might be cognitive. But neither should we in this case infer that perception is at Descartes’s second or third grade. For as he conceives of them, not only are they cognitive but, also, the mind or soul is essentially involved in perceiving. Descartes’s taxonomy doesn’t allow for a case in which the body perceives and yet perception is cognitive.

Here we need to distinguish the subject of perception from its content. For Descartes, either the mind or soul is essentially involved in perception, and perception is cognitive and so is at the second or third grade; or the body perceives and perception is just physiological in a sense that precludes its being at all cognitive. In the Phaedo, Plato might hold both that the body is the subject of perception (and/or that parts of the body are the subjects of perception) and that perception is cognitive. If this is his view, then strictly speaking perception isn’t at any of Descartes’s three grades. If it is cognitive, it’s at the second or third grade insofar as content is concerned; but if the body perceives, it isn’t at the second or third grade so far as the subject of perception is concerned. This issue doesn’t arise in connection with Theaetetus 184–6. For there, the soul perceives and perception is cognitive; there’s no difficulty in saying that perception is at Descartes’s second (or, on a rival interpretation) third grade. But matters would be more complicated in the Phaedo if it makes the body the subject of perception but takes its content to be cognitive.

I’m not sure what Plato takes the proper subject of perception to be in the Phaedo. For one thing, as we’ve seen, he just says that we perceive: he never explicitly says either that the body or the soul perceives (or that both do so, either singly or jointly). For another, it’s not clear how literally to take his claim that the body has cognitive powers, and commentators have gone both ways on this. It’s also worth noting that even if Plato thinks the body literally has some cognitive powers, it also plainly has non-cognitive powers, such as the power of digestion. If the body has both cognitive and non-cognitive powers, then, if Plato thinks the body perceives (or that some parts of the body perceive), we can’t tell, from that fact alone, whether he thinks perception is cognitive. We’d need to see how he describes it in more detail.

Further, some passages that might seem to imply that its content is at the second or third grade don’t in fact imply this. For example, Plato says that the senses are neither accurate nor clear, and that the soul is deceived by (hupo) the body (e.g. 65b1–10); and one might think that implies that perception has cognitive content and so is at the second or third grade so far as its content is concerned. However, even if perception were at the first grade, one might wish to say that it is neither accurate nor clear, or that it is deceptive: we might say that a window isn’t clear or that a thermometer isn’t accurate; we might say that we were
deceived by the bright morning sun into thinking it would be a sunny day when, in fact, it turned cloudy later on.

I’ll return briefly, at various points, to evidence for or against perception’s being at the first grade. But from now on, I’ll focus primarily on what can be said for or against its being at the second or third grade, so far as its content is concerned. In particular, I’ll ask whether Plato seems to take its content to be non-conceptual and non-propositional, or conceptual and propositional. When I ask whether he takes perception to be at the second or third grade, it’s just this question I have in mind.

4.

Just as commentators disagree about whether perception is at the second or third grade in *Theaetetus* 184–6, so they disagree about which of these two grades it’s at in the *Phaedo*. J. T. Bedu-Addo, for example, thinks that in the *Phaedo* ‘Plato means by *aisthēsis* mere sensory awareness’; this places perception at the second grade. According to Michael Frede, by contrast, the *Phaedo* restricts perception ‘to cases of awareness that somehow involve the body and that constitute an awareness of something corporeal.’ But, he goes on to say, ‘it would be rash to assume that the verb [*aisthánein*] means “sense-perception.”’ For, he thinks, ‘it is used almost interchangeably with “dokein” and “doxazein,” “to seem” and “to believe.”’ If *aisthánein* is used almost interchangeably with *dokein* and *doxazein*, perception is at the third grade. Similarly, Myles Burnyeat says flatly that, in the *Phaedo*, ‘perception is intrinsically judgmental.’ Indeed, he thinks Plato’s criticism of perception depends on this view: ‘The charge against perception is that it offers itself as a dangerously seductive rival judgement-maker to reason.’

In favor of this view, he cites 65a–67b, 79c–d, 81b, and 82e–83e. I’ll begin by discussing these passages, asking whether they take perception to be a rival

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41 ‘Sense-Experience,’ 44 n. 24. Similarly, N. Gulley, in discussing the theory of recollection in the *Phaedo*, speaks of Plato’s ‘distinction between sensation and a conceptual level of apprehension’ (*Plato’s Theory of Knowledge* (London: Methuen, 1962), 28; see also 31, 32, 91); he thinks Plato counts only the first as perception. See also L. Franklin, ‘Recollection and Philosophical Reflection in Plato’s *Phaedo*,’ *Phronesis* 50 (2005), 289–314, at 295: ‘perception is … *pre-cognitive.*’ (Franklin seems to use ‘cognitive’ more narrowly than I do, such that, for a state to be cognitive, it has to be conceptual or propositional; he isn’t maintaining that perception is wholly and only physiological.)

42 However, as we’ve seen (n. 11), there’s disagreement about whether the second grade includes awareness.

43 ‘Observations,’ 378. In fact, I don’t think the *Phaedo* uses *aisthánein* and *doxazein* ‘almost interchangeably.’ But that doesn’t imply that perception isn’t at the third grade.

44 *Theaetetus*, 60–1. Interestingly, though Burnyeat argues in ‘Grammar’ that *Tht.* 184–6 criticizes the *Republic* on perception (by, among other things, arguing that perception is at the second grade, whereas the *Rep.* places it at the third grade), he doesn’t say that it criticizes the *Phd.* on this score; and he occasionally offers a reading that would allow perception in the *Phd.* to be at the second grade: see Burnyeat, ‘Grammar,’ 34, n. 19; 41.
judgment-maker to reason or, at any rate, place it at the third grade.\(^{45}\) I’ll then turn to the theory of recollection (which Burnyeat doesn’t discuss). For it too has quite a lot to say about perception.

Let’s look first at 65a9–66a10. Since this is the most detailed passage on perception in the dialogue, it is worth quoting it in full:\(^{46}\)

What about the very acquisition of wisdom (phronēsis)? Is the body a hindrance or not, if one enlists it as a partner in one’s inquiry? This is the sort of thing I mean: do sight and hearing contain (echei) any truth (alêtheian) for human beings (P3), or aren’t even the poets always harping on such things, telling us that we neither hear nor see anything accurately (akribes) (P2)? And yet, if these among the senses that involve (peri) the body are neither accurate nor clear (sapheis), the others will hardly be so (P1); for, I suppose, the others are all inferior to these. Or don’t they seem so to you? Certainly.—So when does the soul grasp the truth (haptetai tê̂s alêtheias) (P5)? Because whenever it tries to consider (skopein) something along with (meta) the body, it’s clear that it is then thoroughly deceived by it (P4).—That’s true.—So isn’t it in reasoning (logizesthai), if anywhere at all, that any of the things that are (ti tôn ontôn) become manifest (katadêlon) to it (P8)?—Yes.—And it reasons best (kallista), I suppose, whenever none of these things bothers (paralupêi) it, neither hearing nor sight nor pain nor any pleasure, but whenever it comes to be itself by itself as far as possible, dismissing the body and, to the extent that it can, having neither association nor contact with it, it strives for what is (tou ontos).—That’s so.—So here too, doesn’t the soul of the philosopher especially disvalue the body and flee from it, seeking (zêtei) to become itself by itself?—It seems so.—And what about things like the following, Simmias: Do we say that there is a just itself, or not?—We certainly do.—And again, a beautiful and a good?—Of course.—Now did you ever see any among such things with your eyes?—Not at all, he said.—Did you grasp (ephêpsô) them with one of the other senses <that operates> through (dia) the body? I’m talking about all such things: for example, largeness, health, and strength, and, to sum it up, about the being of all the rest, what each of them really is. Is it through the body that what’s truest about them is viewed (dia tou sômatos autôn to alêthestaton theôreitai)? Or is the following rather the case: whichever of us especially trains himself with the greatest accuracy to think about each thing itself that he considers will come closest to knowing each of

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\(^{45}\) Perception’s being a rival judgement-maker to reason is sufficient but not necessary for its being at the third grade.

\(^{46}\) For the text of the Phaedo, I generally follow Burnet’s OCT edition (1905). I’ve inserted numbers into the translation that correspond to my reconstruction of the argument, in P1–8 below. Some of the steps in my reconstruction are implicit inferences and so they have no corresponding numbers in the text.

I also discuss this passage in section 2 of Chapter 4.
them?—Certainly—So wouldn’t the one who does this the most purely be the one who, so far as is possible, used his thought in its own right to access each thing, neither adducing sight in his thinking nor dragging in any other sense along with his reasoning, but using his thought itself by itself purely, and so trying to hunt each of the things that is, itself by itself and purely, separated as far as possible from his eyes and ears and, one might say, his whole body, because it confuses the soul and, whenever the soul associates with it, it doesn’t allow it to acquire truth and wisdom. Is this, Simmias, the person who will attain what is, if anyone will (P9)?—What you say is evidently true, Socrates, said Simmias.

(65a9–66a10)

Τί δὲ δή περὶ αὐτὴν τὴν τῆς φρονήσεως κτήσιν; Πότερον ἐμπόδιον τὸ σῶμα ἢ οὐ, εἰ ἂν τις αὐτὸ ἐν τῇ ζητήσει [65b] κοινωνόν συμπαραλαμβάνῃ; Οἶον τὸ τοιῶνδε λέγων· ἄρα ἔχει ἀλήθειαν τινα δόξης τε καὶ ἀκοὴ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, ἡ τα γε τοιαῦτα καὶ οἱ ποιηταὶ ἢμῖν ἀεὶ θρολοῦσιν, ὅτι οὔτ' ἀκούομεν ἀκριβεῖς οὐδὲν οὔτε ὀρῶμεν· Καίτοι εἰ αὕτη τῶν περὶ τὸ σῶμα αἰσθάνεσθαι μὴ ἀκριβεῖς εἰσίν μηδὲ σαφεῖς, σχολὴ αἱ γε ἀλλαὶ πᾶσαι γάρ τοι τοῦτον φαυλότερα ἔσχων. Ἡ σοὶ οὖ δοκοῖσαι;—Πάνι μὲν οὖν, ἐφη.—Πότε οὖν, ἡ δ' ἢ, ἡ ψυχή τῆς ἀληθείας ἀπτεται; Ὄταν μὲν γάρ μετὰ τοῦ σώματος ἐπιχειρήση τι σκοπεῖν, δῆλον ὅτι τότε ἐξοπλάταται ὡς αὐτῶν.——[65c]—Ἀληθὴς λέγεις.——Ἀρ' οὖν οὐκ ἐν τῷ λογίζεσθαι εἴπερ ποῦ ἄλλοθεν κατάδηλον αὕτη γίγνεται τοῖς ὑπ' αὐτῶν;—Ναι.—Λογίζεται δὲ γε ποῦ τότε κάλλιστα, ὅταν αὕτη τούτων μηδὲν παραλυπῆ, μήτ' ἀκοὴ μήτ' ὀφθαλμὸς μήτ' ἀληθείας μηδὲ τῇ ἥδονῃ, ἀλλ' ὃτι μάλιστα αὕτη καθ' αὕτην γίγνεται ἐόσα χαίρειν τὸ σῶμα, καὶ καθ' ὧν δύναται μὴ κοινωνόν τούτῳ μηδ' ἀπομενή ὀρέγηται τοῦ ὑπότος;——Ἐσπαυτά.——Οὐκοίν οἷσσα ἦνταθά ἡ τοῦ φυσιοῦντος ψυχή μάλιστα [65d] ἀτιμάζει τὸ σῶμα καὶ φεύγει ἄπ' αὐτῶν, ζητεῖ δὲ αὕτη καθ' αὐτὴν γίγνεσθαι;——Φαίνεται.——Τί δὲ δή τὰ τοιάδε, ὦ Ἡμῖν; Φαίνει τι εἶναι δίκαιον αὐτὸ ἡ οὐδενίω;——Φαίνει μέντοι νῇ Δίᾳ.——Καὶ αὐτὸν καὶ τοῖς καὶ ἀγαθοῖς;——Πῶς δ' οὖν;——Ἡδὴ οὖν πώστετι τι τῶν τοιούτων τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς εἰδές;——Οὐδαμῶς, ἡ δ' ὄς.——Ἀλλ' ἂν τινι αἰσθάνησιν τῶν διὰ τοῦ σώματος ἐφίψοι αὐτῶν; Λέγω δὲ περὶ πάντων, οἷον μεγέθους περί, ὑγείας, ἱερας, καὶ τῶν ἀλλῶν ἐνι λόγῳ ἀπάντησι τῆς οὐσίας δ' [65e] τυγχάνει ἐκαστὸν ὁν ἀρα διὰ τοῦ σώματος αὐτῶν τὸ ἀληθεύσατον θεωρεῖται, ἦ δὲ ἔχει· ὃς ἂν μάλιστα ἡμῖν καὶ ἀκριβέστατα παρακεύεσθαι ἀὑτὸν ἐκαστὸν διανοηθῆναι περὶ οὐ σκοπεῖ, οὗτός ἂν ἐγνώθησιν τοῦ γνώναι ἐκαστὸν;——Πάνι μὲν οὖν.——Ἀρ' οὖν ἐκεῖνον ἂν τοῦτο ποιήσῃς καθαρώτατα ὅστις ὅτι μάλιστα αὕτη τῇ διανοίᾳ ἢ ἡρ' ἐκαστὸν, μήτ' τιν' ὀφθαλμόν παρασυρόμενον ἐν τῷ διανοεῖται μήτε [τινὰ] ἄλλην [66a] αἰσθήσεις ἐφέλκησιν μηδεμίαν μετὰ τοῦ λογισμοῦ, ἀλλ' αὕτη καθ' αὕτην εἰλικρινεῖ τῇ διανοίᾳ χρώμενος αὐτό καθ' αὑτὸ εἰλικρινεῖ ἐκαστὸν ἐπιχειροῦ θηρεύειν τοῖς ὑπ' αὐτῶν, ἀπαλαγείς ὅτι μάλιστα ὀφθαλμῶν τε καὶ ὧτων καὶ ὧς ἐπιστῶν σύμπαντος τοῦ σώματος, ὡς παράστασι καὶ οὖκ ἐώντος τῆς ψυχῆς κτήσασθαι ἀληθείας τε καὶ φρόνησιν
This first part of this passage (65a9–c4) can be formulated as follows:

P1. The senses that involve the body are neither accurate nor clear.  
P2. Therefore, we can’t perceive anything accurately or clearly.  
P3. Therefore, perception doesn’t contain any truth.  
P4. Therefore, whenever the soul inquires into (zetein, 65a10) or considers (skopein, 65b10) something along with the body, it is deceived by the body.  
P5. Therefore, the soul can’t attain truth when it inquires into, or considers, something along with the body.  
P6. If one can’t attain truth, one can’t attain wisdom.  
P7. Therefore, one can’t attain wisdom either by perceiving or by inquiring into or considering something along with the body.  
P8. Therefore, it’s in reasoning, if anywhere, that any of the things that are become manifest to the soul.  
P9. Therefore, if the soul can attain wisdom at all, it can do so only by reasoning.

This argument sounds like T1–5.  
But are the arguments the same? Or do they use similar language to make different points? What grade or grades do P1–9 suggest perception is at?

P3 sounds like T4. On the reading I favor, T4 means that perception can’t grasp any true propositions, not even that e.g. something is red. That this isn’t what P3 means is suggested by the fact that the reason given on behalf of P3, in P1–2, sounds rather different from the reason given on behalf of T4. As we’ve seen, Plato defends T4 by saying that perception can’t grasp incomplete being: we can’t perceive that any x is F; we can’t perceive anything as being F. Yet doing so is a necessary condition for grasping truth which, in turn, is necessary for attaining knowledge. P1–2, by contrast, say that we don’t hear or see anything accurately or clearly. But what does that mean, and why does Plato believe it?

On one interpretation, P1–2 mean that perception issues in judgments, though ones that aren’t accurate or clear, indeed, in ones that are false. Gallop, for example, asks: ‘Can Socrates be thinking of misjudgements of size due to distance, or of refraction or other sources of visual error? His talk of the soul being “taken in by the body” (65b1, cf. 83a4–5) might suggest this.’  
If this is what P1–2 mean, perception is at the third grade.

65b4 just has ‘accurate’; 65b5 has both ‘accurate’ and ‘clear.’ I assume that either no difference is intended between accuracy and clarity, or else the latter is a necessary condition for the former.

According to Sedley, the passage is ‘very reminiscent’ of Tht. 184–6 (Midwife, 112 n. 38).

Gallop, Plato: Phaedo, 91. However, Gallop goes on to reject this interpretation in favor of the view that: ‘Socrates’ quarrel with the senses appears more radical. It is not merely that they misrepresent
However, that this isn’t what P1–2 mean is suggested by P8, which says that it’s in reasoning, if anywhere, that ‘any of the things that are’ (\(τι\ τὸν\ οὐτὸν\)) become manifest to the soul. Since perception can’t reason, it can’t grasp any of the things that are. This actually gives us a further verbal similarity with \(Tht\). 184–6: both passages say, or imply, that perception can’t grasp what is. We’ve seen what \(Tht\). 184–6 means in saying this. But what does P8 mean? And exactly how is P8 related to P1–2?

Plato explains P8 in 65d4–e2, where he makes it clear that ‘the things that are’ are forms, which aren’t perceptible. Being, in P8, isn’t incomplete being; rather, it indicates forms, which are the ‘real,’ ‘genuine,’ or fundamental beings.\(^5\) In implying that perception can’t grasp what is, P8 implies—not that perception is non-propositional and non-conceptual, but—that we can’t perceive forms.\(^5\) P8 is therefore quite different from T3.\(^5\)

I think P8 is meant to explain, and thereby to restrict the scope of, P1–3. It makes it clear that the point in P1–3 is that, since we can’t perceive forms at all, we can’t perceive them accurately or clearly, which is taken to imply that we can’t grasp any truths about them through perception; yet grasping truths about forms is a necessary condition for attaining wisdom.\(^5\) If this is right,

the physical world, but that they never present anything else. They hamper the soul’s access to the real objects of its understanding, the “Forms”, that will be introduced at 65d4–5 below. They give no indication that there are any such objects, and strongly suggest that there are not’ (Gallop, \(Plato:\ Phaedo\), 91). I’m not sure whether, in saying that the senses ‘strongly suggest’ that there are no forms, Gallop means to place perception at the third grade. Contrary to Gallop, it is not radical or even controversial to say that the senses don’t present anything other than what can be perceived. However, it is controversial to say that in addition to the physical world, there are forms that are more real than anything physical.

However, they aren’t the only things that exist: 79a says that there are two kinds of beings, those that are visible and those that are unseen (i.e. those that are perceptible and those that aren’t).\(^5\) That’s one thing P8 means. As I go on to explain, it also means that what I shall call perception-guided inquiry can’t grasp forms.

As we’ve seen, however, there are other readings of T3; and, on some of them, it is closer to P8 than I take it to be.

I don’t think that either \(τι\ τὸν\ οὐτὸν\) in 65c3 or \(τοῦ\ \ οὐντο\)\(s\) in 65c9 means ‘forms’ or even clearly refers just to forms. Rather, Plato begins by sketching a view that even the poets maintain (65b3), and they presumably don’t countenance forms. The general view he begins with is indeterminate and can be filled in in different ways. The thought is that many people accept something like the view he sketches. His particular version of the general view becomes clear only when we turn to 65d, where he mentions forms. As Gallop notes (\(Plato: Phaedo\), 93), Plato uses ‘the things that are’ in different ways in the dialogue: sometimes for forms (as at 78d4 and 83b2), sometimes more generally (as at 79a6 and 99d5), and sometimes in a way that is indeterminate, as in 65c. Though the usage in 65c is indeterminate, Plato goes on to make it clear that his version of the general claim has to do with forms.

In 4.6 Olympiodorus also suggests that, in saying that perception can’t grasp being, Plato means that it can’t grasp forms. He also thinks Plato allows that, though we can’t perceive forms accurately (since we can’t perceive them at all), we can perceive other things accurately. (In 4.7 he says that perception always deceives us. But he makes it clear that he means that it does so just insofar as it isn’t the highest-level sort of cognition; and he adds that perception can also be said to be always true and accurate, if it is compared instead to \(eikasia\).) Similarly, Damascius suggests that Plato thinks the senses are accurate in one way, though not in another (1.80); to explain this, he says that Plato acknowledges degrees (or levels or grades) of truth (or reality: \(αλήθεια\)). For Olympiodorus and Damascius, see L. G. Westerink (ed.), \(Commentaries\ on\ Plato’s\ Phaedo\) (Dilton Marsh, Westbury: Prometheus.
then P3, like T4, concerns propositional truth. But whereas T4 says that perception can’t grasp any truths at all, P3 says only that perception can’t grasp any truths about forms.\(^54\) P3 doesn’t take a stand, one way or another, as to whether there are other truths perception can grasp. Hence it doesn’t preclude perception’s being at the third grade—though neither does it imply that it is at that grade. It’s compatible with perception’s being at any of Descartes’s three grades.

One might think Plato’s contrast between perception and reasoning (logismos) implies that perception is at the first or second grade. And that would indeed be implied if reasoning were all thinking broadly construed. However, reasoning, as it is conceived of here, is narrower in scope.\(^55\) We can see that this is so if we look at P4–5, where Plato turns from perception to what I shall call perception-guided inquiry. First we can note that he makes it clear that the person, or soul, engages in it.\(^56\) But that doesn’t imply that the person, or soul, perceives; for perception is different from perception-guided inquiry. So, for example, at 65a10–b1 Plato speaks of someone inquiring (zetein) in common with the body as a partner (sumparalambanêi, 65b1). At 65b10, he speaks of the soul considering something

\(^54\) As we’ve seen, Cornford, in Plato’s Theory of Knowledge, may think T4 makes this point. To say that perception can’t grasp any truths about forms isn’t to say, one way or the other, whether it can have false beliefs about them. If it can do so, it is at the third grade. But Plato’s view seems to be instead that, since perception can’t grasp forms at all, it doesn’t issue in either truths or falsehoods about them: they are beyond its purview. That doesn’t imply anything about what grade perception is at. He nonetheless focuses on the claim that they don’t grasp truths about forms, because that’s what’s relevant here, since grasping truth is necessary for wisdom.

One might argue that propositional truth isn’t at issue since, at 65e2, he uses the superlative (alethestation). However, Plato sometimes uses the superlative where it’s clear that propositional truth is at issue: see e.g. 74c10 (alethestata). Perhaps 65e2 means that perception can’t grasp the most important truths about forms. Of course, it can’t grasp any truths about forms; but grasping the most important truths about them is necessary for attaining wisdom.

One might also argue that if Plato meant that perception has no access to forms, he wouldn’t have said that we don’t perceive them accurately or clearly: surely the latter implies that the senses have some sort of access to them! However, in 81b6–7 he speaks of what’s obscure to the eyes and invisible: forms are obscure to the eyes precisely because they can’t be perceived. Similarly here, perception can’t grasp forms accurately or clearly, precisely because they can’t be perceived at all.

\(^55\) Similarly, I argued that in Tht. 186c2–5, the calculations at issue aren’t necessary for having concepts or beliefs as such; rather, they are necessary for knowledge in particular. However, it doesn’t follow that those calculations are exactly the same as the logismos at issue here.

\(^56\) 65a10–11 seems to have a person inquiring, but 65b10 has the soul doing so. See also 79c, which I discuss in section 5. As I formulate the argument (P1–9), perception-guided inquiry isn’t mentioned until P4. However, in the passage itself, it’s mentioned at the very beginning, in 65a9–b1.
(skopein ti) along with (meta) the body. (I take it that skopein, here and elsewhere in relevant contexts in the Phaedo, is the same as zetein.) The relevant use of the body involves the senses, and so perceiving. But to say that in one sort of inquiry the person, or soul, uses the body, or perception, as a partner isn’t to say that perception does the inquiring. It’s just that some (though not all) inquiries rely on, or are guided by, perception—just as, in Theaetetus 184–6, considering something sometimes requires one to use the senses, though the considering or inquiring is distinct from perceiving.

I take it that perception-guided inquiry is propositional: inquiry by its nature involves considering various propositions (or at least raising various questions). So if perception were the same as perception-guided inquiry, perception would be at the third grade. However, since they are not the same, we shouldn’t follow this route to the conclusion that perception is at the third grade.

Perception-guided inquiry is distinct not just from perception but also from reasoning (logismos). Hence reasoning isn’t coextensive with all thinking; and so we shouldn’t infer from Plato’s contrast between reasoning and perception that perception is at the second grade.

Nor does the fact that perception-guided inquiry goes beyond perception imply that perception is at the second grade—if only because it’s not clear exactly what’s included in perception-guided inquiry. Plato does make it clear that when we use it in the search for wisdom, it leads us astray. As he explains in more detail later (82e–83e), that’s because if we rely on it in searching for wisdom, we will conclude that only sensibles are real whereas, in fact, forms are most real. It’s not clear, however, whether perception-guided inquiry is restricted to the search for wisdom. What, for example, if we want to figure out whether the object before me is a horse or a cow? Does every attempt to answer that sort of question involve perception-guided inquiry? Or can we answer such questions by reasoning? Or are there modes of thinking that are distinct from both reasoning and perception-guided inquiry that are involved in such cases? Or can perception on its own answer them? So far as I can tell, 65–6 doesn’t allow us to choose among these options: it’s compatible with all of them but doesn’t imply any of them. Hence the

57 On using the senses, see also 75e3 and 83a7.
58 Nor does the fact that the soul uses the body imply that the body does the perceiving. It’s just that perceiving requires having a body.

There might be a difference between the soul relying on, and its being guided by, perception: for there might be a case in which the soul needs to rely on, in the sense of use, perception, without its thereby being guided by it. Perhaps there’s a question that can’t be resolved without perceiving; yet, for all that, the soul might conclude, as a result of thinking about the overall situation, that the visual impression is misleading. In this case, it uses but isn’t guided by perception. I ask shortly about the scope of perception-guided inquiry.

59 Nor is it clear exactly what’s involved in reasoning. It plainly comes in degrees, or levels, for Plato tells us that we reason best when the senses don’t ‘bother’ us, when the soul is ‘itself by itself as far as possible.’ This leaves open the possibility that in some contexts, reasoning involves using the senses in some way, though not in a way that is wholly dependent on or guided by them.
passage doesn’t imply that perception is at the second grade—or that it is at the third grade. All we can say is that it’s neither reason nor perception-guided inquiry. That in principle leaves room for it to do some other sort of thinking; but it doesn’t imply that it does so.

On the reading I’ve suggested, despite the verbal similarities P1–9 are in fact quite different from T1–5. T1–5 argue that perception can’t grasp being, where that implies that it is non-propositional and non-conceptual. Hence it can’t grasp any truths, and so it isn’t knowledge, since knowledge is truth entailing. Since perception is non-propositional and non-conceptual, it isn’t at the third grade. Since it’s also the case that the soul perceives, perception is at the second grade. By contrast, P1–9 argue that perception has no access to forms; hence perception-guided inquiry can’t grasp any truths about them. Yet doing so is necessary for attaining wisdom. To say only so much doesn’t imply that perception can’t grasp any truths at all. If the possibility that perception grasps some truths remains open, then so too does the possibility that it is at the third grade, though it doesn’t follow from that possibility remaining open that perception is at the third grade. If the passage doesn’t imply that perception is at the third grade, it doesn’t imply that perception is a rival judgment-maker to reason.

5.

I now turn to the other passages Burnyeat thinks make perception a rival judgment-maker to reason.

At 79a, Plato reiterates that forms can’t be perceived; they can be grasped (epilaboio, 79a3) ‘only by the reasoning of the intellect’ (tòi tês dianoias logismô(i)). The fact that he contrasts perception just with ‘the reasoning of the intellect,’ and doesn’t mention perception-guided inquiry, might seem to cast doubt on my

⁶⁰ Plato seems to use forms of dianoia (65e7, 67a2) and dianoiêsthai (65e3) for thought as such, and logismos for a species of it. (Sometimes dianoia seems to be the intellect; the point then is that there are different ways of using it, some of which are more independent of the senses than others are.) (Compare Rep. 476d, which uses dianoia broadly, such that both knowledge and (mere) belief are species of it.) The passage leaves open the possibility that logismos and perception-guided inquiry don’t exhaust ways of thinking, though no further ways are mentioned here.

⁶¹ I take wisdom, here, to be an especially high-level sort of knowledge, not knowledge as such. Hence, though the passage makes it clear that one must grasp forms to have wisdom, it doesn’t imply that one must grasp forms to have knowledge as such: it leaves open the possibility that there are lower levels of knowledge that don’t require grasping forms. Tht. 184–6, by contrast, requires grasping (incomplete) being for knowledge as such and indeed for having beliefs and concepts. Hence Phd. 65–6 and Tht. 184–6 not only understand being differently but also differ about what grasping being is needed for.

⁶² If, as I’ve suggested, reasoning in 65–6 is just a species of thought, then its contrast between reasoning and perception is to that extent similar to Tht. 186c2–5, which contrasts perception with calculating about being and usefulness, which not everyone ever does: there, as here, reasoning and perception are not exhaustive. However, 184–6 also contrasts perception with grasping truth in a way that implies that perception is at the second grade. 65–6 does the former but not the latter.
suggestion that Plato distinguishes perception-guided inquiry from perception. However, his concern in 79a is just to emphasize the difference between the visible and the invisible or, more generally, the perceptible and the imperceptible; to do that, he doesn’t need to mention perception-guided inquiry. But he goes on to mention it in his fuller account in 79c, a passage that explicitly alludes to 65–6:63

Now weren’t we also saying a while ago that whenever the soul additionally uses (proschrêstai) the body to consider something (skopein tì), whether through seeing or hearing or some other sense (aisthêseos)—for to consider something through the body is to consider it through a sense (aisthêseos)—it is then dragged by the body to the things that are never the same; and it wanders about and is confused (tarattetai) and dizzy, as if drunk, because the things it is grasping (ephaptomenê) are of the same sort? (79c2–8)

According to Lesley Brown, Plato says here that the soul perceives.64 If the soul perceives, perception is not at the first grade. However, 79c doesn’t say that the soul perceives. It says that the soul considers various things through the body, that is, through the senses. I take it that considering is perception-guided inquiry.65 In it, the soul uses the body, and so perception is involved; but it doesn’t follow, and it isn’t said, that the body, or the senses or perception, do the considering. Rather, the soul does the considering through the body, i.e. through the senses. Since the soul is only said to do the considering, and not also the perceiving, we shouldn’t use this passage as evidence that the soul perceives (and so is at least at the second grade). Nor should we use it as evidence that perception is at the third grade (on the ground that it’s identical to perception-guided inquiry, since it isn’t).

Exactly how does the soul use the senses in perception-guided inquiry? Does it get the senses to do some inquiring of their own? Or does it use the senses as instruments that have no cognition of their own? In the first case, perception is at the third grade, insofar as content is concerned. In the second case, it isn’t. In

63 Ὁδεὶ καὶ τάδε πάλαι ἐλέγομεν, ὅτι ἡ ψυχή, ὅταν μὲν τῷ σώματι προσχρῆται εἰς τὸ σκοπεῖν τι ἢ διὰ τοῦ όραν ἢ διὰ τοῦ ἄκοιν ἢ δ’ ἄλλα τινὸς αἰσθήσεως—τοῦτο γὰρ ἐστὶν τὸ διὰ τοῦ σώματος, τὸ δ’ αἰσθήσεως ακοπέν τι—τότε μὲν ἔλλειται ὑπὸ τοῦ σώματος εἰς τὰ οὐδέποτε κατὰ ταύτα ἔχοντα, καὶ αὕτη πλανάται καὶ ταράττεται καὶ εἰληφθαί ὢσπερ μεθύονα, ἀπὸ τοιούτων ἐφαπτομένης;

64 See L. Brown, ‘Innovation and Continuity: The Battle of the Gods versus Giants, Sophist 245–249,’ in J. Gentzler (ed.), Method in Ancient Philosophy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 181–207, at 195 n. 23. Kanayama, by contrast, says that 79c, along with 82e and 83a–b, ‘make it clear’ that, in Tht. 185c1–3, perception doesn’t itself consider anything (‘Perceiving,’ 40). Also seemingly in contrast to Brown, Burnyeat says that the Phaedo treats perception ‘as something essentially alien to the soul.’ However, he adds: ‘or to the soul’s true nature’ (Burnyeat, ‘Grammar,’ 49), which leaves open the possibility that the soul perceives, though it’s not its true nature to do so but, presumably, something it can do while embodied, which isn’t essential to its existence or nature. However, Burnyeat doesn’t pursue the point.

65 Interestingly, Plato speaks of considering dia the body and the senses or perception. If dia is used here in the way Campbell suggests, this perhaps supports the view that perception differs from perception-guided inquiry. See n. 10 and n. 33.
Tht. 184–6, the use of *dia* suggests the second view; but it’s not clear how much weight the term can bear in the *Phaedo*. It seems safest to say that the passage doesn’t say enough to allow us to draw any conclusions about what grade perception is at.

6. At 81b, Plato says that some souls are bewitched by the ‘desires and pleasures’ of the body, in such a way that they think (*dokein*) ‘nothing else real (*alethes*) except what is corporeal—what one can touch and see, drink, eat, or enjoy sexually’ (81b4–6). Such souls ‘hate, dread, and flee what is obscure and invisible to the eyes, but intelligible and grasped by philosophy’ (81b6–7).⁶⁶ What’s obscure and invisible to the eyes are forms: for the eyes have no access to them. Forms aren’t possible objects of vision, and of course we need eyes to see, whether or not they do the seeing. This doesn’t place perception at any particular grade. Nor does the first part of the passage do so. Plato speaks here of what some souls believe—viz. that only the corporeal is real. It’s true that such souls make judgments that are opposed to (good) judgments of reason. But it doesn’t follow that perception makes such judgments. Perhaps the soul makes such judgments only after, and as a result of, perceiving and engaging in perception-guided inquiry.

7. In 82e, Plato explains what happens when philosophy takes a soul in hand. Until that happens, the soul is forced to consider (*skopeisthai*, 82e3) things as if through (*dia*) a prison. Then, at 83a, he says that investigation (*skepsis*, 83a4) through (*dia*, 83a4–5; cf. b2) the eyes and the other senses is full of deceit (*apatês*); hence the way in which we consider things through a prison is full of deceit.⁶⁷ It’s fascinating to compare the prison metaphor with the wooden horse metaphor discussed in *Tht*. 184. As we’ve seen, according to the latter metaphor the senses, or sense organs (*aisthêseis*, 184d2), are autonomous agents housed in a wooden horse, which is itself insensate. Plato rejects that view in favor of the view that a single mind or soul does the perceiving through the senses and sense organs. One might be tempted to think that the prison metaphor expresses the same view as the wooden horse metaphor; and one might then infer that, in rejecting the

⁶⁶ If forms are obscure to the eyes, one might think they are some way accessible to it, just not clearly. However, Plato also says they are invisible: hence they are inaccessible to sight, or perception more generally. Similarly, in 65–6 he says we can’t perceive forms clearly or accurately; but that turns out to be because we can’t perceive them at all. See n. 54.

⁶⁷ Note the use of *dia*: the soul considers things through the prison just as, in 79c, the soul considers things through the body, i.e. through the senses.
wooden horse metaphor, Plato is rejecting a view he accepts in the *Phaedo*. However, it’s the *soul* that’s in the prison, not the senses or sense organs. One might then wish to argue that, according to both metaphors, the soul perceives through the senses or sense organs, which, in the prison metaphor, would presumably be apertures in the prison.⁶⁸

However, just as it may be too quick to say that the prison metaphor expresses the same view as the wooden horse metaphor, so it may be too quick to say that it expresses the view Plato favors in rejecting the wooden horse metaphor. For Plato uses the prison metaphor, not to explain perception, but to explain perception-guided inquiry: it’s the latter that the soul engages in as if through a prison. Plato doesn’t explicitly say what does the perceiving. For all he says here, the soul might perceive as though through apertures in the prison; and if that’s Plato’s view, the prison metaphor accords with Plato’s preferred way of conceiving of perception in *Tht.* 184–6 insofar as, in both places, the soul perceives through the senses or sense organs. However, it’s also true that, for all he says here, the prison might do the perceiving and convey the results to the soul. After all, at 82e5 he mentions the cunning, or cleverness (*deinos*), of the prison;⁶⁹ if the prison is cunning or clever, it has cognition. Further, as we’ve seen, at 83d he mentions beliefs the body has, which the soul in some cases endorses and adopts. Perhaps, then, the body also does the perceiving. However, Plato doesn’t say that the body, or some part of the body, perceives, any more than he says that the soul does so.

*If* the soul does the perceiving, perception isn’t at the first grade. However, merely saying that the soul perceives is compatible with perception’s being at either the second or third grade. It’s true that Plato says that, when we are housed in and dependent on the body, we will inevitably acquire some false beliefs, such as the belief that the corporeal is most real (83c). But he doesn’t say that perception has, or by itself issues in, these beliefs.

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⁶⁸ However, this isn’t explicitly said. For all Plato says, perhaps the prison has no apertures or, at least, none the prisoners can see through.

⁶⁹ *Deinos* can mean ‘terrible’ or ‘formidable,’ without any implication of cognition (a terrible or formidable obstacle needn’t be a cognitive one). So perhaps we shouldn’t place any weight on the word. However, the ‘cunning’ or ‘terribleness’ of the prison is explained by saying that it works through desire, which is the best way to make the prisoner assist in his imprisonment; this seems to suggest that cognition is at issue, even if the mere use of the term doesn’t by itself require (though it allows) that. But even if we don’t rely on the term, the fact that the body is said to have beliefs, if interpreted literally, suggests that it has cognition.

Beere, *Philosophy, Virtue, and Immortality in the Phaedo,* thinks the prison metaphor provides ‘decisive evidence’ against the view that the body is a source of motivation independent of the soul (264). For he thinks that, according to the metaphor, ‘[t]he prisoner contributes to his own imprisonment [just as] the soul contributes to its own bodily imprisonment by desiring, but surely not by desiring wisdom; rather, by desiring food and drink and so on’ (264). However, as Bailly notes in his reply to Beere (*Commentary on Beere,* at 292), in saying that the soul collaborates in its imprisonment, Plato implies that it has a collaborator, viz. the body; that leaves room for the body to have desires, which it can cause the soul to endorse. But even if the body isn’t ‘a source of motivation independent of the soul,’ it might perceive. For it’s not clear that perception (as opposed to desire) is in itself a source of motivation.
If, on the other hand, the body (or some part of the body) does the perceiving, it’s still unclear what grade perception is at, so far as content is concerned. Prisons and their apertures lack cognition; so we might infer that perception also does so, in which case it is at the first grade. However, as we’ve seen, Plato says that the prison (i.e. the body) is cunning and has beliefs; this suggests that he accords the body cognitive powers. Perhaps, then, even if the body perceives, perception is at the second or third grade, so far as content goes. One might infer that if the body perceives, and has beliefs, perception is at the third grade—again, so far as content goes. But that would be a rash inference: for, again, Plato doesn’t say that perception is or includes or by itself issues in belief. For all he says, the body might perceive, where perception is at the second grade (in terms of content), and that, in turn, causes the body to acquire certain beliefs.

So far as I can tell, then, the prison metaphor doesn’t allow us to know what grade Plato takes perception to be at. Like other passages we’ve looked at, it’s indeterminate on that point.⁷⁰

8.

We’ve now looked at the passages Burnyeat takes to show that, in the Phaedo, perception is a rival judgment-maker to reason. I’ve argued, by contrast, that, in these passages, it’s not clear that perception is a judgment-maker at all. To be sure, they take perception-guided inquiry to be a rival judgment-maker to reason.⁷¹ But that doesn’t imply that perception is a rival judgment-maker to reason. But even if it isn’t, that doesn’t imply that it doesn’t issue in any judgments, though neither

⁷⁰ Burnyeat notes that in addition to using the prison metaphor, Plato also speaks of using (chrêsthai, 83a7; cf. 79c3) the senses; the first, he says, suggests a spatial sense, whereas the second suggests instrumentality. (See n. 10.) Evidently, he says, ‘Plato feels no tension between the spatial and the instrumental language. Nor indeed is there any reason why he should, since an aperture can perfectly well be used as a means by anything that can use means at all’ (‘Grammar,’ 41). While I agree that Plato speaks both of using the senses and of doing something through a prison, and that Plato rightly feels no tension between these two ways of speaking, he speaks as he does to illustrate perception-guided inquiry—not, as Burnyeat seems to think, perception. Though Burnyeat rightly emphasizes that Tht. 184–6 distinguishes between considering through the senses and perceiving through them, he doesn’t seem to think that the Phaedo also draws this distinction. Perhaps that’s why, or one reason that, he thinks the dialogue takes perception to be a rival judgment-maker to reason. On the other hand, he suggests that in the prison metaphor the apertures are the senses, which we perceive through. That seems to align it with the view he takes Plato to hold in Tht. 184–6, on which perception is at the second grade.

⁷¹ At least, that’s so in the context of the search for wisdom and in attempting to discover what’s real (at least when one reasons well). However, as we’ve seen, Plato might think that perception-guided inquiry is reliable in other contexts, e.g. for identifying whether something is red. If it can do that, then, though perception-guided inquiry and (good) reasoning issue in contradictory verdicts about what’s real, they aren’t always in tension. However, as we’ve also seen, it’s not clear what the precise scope of perception-guided inquiry is: whether it is restricted to searching for wisdom and determining what’s real, or whether it extends even to identifying perceptible objects.
does it imply that it does so. More generally, these passages aren’t committed to
perception’s being at any particular grade.

But there’s one passage we haven’t yet considered: the lengthy discussion of
recollection.⁷² Perception figures prominently in it, though its precise role is
disputed. On one view, the passage, so far from making perception a rival
judgment-maker to reason, says that perception confers knowledge of forms.
On this view, the passage would conflict with some of the other passages we’ve
explored, according to which perception has no access to forms. Be that as it may,
if this view is correct, perception, at least in the theory of recollection, is at the
third grade (so far as content goes) and, it would seem, at the high end of it. The
third grade includes a range of cases, with mere labeling of basic sense contents
being at the low end and knowledge of forms (if perception can deliver that) being
at the high end.

There are two main views about what recollection is supposed to explain. On
one of them, it explains concept and belief acquisition; on the other, it explains
how we move from our initial concepts and beliefs (which are not acquired
by recollection) to genuine knowledge, something few of us succeed in doing,
though we are all in principle capable of doing so.⁷³ Both views are in principle
compatible with perception’s being at either the second or the third grade.⁷⁴
The first view, for example, leaves open the possibility that I acquire at least
some concepts and beliefs through perception; if this is Plato’s view, perception is
at the third grade. But the first view also leaves open the possibility that I acquire
all concepts and beliefs by reasoning or thinking that goes beyond perception,
though in some cases it might make use of perception, and presumably the
reasoning at issue would be more rudimentary when one first acquires some
concepts or beliefs than it becomes as one develops. Still, if all concepts and

⁷² There’s an enormous amount of literature on the theory of recollection. For two especially helpful
discussions, see J. L. Ackrill, ‘Anamnesis in the Phaedo: Remarks on 73c–75c,’ in E. Lee et al. (eds.),
Exegesis and Argument (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1973), 175–95 (reprinted in Ackrill’s
Essays on Plato and Aristotle (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 13–32; latter pagination); and R. Dancy,
Plato’s Introduction of Forms (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), ch. 11. I shall focus on
the points of central concern to us here, leaving many other issues to one side. I discuss the Phaedo’s
theory of recollection in more detail in Chapter 6.

⁷³ For the first view, see Ackrill, ‘Anamnesis’; D. Bostock, Plato’s Phaedo (Oxford: Clarendon Press,
1986), ch. 4. For the second view, see D. Scott, Recollection and Experience (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1995), ch. 2; Dancy, Introduction, ch. 11. I have also defended it briefly in G. Fine,
variations on these two basic views, but I don’t have the space to consider them here. Commentators on
both sides of the divide vary as to what exactly recollection is supposed to explain. The first view is
sometimes said to concern concept acquisition (see e.g. Dancy, Introduction, 255). But, as Scott points
out, what that involves varies from person to person (Recollection and Experience, 53–4 n. 1); and he
himself speaks of recollection in connection with both concepts and beliefs (see e.g. 54). If one thinks
one can have concepts if and only if one has beliefs, the difference might not matter. At any rate, I won’t
make anything of it here.

⁷⁴ Or at the first grade, but I leave that to one side here; I also leave to one side the question of the
subject of perception, and focus just on its content. When I ask whether perception, in the discussion of
recollection, is at the second or third grade, I have in mind just the content of perception.
beliefs are acquired by reasoning that is distinct from perception, perception is at the second grade. The second view is also compatible with both of these possibilities. For it takes no stand on how one acquires one’s initial concepts or beliefs, except to say that acquiring them does not involve recollection. That is compatible with perception acquiring them. It is also compatible with their being acquired by some sort of reasoning that is distinct from perception. But even if both views are in principle compatible with perception’s being at either the second or the third grade, Plato might spell out which (if either) of these two views he accepts in a way that commits him to placing perception at one of those grades. We shall need to see.

Plato begins by laying out general conditions for recollection. One of them is the Different Knowledge Requirement (DKR): ‘if someone, on seeing a thing, or hearing it, or getting any other perception of it, not only recognizes (gnô(i)) that thing, but also thinks of something else which is the object not of the same knowledge but of another, don’t we rightly say that he’s been reminded of the object of which he has got the thought?’ (73c6–d1). One example he gives to illustrate DKR is that someone might see and recognize (egnôsan) their lover’s lyre, and then think of their lover (73d5–8). Similarly, someone might see Simmias and be reminded of Cebes (73d), or see a picture of Simmias and be reminded of Cebes, or of Simmias (73e).

Here we should notice that Plato speaks of seeing such things as lyres, pictures, and people: objects, broadly construed. It’s often thought that, in Tht. 184–6, perception is restricted to proper sensibles: strictly speaking, we can see only colors, hear only sounds, and so on. This view is often thought to go hand in hand with the view that perception at the second grade. The idea is that perceiving an object requires collating the evidence from different senses. To do that, it’s often thought, requires inference and reasoning (in some sense of the term ‘reasoning’). If we can perceive objects, and if doing so involves inference and reasoning, perception is at the third grade. Since, in the theory of recollection, Plato speaks of our seeing objects, one might think that it places perception at the third grade.

As against this, however, it’s been argued that 184–6 doesn’t restrict perception to proper sensibles, even though it places perception at the second grade.

Franklin thinks that the gnôsis at issue here is just ‘being aware of,’ where that doesn’t involve recognizing what one perceives as being something or other: ‘Recollection and Philosophical Reflection in Plato’s Phaedo,’ 293–4. However, I agree with Ackrill that recognition is at issue: ‘Anamnesis,’ 18. If I perceive something, but don’t recognize it as being anything, and then think of something else, that isn’t recollection.

For detailed discussion of this part of the argument in 184–6 (which I did not discuss above), see A. J. Holland, ‘An Argument in Plato’s Theaetetus 184–6,’ Philosophical Quarterly 23 (1973), 97–116. See Burnyeat, ‘Grammar,’ 47–8; McDowell, Plato: Theaetetus; Lorenz, Brute, 80–1. Here we should distinguish two questions: (a) does 184–6 say that perception is restricted to proper sensibles? (b) does it assume that view in arguing that perception isn’t knowledge? Burnyeat, McDowell, and
Perhaps, similarly, in the theory of recollection, even though perception is at the second grade, we can perceive lyres, pictures, and people. What’s crucial isn’t what one perceives—objects or proper sensibles—but whether, merely by perceiving, without doing anything further, one can recognize or identify what one perceives as being something or other. Perhaps it’s one thing to perceive something, another to identify it as being something or other, whether the something at issue is an object such as a cloak or a proper sensible such as a color.

The crucial question, then, isn’t what one perceives, but whether one can perceive anything as being something or other, or whether identifying something as being something or other goes beyond perception. Here we can ask what DKR means in saying that we must both perceive and recognize the reminding item. Are these two conditions, both perceiving and recognizing, where the latter goes beyond perceiving? Or is there just one condition, such that perception does the recognizing? If there is just one condition, perception is at the third grade. If, however, all recognition goes beyond perception, it would seem that perception is at the second grade.⁷⁸

I don’t think DKR, as initially stated, allows us to choose between these options. It says it’s a sufficient condition of recollection that we see and recognize something, and then think of something else that’s the object of a different knowledge. It doesn’t take a stand, one way or the other, on whether the seeing does the recognizing. However, though 73c6–7 and 73d5–8 say that we see and recognize, without making it clear whether the perceiving includes the recognizing, at 73d9–10 Socrates says that someone who sees Simmias ‘often recollects Cebes’; and he goes on to give further examples, again saying that someone sees something and then recollects something else. He doesn’t repeat that one needs to recognize the reminding item.

Why doesn’t he do so? There are two main possibilities. First, perhaps he doesn’t do so because he thinks he’s made it clear that perception includes recognition (gnôsis), and so he need not keep repeating the point; he can just speak of perception. If this is right, perception is at the third grade. Secondly, perhaps he initially mentions two conditions—perception and recognition—but, having made it clear that both are required, he doesn’t feel the need to repeat the recognition condition; hence he speaks elliptically. On this second interpretation, Plato doesn’t take a stand on whether perception does the recognizing; he just says that there must be perception and recognition, however that is achieved. This interpretation is compatible with perception’s being at the second grade, though it

⁷⁸ For the view that perception doesn’t do the recognizing and so is at the second grade, see Bedu-Addo, ‘Sense-Experience,’ 37.
doesn’t imply that it is. Both interpretations seem possible. If so, DKR doesn’t allow us to know whether perception is at the second or third grade.

Having laid down general conditions for recollection (of which DKR is just one), and given some homely examples of recollection (such as when, on seeing and recognizing Simmias I think of Cebes), Socrates shifts gear. First he notes that there is such a thing as the form of equality (74a9–12) and that ‘we’ know what it is (74b2).79 He then argues that we could have this knowledge only if we also had it in a prior life; hence we existed prenatally.

In the course of defending this view, Socrates asks: ‘So do we agree that whenever someone, on seeing something, thinks that “This thing that I am now seeing wants to be like some other thing there is, but falls short and cannot be just like it and is inferior”—the person who thinks this must have previously known the thing that he says it resembles but falls short of’ (74d9–e4). I take it that Socrates thinks that only someone who knows what the form of equal is, and who sees sensible equal things and explicitly both compares them with the form and also thinks they fall short of it, can have this thought.80 Such a person, Socrates thinks, must have prior knowledge of the form; he does not acquire knowledge of it, for the very first time, when making the comparison. Socrates does not say that perception delivers the thought. Nor does he think it does so: for the thought

79 The passage is problematic. For it seems to conflict with 76b–c, where they say they don’t know what various forms are. On the resolution I favor, 74b2 means that we Platonists know what the form of equality is, in the sense that we can answer the ‘What is F?’ question about it, whereas 76b–c means that we don’t know what various other forms (such as the moral forms) are. On this view, the scope of ‘we’ and the sort of knowledge that’s at issue are the same in both passages, and indeed throughout the argument. For this view, see Scott, Recollection and Experience, 67–8; R. Hackforth, Plato’s Phaedo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955); 76; Rowe, Plato: Phaedo, 168. On an alternative view, the scope of ‘we’ and/or the relevant sort of knowledge differ in 74b2 and in 76b–c. See e.g. Bostock, Plato’s Phaedo, 67–9. Ackrill considers this view but rightly finds it problematic: ‘Anamnesis,’ 28–9.

Having said that we know what the equal itself—i.e., the form of equality—is, Socrates, at 74b4–6, and in Sedley and Long’s translation, Socrates asks: ‘Having got the knowledge of it [the form of equality] from where? Wasn’t it from the things we were just mentioning? Upon seeing that either sticks or stones or some other things were equal, wasn’t it from them that we came to think of it [the form], different as it is from them?’. If this translation were right, it would imply that, at least here, perception is at the third grade. For, on this translation, we see that the sticks and stones are equal. If we can see that something is thus and so, judgment is involved, and so the third grade of perception is at issue. However, Plato uses a direct-object construction, which would be more accurately translated as: ‘on seeing sticks or stones or other equal things’; Hackforth, Plato’s Phaedo; R. S. Bluck, Plato’s Phaedo (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955); G. M. A. Grube, Phaedo, in John M. Cooper (ed.), Plato: Complete Works (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997); Rowe, Plato: Phaedo; and Gallop, Plato: Phaedo—all use versions of this translation. The direct-object construction doesn’t imply that we see that the sticks and stones are equal. It leaves open the possibility that we see the sticks and stones in a second-grade way, and then think that they are equal, or recognize them as being equal, where doing so involves more than just perceiving them.

80 For a defence of this view, see Scott, Recollection and Experience, 60; see also the previous note. For the view that Socrates thinks a wider range of people can have this thought see S. Kelsey, ‘Recollection in the Phaedo,’ Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy, 16 (2000), 91–121 at 117–18. It does not matter for my purposes which view is correct. For both views leave open the possibility that perception can have some thoughts, though neither view implies that perception has any thoughts.
requires conscious knowledge of forms, which we cannot acquire through perception. However, that leaves open the possibility, though it does not imply, that perception can have other thoughts.

Socrates then repeats that 'we must have known the equal before that time when we first saw the equals and thought that all of them wanted to be like the equal but fell short' (74e9–75a3). Once again, he does not say that perception delivers this thought; and we have seen that it does not. It is true that he goes on to say that we cannot have this thought 'from anywhere except seeing or touching or some other sense' (75a5–7). But this just means that we could not have the thought unless we perceived: perceiving is necessary, but not sufficient, for having the thought.

9.

At 75b4–8 Plato says that we started seeing and hearing and using the other senses at birth; he infers that we must have had prenatal knowledge of forms, and so we must have existed prenatally. In his review of Hackforth, J. L. Ackrill says:

Hackforth does not point out the gap in Plato’s argument for prenatal knowledge of Forms. One could admit that we saw and heard from birth, and that referring what one sees and hears to standards implies prior knowledge of the standards, and one could still deny that we had prenatal knowledge of standards. For we may have done a good deal of infantile seeing and hearing before we began to refer what we saw and heard to any standards (in fact we certainly did).

I take Ackrill’s point to be that, according to Plato, referring sensibles to forms requires having concepts; but we don’t have concepts at birth. But if we don’t do the referring until some time after birth, that leaves room for us to acquire concepts at some time between birth and the initial referring; hence the inference to prenatal knowledge is invalid.

Ackrill’s claim that, according to Plato, we don’t do the referring from birth has been challenged. Indeed, Michael Morgan argues that Plato says not only that we

\[81\] See also 75a11–b2.

\[82\] ‘Review of R. Hackforth, Plato’s Phaedo’ Philosophical Review 67 (1958), 106–10, at 108. Interestingly, in his paper ‘Anamnesis’ Ackrill doesn’t explicitly discuss this issue, though I take it he has it in mind in speaking of ‘the notorious fallacy in the argument of 75b4–c6’ (29 n. 13).

\[83\] I assume Ackrill ascribes this view to Plato; for if his view were that Plato thinks we do the referring from birth but is wrong to do so, he would have said that the argument was unsound, not that it was invalid. If Plato thinks we not only perceive from birth but also lack concepts at birth, then he places at least infant perception at the second grade. That’s compatible with mature perception being at the third grade, though it doesn’t imply that it is. Here we might note that the Stoics hold that mature human but not infant or animal perception is at the third grade: see e.g. Aetius 4.11.1–4 (= SVF 2.83/LS 39E); DL 7.55–6 (= LS 33 H).
refer sensibles to forms from birth but also that we know them from birth, and that this knowledge is conferred by perception. Since we need to know forms before we begin to do the referring, the inference to prenatal knowledge is valid. If Morgan is right, all perception, including infant perception, is at the third grade. If it confers knowledge of forms, it is at the high-end of the third grade.⁸⁴

If Plato says or implies that perception gives us knowledge of forms, the passage conflicts with other passages (such as 65–6) where, as we’ve seen, he argues that perception doesn’t have any access to forms. But, fortunately, we don’t need to accept this interpretation. For Plato doesn’t say that perception confers knowledge of forms, either at birth or at any other time. Nor does he even say that perception does the referring, whether from birth or at any other time. He says only that we must know forms before we refer sensibles to them and that, since we perceive from birth, the prior knowledge must be prenatal. This doesn’t imply that we do the referring from birth. Nor does it say perception ever does the referring. It leaves open the possibility that the referring, whenever it happens, is done by some sort of thinking distinct from perception. Of course, perception is needed, since the relevant thought involves comparing sensibles to forms; but that doesn’t mean that perception does the referring.

If some sort of thinking distinct from perception does the referring, one might infer that perception is at the second grade. However, whether that follows depends on what’s involved in the referring. If (as is sometimes thought) one refers to forms whenever one applies any concepts whatever, then, if perception doesn’t do the referring, perception would seem to be at the second grade. If, however, as I think, the referring at issue is a high-level thought had only by those

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⁸⁴ M. Morgan, 'Sense-Perception and Recollection in the Phaedo,' Phronesis 29 (1984), 237–51. He says, for example, that ‘any perceiver can have, as a result of his perception, some knowledge of the Forms involved in that perception’ (238). However, he also says that infant knowledge is ‘pre-propositional and pre-articulate’ (247). In my view, Plato wouldn’t count something pre-propositional and pre-articulate as knowledge (as opposed to its being some other, lower-level form of cognition). So, though Morgan claims that Plato takes perception to be knowledge, what he describes as knowledge isn’t genuine knowledge as Plato conceives of it.

According to N. P. White (whom Morgan also cites), ‘Plato thinks that our very earliest judgments, and indeed our very earliest uses of our senses, involve comparing sensible objects with Forms (75b5–6) and being reminded of Forms by sensible objects’ (Plato on Knowledge and Reality (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 76). This too takes perception to be at the third grade; but White doesn’t say that perception provides knowledge of forms from birth.

C. Osborne also thinks that the Phaedo, at least in discussing recollection, places perception at the third grade, though (like White and in contrast to Morgan) she doesn’t say that infant or any other perception delivers knowledge. Commenting on 75a11, she says: ‘Socrates says we must have had the knowledge before we started to use our own senses. Presumably we see them as things of a certain sort. Plato implies that there is no time at which we see them just as things, not as like a Form. He need not imply that we consciously remark a shortfall in particulars the first time we see them in the light of the Forms, but there is no occasion on which we see them and are unable to do so if required’ (‘Perceiving Particulars and Recollection the Forms in the “Phaedo,”’ Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 95 (1995), 211–33, at 224, n. 24). This implies that even new-borns could, if asked, remark on the shortfall. On the interpretation I go on to suggest, Plato is not committed to that (to my mind implausible) view.
who explicitly countenance forms, then it doesn’t follow from the fact that perception doesn’t do that referring, that it’s at the second grade. All that follows is that there are some thoughts perception can’t have.\(^{85}\)

But if we don’t refer sensibles to forms from birth (whether by perception or by thinking that isn’t done by perception), why does Plato think we need prenatal knowledge? Why not say instead that we first acquire our knowledge of the form of equality (for example) at some time after birth, but before the time when we first think that sensibles fall short of it? Perhaps we first come to know that there are forms, and what some of them are, only when philosophy ‘takes our soul in hand’—say, at the age of 20. If Plato can’t rule out that possibility, he can’t infer to prenatal knowledge.\(^{86}\)

Plato has an argument against this possibility. He thinks that the fact that we perceive from birth handicaps our ability to reason to such an extent that we can’t acquire knowledge of forms for the very first time in this life. But we all can, and some of us do, acquire such knowledge in this life. In his view, this can be explained only by positing prenatal knowledge of forms, traces of which remain in us in a way that allows us to overcome the difficulties arising from the fact that we perceive from birth. This argument is neutral about what grade perception is at. The crucial point is just that if we didn’t have, and retain traces of, our prenatal knowledge of forms, the fact that we perceive from birth would prevent us from ever acquiring knowledge of them while incarnate. Though the argument is neutral on the question of what grade perception is at, it shows that we need not endorse either Ackrill’s view that Plato’s argument is invalid or the view that it is valid because it takes us to refer to forms from birth.\(^{87}\)

\(^{85}\) Here, then, is one place where the difference between the two views of the theory of recollection (that it is meant to explain concept and belief acquisition, or to explain only how we move from our initial concepts and beliefs to knowledge) might make a difference to our view of perception. As I’ve said, Plato could in principle accept either view of recollection without its following that perception is at any particular grade, noting that he could, nonetheless, spell out one of these views in a way that commits him to perception’s being at one or another grade. My present point is that if he accepts the first view and spells it out in the way just described, he would seem to be committed to perception’s being at the second grade. But, in my view, he accepts the second view and spells it out in a way that doesn’t commit him to perception’s being at any particular grade. Much of what I go on to say would stand (though it would need to be rephrased) even if the referring were more extensive than I take it to be. So, for example, in D. Sedley, ‘Equal Sticks and Stones,’ in D. Scott (ed.), \textit{Maieusis: Essays in Ancient Philosophy in Honour of Myles Burnyeat} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 68–86, Sedley takes ‘we’ to be more extensive than I do: he thinks that the ‘we’ who know the form of equal and refer sensibles to it ‘potentially’ includes ‘anybody who has studied geometry’: \textit{Midwife}, 75. But this is compatible with their doing the referring by some sort of reasoning ability acquired by their study of geometry.

\(^{86}\) He also needs to rule out the view we acquire knowledge of forms for the first time at, say, the age of 2 when, let us suppose, we first acquire some concept or idea of equality. The reply I attribute to Plato rebuts that view no less than the one I focus on in the text. See previous note; and Dancy, \textit{Introduction}, 276–8.

\(^{87}\) The argument I attribute to Plato appeals to the so-called poverty of the stimulus. Usually such appeals posit innate knowledge; Plato posits prenatal knowledge instead. I discuss this in connection
Our discussion of what grade perception is at in the theory of recollection has been just as inconclusive as our discussion of what grade it’s at elsewhere in the Phaedo. We’ve considered arguments for putting perception at the second grade, and other arguments for putting it at the third grade. But we’ve found all these arguments wanting. What he says is compatible with placing perception at the second or at the third grade; but he is not committed to its being at either of these grades.

I’ve argued that perception is at the second grade in Theaetetus 184–6, and that it’s not clear what grade it’s at in the Phaedo. That’s not to say that the Phaedo is confused or that it holds a different view from Tht. 184–6. It’s just that Plato’s concerns lie elsewhere, in such a way that it would be a ‘sign of ill breeding’ (Tht. 184c) to discuss what is due just to perception and what strictly speaking goes beyond it.88 For all Plato says in the Phaedo, perception might be at the low-end of the third grade, involving some thoughts and recognition, though not ones that are sufficient to explain how we do or can know forms. But what he says is also compatible with perception’s being at the second grade.89

If this is right, we shouldn’t say that the Phaedo makes perception a rival judgment-maker to reason: for it’s not clear that it makes perception a judgment-maker at all. Perception-guided inquiry is a rival judgment-maker to (good) reasoning, at least when what’s of concern is what’s most real. But it’s not clear that Tht. 184–6 disagrees with that claim: it doesn’t address that issue. It’s true that Tht. 184–6 recommends a way of speaking about perception that the Phaedo doesn’t adhere to. So it in effect makes a terminological criticism of the Phaedo.90 But it’s not clear that it also makes a substantive criticism.

Even if it doesn’t do so, however, we should hesitate to say that the two contexts agree. It would be better to say that the Phaedo is uncommitted either way and that its main concerns lie elsewhere. The task in Tht. 184–6 is to provide a precise account of the nature of perception and what it can achieve. The primary task in the Phaedo (so far as the passages that discuss perception are concerned) is to defend the view that we can’t acquire knowledge of forms if we rely on perception or perception-guided inquiry; rather, we need to reason in a way that is, in the

88 However, the Phaedo is well aware that sometimes it’s important to speak accurately: see e.g. 115e.
89 Or, for that matter, at the first grade.
90 I say ‘in effect,’ since it’s not clear that, in writing Tht. 184–6, Plato was thinking of the Phaedo.
right way and to the relevant extent, independent of both of them. To accomplish this task, it isn’t necessary to say what is due to perception proper, what to perception-guided inquiry. Nor is it necessary to distinguish second-grade from third-grade perception. Whatever grade perception is at, it remains the case that insofar as we are guided by it we can’t acquire knowledge of forms.

Theaetetus 184–6, we might say, focuses on describing perception, which is at the low end of cognition; hence it doesn’t discuss how e.g. knowledge differs from belief (though the dialogue discusses this elsewhere). The Phaedo (in the passages we’ve focused on) is largely concerned with the high end of cognition: with articulating a sort of reasoning that a discarnate soul can engage in, and that an incarnate soul can also engage in insofar as it can distance itself from an inappropriate reliance on perception, where that includes perception-guided inquiry. Hence the dialogue doesn’t say much about lower-level sorts of cognition. It does distinguish perception from perception-guided inquiry, but it isn’t as precise as we’d like it to be about what falls on either side of that divide. Perhaps that’s because doing so isn’t necessary for achieving its main purpose. For wherever exactly we draw the line between perception and perception-guided inquiry, the fact remains that to the extent that we rely on either of them, we won’t attain wisdom.91

91 Thanks to Lesley Brown and Terry Irwin for many rewarding discussions of the questions considered here; to Alison Simmons for helpful correspondence about Descartes on the grades of perception; to David Sedley for helpful discussion and written comments; to Victor Caston, not only for helpful discussion and written comments but also for help in preparing the final manuscript; and to audiences in Princeton, St. Andrews, the University of California at San Diego, and the Classical Institute in the University of London, where earlier versions of this chapter were given, especially Verity Harte, who was my commentator at Princeton.
8
Meno’s Paradox and the Sisyphus

1.

At least since Thrasyllus, the *Corpus Platonicum* has had a concluding section called *Νοθευομένοι*, which consists of dialogues that were, at least by that time, taken to be spurious; one of these is the *Sisyphus*.¹ The dialogue had some influence in some periods. In particular, Dio Chrysostum’s 26th Discourse, *On Deliberation*, makes intelligent use of it.² But the dialogue has received little

¹ See, for example, vol. 5 of the OCT of Plato. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, III 62 lists several dialogues that were agreed to be spurious (*νοθεύομένοι ὁτι τῶν διαλόγων ὀμολογούμενοι*); one of these is the *Sisyphus*. The L. G. Westerink (ed. and trans.), *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* 2nd ed. (Dillon Marsh, Westbury, Wiltshire: The Prometheus Trust, 2011). (Originally published by North Holland Publishing, 1962.) also mentions the *Sisyphus* as one of the dialogues that is ‘commonly agreed to be spurious’ (κοινῶς ὀμολογούσι νόθοις, XXVI 3).

² Dio’s dates are approximately 40–120 AD. His essay *On Deliberation* may conveniently be found in J. W. Cohoon, *Dio Chrysostom: On Deliberation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939). According to Müller, this essay is the earliest instance of a famous author using one of the *spuria*; as he notes, it seems to be a ‘free paraphrase’ of the *Sisyphus*. Cohoon notes that some scholars think that Dio and the author of the *Sisyphus* were both indebted to a third source. I agree with Cohoon that this is very unlikely. It would be surprising if two authors independently followed a common source so
attention in modern times. Perhaps this is because scholars agree with W. K. C. Guthrie that the *Sisyphus* is an ‘unimportant Sophistic exercise in paradox’.

Similarly, John Dillon says that the *spuria* ‘are in general (though not quite unreservedly) a pretty dismal group of texts.’ (He doesn’t say whether he thinks the *Sisyphus* is one of the exceptions.) Paul Shorey renders a more favorable, though still muted, verdict, saying that the dialogue is ‘a not altogether unintelligent, though somewhat confused discussion’ that ‘[w]ith all its sophistry…glances at some real questions.’ My sympathies lie with Shorey: though the dialogue seems confused in some places, it is nonetheless well worth our attention.

The dialogue’s subtitle is ‘On Deliberation’; and, not surprisingly, its main topic is deliberation. One question it considers is whether deliberation is a type of inquiry; and its discussion of inquiry, like much else in the dialogue, plainly reflects the influence of the *Meno*. But the focus on deliberation differs from the *Meno* and, indeed, from all the Platonic dialogues. For, though the dialogues sometimes touch on the topic, none of them—in contrast to Aristotle’s ethical writings—provides a detailed, systematic discussion of deliberation. And just as there are interesting affinities between the *Meno* and the *Sisyphus*, so there are interesting affinities between the *Sisyphus* and Aristotle’s account of deliberation.

The dialogue falls into three parts. In the first part, Socrates proposes a definition, or account, of deliberation. Sisyphus challenges this account and suggests another one. Socrates suggests that, on Sisyphus’ account, deliberation is a type of inquiry. Accordingly, in the second part of the dialogue Socrates and Sisyphus explore the nature of inquiry. In the third part, Socrates challenges the view that deliberation is a type of inquiry. He also challenges the view that there could be such a thing as deliberation, if it requires knowledge. For the sort of closely. It seems far more likely that Dio adapted the *Sisyphus* for his own purposes (C. W. Müller, *Appendix Platonica* und Neue Akademie. Die pseudoplatonischen Dialoge Über die Tugend und Alkyon,* in K. Döring et al. (eds.), *Pseudoplatonica* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 2005), 155–74, at 155).

5 W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 397. I have changed Guthrie’s plural to a singular. He uses the plural because he is also discussing the *Democritus*, which is another *spurium*.


8 Though it’s clear that the *Meno* was written before the *Sisyphus*, there is more room for dispute about the relative dates of the *Sisyphus* and Aristotle’s ethical writings: see n. 14.
knowledge it would require is unattainable. But if deliberation doesn’t involve knowledge, it is mere guesswork. But deliberation is not mere guesswork. It follows that, whether or not deliberation involves knowledge, deliberation is impossible. We might call this ‘the Sisyphus’ Paradox of Deliberation.’ As we shall see, it neatly parallels what is generally known as Meno’s Paradox.

2.

The dialogue has just two interlocutors, Socrates and Sisyphus of Pharsalus. In order to distinguish the Socrates of the Sisyphus from Plato’s Socrates, I shall refer to the former as ‘Socrates-S’ and to the latter as ‘Socrates-P.’ I shall refer to the historical Socrates as ‘Socrates.’

Sisyphus was a political leader in Pharsalus, a town in Thessaly. (Interestingly, Meno is also from Thessaly.) He seems to have been active in the early fourth century. It’s not clear whether he could have met Socrates. Two other people are mentioned in the dialogue, though they don’t appear as characters in it. At the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates-S mentions Stratonicus, who was a well-known citharist; his dates are approximately 410–360. So even if Socrates could have met Sisyphus, it’s unlikely that he met Stratonicus; but if he did, it wasn’t when he was an adult.

9 At least, it’s generally assumed that these are the two interlocutors. But David Sedley (at the B-Club in Cambridge and in subsequent communication) notes that Sisyphus never addresses the other speaker by name, nor does that other speaker mention his own name. Nor do the earliest manuscripts of Plato have speakers’ names. Nor is it clear that they provided a list of dramatis personae at the beginning. Sedley suggests that when we put these facts together with the dialogue’s dramatic date and the uncertainty about its location (on which, see further below), we have reason to wonder whether Socrates is the main interlocutor.

10 In addition to being mentioned in our dialogue, Sisyphus is also mentioned by Theopompos (Hist., Fragment 18 apud Athenaeus VI 61, 252F). For information about Sisyphus, see Müller, Die Kurzdialog der Appendix Platonica, 45–6; and D. Nails, The People of Plato (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), sv., Sisyphus of Pharsalus). I don’t think we need to see any allusion to the mythological Sisyphus; but see W. A. Heidel (ed.), Pseudo-Platonicus (Baltimore: The Friedenwald Company, 1896, 24 n. 2). A. E. Taylor, in Plato: The Man and His Work (London: Methuen, 1926), speculates that ‘Sisyphus’ was a nickname (547). Hutchinson says flatly that Sisyphus ‘was a contemporary of Plato’s but not of Socrates’ (‘Introduction to Sisyphus,’ in J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (eds.), Plato: Complete Works (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 1707). Müller, by contrast, thinks that Sisyphus and Socrates could have met (Die Kurzdialog der Appendix Platonica, 46).

11 Socrates-S says that Stratonicus gave a performance (ἐπίδειξις, which is what Socrates-P says he will give, when Meno promises not to understand what Socrates-P has said: Meno 82b2; cf. 82a6) that was splendid both λόγῳ καὶ ἑργῳ (387b4). For the phrase λόγῳ καὶ ἑργῳ, see Meno 86c2. Interestingly, this precise phrase occurs in only two further places in the Platonic corpus: at Minos 318e8 and at Epistulae 362e8; both of the works are likely to be spurious. However, similar phrases are not uncommon in the genuine corpus. Dillon (‘Dubia and Spuria’) says that Socrates-S says that he had to miss a talk by Stratonicus (52). However, it’s tempting to think that λόγῳ καὶ ἑργῳ indicates that Stratonicus both gave a talk and a musical performance.

12 See the OCD (1966), sv., Stratonicus. Aristotle mentions a Stratonicus at EE III 2, 1231a11 (the passage is miscited as 1131a11 by F. Aronadio, F., Dialoghi spuri di Platone (Turin: Torinese, 2008), though not in connection with music. However, Stratonicus was known for more than his contributions to music. For example, Athenaeus records several of his witticisms, not all of them having to do with music. He is said to be from Athens, though that doesn’t preclude his traveling to Pharsalus. For the setting of the dialogue, see n. 16.
Then, at 388c Socrates-S says that one might know who Callistratus is without knowing where he is. He is probably referring to Callistratus of Aphidnae, who was a well-known general in the mid-fourth century. He was exiled in 361 and executed by 350. During his period of exile, it was widely known who Callistratus was but not where he was. After his death, he was apparently not very well known.

The reference to Callistratus suggests that the dialogue’s dramatic date is the mid-fourth century; and the references to Stratonicus and Sisyphus are compatible with that date. It doesn’t follow that the dialogue was written then. Nonetheless, that seems the most likely date of composition. For one thing, the references to Stratonicus, Sisyphus, and Callistratus would have been salient only to an audience of roughly that time. It’s not clear why a later author would mention them since, to a later audience, they would just have been names.¹³ But nothing I say here depends on any particular dating.¹⁴

3.

The dialogue opens with Socrates-S remarking that,¹⁵ on the previous day, they had waited a long time for Sisyphus, but then left to go hear Stratonicus.¹⁶

¹³ On the dating of the dialogue, see Müller (Die Kurzdialog der Appendix Platonica, 94–104). He favors a mid-fourth-century dating; and I owe the argument about Callistratus to him (103). He also adduces other arguments in favor of this dating, not all of which seem to me to be equally convincing. A mid-fourth-century date is also favored by Hutchinson, who speculates that the dialogue was written by a pupil of Plato’s at roughly the same time as Aristotle wrote the Protrepticus (Hutchinson, ‘Introduction to Sisyphus,’ 1707). Aronadio also dates the work to Plato’s lifetime; and he too thinks it was written by a member of the Academy (Dialoghi spuri di Platone, 327 n. 1). Heidel, by contrast, thinks the dialogue was written around 150 BC (Heidel, Pseudo-Platonica, 15; 24–7). However, his reasons are not convincing. For example, he mentions its interest in geometry. However, as he himself rightly notes, that might instead reflect the influence of the Meno (24–5). He also suggests that the fact that the dialogue mentions Anaxagoras and Empedocles ‘accords well with Carneades’ habit’ of citing the Presocratics (27 n. 17). But Plato also mentions both Anaxagoras and Empedocles; so too does Aristotle. In Pseudo-Platonica, Heidel also suggests that ‘the vocabulary and style of the dialogue are such that one is compelled to seek its origin in the age of decadence’ (24). For criticism of Heidel, see Souilhé, Platon, 63–4; and Müller (Die Kurzdialog der Appendix Platonica). In Platon, Souilhé (1926) says that the dialogue’s vocabulary is classical and that almost all its terms can be found in Plato, though he thinks that a few terms might (peut-être) suggest a later date (64). A few pages earlier, he more firmly asserts that the dialogue ‘could not have been written before the Aristotelian era’ (n’a pu être écrit avant l’époque aristotélicienne) (59). He also says that ‘very probably,’ it was written in the time of Aristotle, or a bit later than that (65). However, he doesn’t justify this view.

¹⁴ However, if, as I’ve suggested, the dialogue was probably written in the mid-fourth century, it was probably written before the EN. It doesn’t follow that the EN is replying to it; Aristotle and the author of the Sisyphus might have written independently of one another. Cf. Müller (Die Kurzdialog der Appendix Platonica, 86–94, esp. 93.)

¹⁵ I base my translations of the Sisyphus on D. Gallop’s translation in J. M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (eds.), Plato: Complete Works (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), though I sometimes alter it without comment. Gallop’s translation is based on the OCT. I have also consulted the translation in G. Burges, The Works of Plato (London: Bohn, 1854), which is based mainly on Stallbaum’s text. Aronadio provides an Italian translation; and Souilhé provides a French translation.

¹⁶ This makes one wonder where the dialogue is set. Heidel (Pseudo-Platonica, 25) and Dillon (‘Dubia and Spuria,’ 52) think it is set in Pharsalus. In their defense, we can note that it would have
Sisyphus explains that he was detained because the authorities required him to join them in their deliberations. This prompts Socrates-S to ask Sisyphus what deliberation (βουλεύεσθαι) is; he suggests that, since Sisyphus is a good deliberator (for that’s presumably why the authorities wanted to deliberate with him), he should be able to say what deliberation is.¹

Socrates-S says it would take too long to discuss good deliberation;¹ so he proposes to discuss¹ deliberation as such instead.² Asking what good deliberation is would be asking about a type of deliberation. In proposing to focus instead on the question ‘What is deliberation?’, Socrates-S gives some sort of priority to the general over the more specific. The same preference is clear in the Meno. Socrates-P says, for example, that there are many kinds of bees. But he wants to know the one thing in virtue of which they are all bees, what it is to be a bee (Meno, 72b–c). He also argues that one can’t know what justice is unless one knows what virtue is; for justice is a kind of virtue (78d–79b).²¹

Sisyphus is surprised that Socrates-S has asked him what deliberation is: he asks whether he really doesn’t know (ἄγνωστον, 387d9) what it is, assuming that Socrates-S wouldn’t have asked him if he knew the answer. Similarly, in the Meno Meno is surprised when Socrates-P says that he doesn’t at all know what virtue is (71b9–c2). In the Meno, Socrates-P, having said that he doesn’t at all taken Sisyphus more than a day to get from Pharsalus to Athens. On the other hand, one might assume that it is set in Athens since, at least according to Crito 52b, Socrates never left Athens except for military service. Taylor wonders whether Pharsalus might have had offices in Athens (A. E. Taylor, Plato: The Man and His Work (London: Methuen, 1926), 547 n. 2). According to Westerink’s Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy, after Socrates’s death Plato set dialogues outside of Athens; but he also notes that the Timaeus isn’t set in any particular place (XVI 42–7). In Platon, Souilhé reasonably says that it is indeterminate where the dialogue is set (57).

¹ Cf. Charmides 158e–159a.
¹ευβουλία (387c5, 6) is used interchangeably with εὐ βουλεύεσθαι (387c7; cf. 390c6–7). Cf. καλῶς (387d5). No difference seems to be intended between καλῶς and εὐ. For Socrates-S regularly contrasts εὐβουλία with κακοβουλία; see, e.g., 391d3. Cf. 390d6–7, e5, 391b1, 2, c5–6.
² διαλεχθῆναι, 387d3. As we shall see, ‘discuss’ (or ‘talk’) seems to be used differently later in the dialogue. With the claim that he will discuss something with Sisyphus, cf. the claim at Meno 80d4 that they will σκέψασθαι καὶ συζητῆσαι.
²¹ A further parallel with the Meno is that, though the Sisyphus takes the question of what deliberation is to be in some way prior to the question of what good deliberation is, later they ask how to distinguish good from bad deliberation, even though they don’t yet claim to know what deliberation is. Similarly, the Meno takes the answer to the question ‘Is virtue teachable?’ to be in some way prior to the answer to the question ‘Is virtue teachable?’ Nonetheless, after several failed attempts to say what virtue is, they turn directly to the question of whether it’s teachable.

One interesting difference with the Meno is that, whereas Meno 71b4 clearly distinguishes knowing what something is (τί) from knowing what it is like (ὅπως), the Sisyphus does not do so. For example, 387d3 has ὅτι ἐστὶν, 387d4 has ὅτι ποί’ ἐστιν, and δό has ὅπως τί; these all seem to be used interchangeably. This fits with the fact that it’s not clear whether Definition 1 (for which, see below) is a definition or an account in a looser sense.
know what virtue is, asks Meno to tell him what it is (71d1–8). In the Sisyphus, by contrast, Socrates-S himself gives an account of deliberation. He suggests that one deliberates when: ²²

one doesn’t know (μη ἐπιστάμενον) about the things about which one must do something; but, by divining (διαμαντεύομενον) and making things up (σχεδιάζοντα), one says whatever it may turn out to be (ὅτι ἂν τύχῃ), guessing (εἰκάζοντα) about these things, just like those who play odds-and-evens. Such people of course know nothing (οὐδὲν ἐπιστάμενοι)²³ about whether they are holding an odd or even number of things in their hands. Yet when they say which it is, they hit the mark (ἐπιτυγχάνοντι), speaking the truth about these same things. Deliberation too, therefore, is often (πολλάκις) that sort of thing: someone who knows nothing (μηδὲν ἐπιστάμενον) about the things he’s deliberating about hits the mark, having spoken true things by chance (ἀπὸ τύχης).²⁴

(387e1–388a3)

²² The vocabulary is worth noting. διαμαντεύομαι occurs just once in Plato (at Laws, 696b1). σχεδιάζει is a hapax within the Platonic corpus; cf. σχεδιασμός (390c4). However, it is not a hapax as such. Souilhé notes (Platon, 64–5) that σχεδιάζω occurs in, for example, the comedian Anaxandrides (whose acme is 376); and Cicero uses it in a letter to Atticus, 6, 1, 11. Though Plato doesn’t use σχεδιάζει, he uses αὐτοσχεδιάσθαι (see, e.g., Euthyphro 5a7, 16a2), which is also used later in the Sisyphus at 390b2–3. Cf. Thucydides 1.138. For the game of odds-and-evens, see, e.g., Aristotle, PN 463b19.

²³ In the Meno, Socrates-P says both that he doesn’t know what virtue is (71b4) and that he doesn’t know at all (παράσται) what it is (71b3); cf. 80d6 with 80d6–8. Similarly here, first Socrates-S says that the deliberator doesn’t know. Then, when he compares the deliberator to the person playing odds-and-evens, he says that he doesn’t know anything (οὐδέν) about whether they are holding an odd or even number of things. There’s dispute about whether, in the Meno, not knowing at all is different from merely not knowing or whether ‘at all’ is just used for emphasis. If not knowing at all differs from merely not knowing, the presence and omission of ‘at all’ is significant. If ‘at all’ is just used for emphasis, the fact that it is sometimes present, sometimes omitted, is not significant. In my view, in the Meno ‘at all’ is just used for emphasis. We shall need to see whether an analogous point holds for the Sisyphus. Those who think the omission is important in the Meno generally think the point is that, though we lack knowledge at the conscious level, we have latent innate knowledge. In my view, however, the Meno doesn’t posit latent innate knowledge, in which case there at any rate isn’t that reason for thinking that not knowing, and not knowing at all, are distinguished. Whatever is true of the Meno, latent innate knowledge plays no role in the Sisyphus.

²⁴ Socrates-S said he was going to discuss deliberation as such, not good deliberation in particular. Yet one might think that, in saying that the deliberator hits upon the truth, he is speaking just about good deliberation. Perhaps he means that one deliberates only when one lacks knowledge and so guesses instead. When one gets the wrong answer, it’s clear that one lacked knowledge; his point is that even when one gets the right answer, one didn’t know. Cf. also πολλάκις, which Gallop translates as ‘perhaps’; cf. Heidel (Pseudo-Platonic, 24 n. 3) (who, however, says that this use of πολλάκις without εἶ or μὴ is quite anomalous). Souilhé (Platon) translates as ‘souvent’ and I agree with him that πολλάκις means ‘often’ here. The point is that deliberators often—but not always—hit upon the truth. With ‘perhaps,’ Socrates-S would seem to be saying that perhaps deliberators always hit upon the truth. Perhaps good deliberation does so. But not all deliberation does so; and Socrates-S said he was going to discuss deliberation as such.
Socrates-S says that, if deliberation is like that, he knows (γιγνώσκειν) what, or what sort of thing, it is (ὁιον, 388a4). But, if it’s not like that, he doesn’t yet (πω)26 know (ἐπίστασθαι) what it is. Let’s call this ‘Definition 1’.²⁷

A deliberates = df. A doesn’t know about the things about which one must do something, but guesses, by divining and making things up.

This is an odd definition. In particular, it suggests that knowing and guessing are exhaustive options. To be sure, this isn’t strictly speaking implied: if I say that something is not blue but is red, I don’t thereby imply that there are no other colors. Similarly, then, the fact that Definition 1 says that deliberation doesn’t involve knowledge but does involve guesswork doesn’t imply that knowledge and guesswork are exhaustive options. And there seems to be a third option. For in addition to knowing and guessing, there is also true belief. The failure to mention true belief (either here or elsewhere in the dialogue) is surprising given the similarities between the Meno and the Sisyphus. For in the Meno, much is made of the distinction between knowledge, on the one hand, and true beliefs that fall short of knowledge, on the other hand. Not all of the latter are lucky guesses.

Perhaps we are meant to see that there is a tertium quid between knowledge and guessing. An alternative, however, is that Socrates-S takes knowing and guessing to be genuinely exhaustive options. There are two ways in which he might do so. First, perhaps guesses, as they are conceived of here, include all beliefs that fall short of knowledge. Secondly, perhaps knowledge, as it is conceived of here, includes all beliefs that aren’t guesses. The first alternative doesn’t seem to fit our context: the fact that Socrates-S elucidates guessing with the game of odds-and-evens suggests that here, guessing is random conjecture.²⁸ So either

² Sisyphus asks Socrates-S what deliberation is (τὸ βουλεύομαι ἐστιν, 387d9); and Socrates-S proceeds to say just what it is (ὁπερ, 387e1). As J. Barnes notes, Aristotle often uses the phrase ‘γιγνώσκειν’ to indicate either that x is y’s genus or that x is in the essence of y (‘Aristotle’s Concept of Mind,’ Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 75 (1971/1972), 101–14, 168); see, e.g., Posterior Analytics, 83a24, 89a35. Plato also often uses the word, though not in this, or any other, technical sense. Socrates-S then says that his account says what deliberation is like (τοιοτὸν, 388a4–5; ὁιον, 388a4). Cf. n. 21. Gallop seems to try to capture the fact that Socrates-S speaks of knowing what deliberation is like by translating τοιοτὸν as ‘roughly.’ τοιοτὸν is also used at 388a1, but here it is coupled with πολλάκις, so perhaps Socrates-S has just some deliberation in mind here (if πολλάκις means ‘often’ rather than ‘perhaps:’ see previous note); if so, the use of τοιοτὸν is not so surprising.

²² Gallop seems to translate πω as ‘not at all.’

²⁷ It’s not clear whether this is meant to be a definition or an account in a looser sense. But it will do no harm to speak of it as a definition here. See also n. 21, n. 25, and n. 31. Nor is it clear how extensive Definition 1 takes the deliberator’s lack of knowledge to be: it’s clear that the deliberator doesn’t yet know what to do; but it’s not clear whether he has other relevant knowledge. I return to this point later.

²⁸ Plato, by contrast, doesn’t always assume such a narrow notion of guessing. For example, in Meno 98b1, Socrates-P says that he speaks not as someone who knows (εἰδεῖναι), but as someone who is guessing (εἰκαζεῖν). He doesn’t mean that he’s speaking at random; rather, he has a belief, one he takes to be well-grounded. In the Divided Line in Republic VI, εἰκαζεῖν is a subclass of δόξα. At Philebus 55e1–56a1, guessing (εἰκαζεῖν cf. 56a4: στοχαστικά) isn’t a mere shot in the dark; rather, it can rely on experience and training. Examples of where guessing (rather than measurement) is involved include
Definition 1 doesn’t mention exhaustive options, or else ‘knowledge’ is used quite extensively, so as to include all beliefs that aren’t random conjectures. I ask later how knowledge is conceived of here.

If guesswork is just random conjecture, it is odd to think of deliberation as being a matter of guesswork. At least, that will seem odd to anyone familiar with Aristotle’s account of deliberation. For he argues that good deliberation is not a matter of good guessing (ἐνδοτοχία, Nicomachean Ethics VI 9, 1142b2; cf. Magna Moralia II 3, 1199a); by implication, deliberation is not a matter of guessing.

Rather, he suggests, deliberation is a type of inquiry and, as such, it involves ‘analyzing’ (ἀναλύειν, EN III 3, 1112b20) and ‘rationally calculating’ (λογίζεται, EN VI 9, 1142b2).²⁹

4.

Aristotle is not the only one who rejects Definition 1.³⁰ Sisyphus also does so. He says that one doesn’t deliberate ‘when one doesn’t know (ἐπιστασθαί) anything at all about some matter (μὴ κοιμιδὴ μηδὲ τί).’ Rather, one deliberates when ‘one knows (εἰδέναι) something of the thing (τι τοῦ πράγματος), but doesn’t yet know something else (τὸ δὲ μηδέπω ἐπιστασθαί)’ (388a7–9).³¹

Socrates-S suggests that perhaps he ‘divines’³² what Sisyphus means: namely, that someone who deliberates—or, rather, someone who deliberates well (ἐν βουλεύεσθαί, 388b3)—seeks to discover the best things (τὸ ζητεῖν τὰ βέλτιστα ἔξευρεῖν)³³ to do, not yet (μηδέπω) knowing clearly (ἐπιστασθαί σαφῶς) what they
are, though he is in the process of thought (ἐν νοήσει).

Sisyphus agrees that ‘what he means. So we are now to consider ‘Definition 2’.

A deliberates = df. A inquires about the best thing to do, not yet knowing clearly what that is, but being in the process of thought.

Definition 2 differs from Definition 1. First, according to Definition 1 one deliberates when one lacks knowledge; according to Definition 2, one deliberates when one doesn’t know clearly what to do. Secondly, Definition 1 says that the deliberator ‘doesn’t know about the things about which one must do something,’ whereas Definition 2 says that the deliberator doesn’t know what the best thing to do is. The difference in phrasing may suggest that the lack of knowledge in Definition 1 is more extensive than it is in Definition 2. Thirdly, Definition 2, but not Definition 1, says that one deliberates about what it is best to do. Fourthly, Definition 2, but not Definition 1, says that deliberation is a kind of inquiry. Fifthly, Definition 1, but not Definition 2, says that deliberation involves guessing. And if deliberation is a type of inquiry, it is not a matter of mere guesswork. For unlike mere guesswork, inquiry is a rational, goal-directed activity.

Because Definition 2 takes deliberation to be a type of inquiry, the discussion next turns to the nature of inquiry. But before considering what is said about inquiry, we should look at the suggestion that, in deliberation, one is in the process of thought but doesn’t yet know clearly what to do. How should we understand this distinction? And how does it elucidate Sisyphus’ claim that, in deliberation, one knows something, but not everything, about the thing itself?

On one tempting interpretation, Sisyphus is suggesting something like Aristotle’s account of deliberation. As we’ve seen, Aristotle also thinks that deliberation is a type of inquiry. Since he thinks that one can inquire only into what one doesn’t know (EN VI 9, 1142a34–1142b1), he likewise thinks that one can deliberate only about what one doesn’t know, where that means that one

34 Cf. Sextus Empiricus, PH II 10, which says that one doesn’t need κατάληψις for inquiry, νόησις will do. (However, II 10 doesn’t use the phrase ἐν νοήσει.) Phaedo 73 speaks both of knowing (several cognitive verbs are used) and of thinking, using both the verb (ἐννοεῖ) and the corresponding noun although, again, the phrase ἐν νοήσει isn’t used. Unlike Heidel (Pseudo-Platonica), I don’t think the phrase shows that ‘we must refer the dialogue’ to ‘[t]he sceptical age’ (24 n. 3). Perhaps ἐν νοήσει is meant to capture the process of thinking, whereas knowing something clearly is meant to capture its successful outcome. Cf., Euthydemus 278, which distinguishes the process from the product sense of μανθάνειν. ἐπίστασθαι σαφῶς is used by, among others, various orators. It doesn’t occur in Plato, though εἰδέραι σαφῶς is used in Hippias Major 286e4.

35 Just as it’s not clear whether Definition 1 is, strictly speaking, a definition, so it’s not clear whether Definition 2 is. With Definition 2, cf. the definition of βουλή in the Definitions: ‘investigation (οἰκέψις) about what would be beneficial in the future’ (414a2).

36 See n. 27 and n. 31.

37 This is another instance of turning from a species to a genus, or from the less to the more general.

38 This is not to say that the author of the Sisyphus is aware of Aristotle’s account. Nor is it to say that Aristotle derived his account from the Sisyphus. See n. 14.
doesn’t yet know what to do; it doesn’t mean that one doesn’t have any other relevant knowledge. As he says at Nicomachean Ethics III 3, we deliberate when we are in doubt (διστάζομεν, 1112b2, 10), and when the outcome is unclear (ἀδήλοις, 1112b9). But, though one doesn’t know what to do, one uses one’s knowledge, or beliefs, about other, related issues and ‘rationally calculates’ and ‘analyzes’ what to do on that basis.

That this is what Sisyphus has in mind is suggested by the fact that he says that, in deliberating, one knows something of the thing itself; and Socrates-S then elucidates this with Definition 2, on which one doesn’t yet know what to do. The implication is that, though one doesn’t know what to do, one deliberates about what to do by relying on other, relevant knowledge, or thoughts, that one does have.

Here it will be helpful to appropriate some terminology due to Lesley Brown.³⁹ She distinguishes between a matching and a stepping-stone version of a foreknowledge principle. For our purposes, we can say that, according to the first, to inquire, one needs to know the very thing one is inquiring into; whereas, according to the second, to inquire, one needs to know, not the very thing one is inquiring into, but something suitably related to what one is inquiring into.

Using this terminology, we can say that Definition 2 rejects a matching version of a foreknowledge principle for deliberation (for one doesn’t already know what to do); but it assumes a stepping-stone version of a foreknowledge principle (since Sisyphus says that one must know something). Or perhaps it would be better to say that Definition 2 assumes a stepping-stone version of a prior-cognition principle. For it says that, in deliberating what to do, one is in thought. Perhaps these thoughts don’t need to constitute knowledge. It’s true that Sisyphus initially says that one needs some knowledge. But the fact that he accepts the substitution of ‘being in thought’ for ‘knowing’ suggests that he either doesn’t have a very demanding notion of knowledge or else is willing to drop the claim about knowledge being necessary, in favor of the view that all one needs to have are certain thoughts, which don’t need to amount to knowledge—though, at the same time, neither can they be mere guesses. In the first case, knowledge and guesswork are exhaustive, and knowledge is very extensive. In the second case, knowledge and guesswork are not exhaustive, since being in thought is a third option. If this second case should prove to be correct, we would need to see whether, as in the Meno, acknowledging beliefs that fall short of knowledge but aren’t mere guesses is important.

The foregoing doesn’t answer the question of whether knowing and knowing clearly are the same. But it seems reasonable to think that they are. For it’s not as though, in deliberation, one doesn’t know clearly what to do, though one knows

what to do. Rather, even if one knows other things, still, one doesn’t at all know what to do: that’s what one is deliberating about. However, it’s difficult to be sure about this, since Sisyphus doesn’t say what he takes either knowing or knowing clearly to be.

This concludes the first part of the dialogue: Socrates-S proposes a definition, or account, of deliberation (Definition 1), according to which deliberation involves guesswork. Sisyphus challenges that account and proposes another one (Definition 2), according to which deliberation is a type of inquiry. Accordingly, in the second part of the dialogue, they consider the nature of inquiry.

5.

Socrates-S asks Sisyphus whether people inquire (ζητεῖν) about things (πράγματα) they know (ἐπίστασθαι) or about things they don’t know.⁴⁰ Sisyphus replies that one inquires into both. He might mean that one can inquire both into what one knows and also into what one doesn’t know. But it seems more likely that he means that one can inquiere into something only if one both does and doesn’t know it, in the sense that one knows something but not everything about it. At least, that’s what he seemed to mean earlier, when he said that one knows something about the thing, though there’s also something else about it that one doesn’t know.

Socrates-S asks Sisyphus for clarification: in saying that one inquires into what one both does and doesn’t know (or in saying that one inquires both into what one knows and also into what one doesn’t know), did Sisyphus mean that one might, for example, know who Callistratus is, but not know where he is?⁴¹

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⁴⁰ Interestingly, he uses ἐπίστασθαι; Meno’s Paradox (80d5–e5), by contrast, uses εἰδέναι. However, as I’ve mentioned (n. 30), the Sisyphus seems to use these two terms interchangeably. I think Socrates-P does so as well; but it’s striking that ἐπίστασθαι and its cognates aren’t used in the Meno until 85d.

⁴¹ I follow Souilhé and Gallop in deleting ὅστις εἰ ὁ Καλλίστρατος in 388c6; cf. Heidel, Pseudo-Platonica, 24 n. 4. Socrates-S’s remark evidently recalls the Meno. At Meno 71a Socrates-P says that, since he doesn’t at all know what virtue is, neither does he know whether it is teachable. He then explains that, in just the same way, if one doesn’t know who Meno is, one doesn’t know whether he is handsome, rich, or well-born. The Sisyphus uses the same grammatical construction, ‘know x who he is.’ Gallop translates as ‘one might, for example, be acquainted with Callistratus—know who he is—but not know where he is to be found.’ This makes it sound as though Socrates-S mentions both knowing Callistratus and knowing who he is, where these might be distinct. (One might, for example, know who Callistratus is by reading about him, without knowing him in the sense of being acquainted with him, that is, without having met him.) However, the Greek just has ‘knowing (γιγνώσκει) Callistratus who he is,’ which is ordinary Greek for ‘know who Callistratus is.’ There is dispute about whether, in the Meno, Socrates-P requires acquaintance with something in order to know anything about it. In my view, the Meno just says that one needs to know who or what a thing is, in order to know anything else about it; it does not imply that knowing who or what a thing is either is the same as or requires acquaintance with that thing. The same, I think, is true here. Interestingly, at 388c8 the text has τὸν Καλλίστρατον εἰδέναι, know Callistratus. Cf. Chm., 154a–b and Apology 20e8 (cf. 21a3), both of which also use εἰδέναι with a direct personal object. According to J. Lyons, however, εἰδέναι in Plato rarely takes a direct personal object (J. Lyons, Structural Semantics: An Analysis of Part of the Vocabulary of Plato (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), 199).
Sisyphus says that is indeed what he meant. His idea seems to be that one is inquiring into what one knows, since one is inquiring about Callistratus, and one knows who he is. But, at the same time, one is also inquiring into what one doesn’t know. For one is inquiring where he is; and one doesn’t know where he is. Hence, he thinks, one inquires into something one both does and doesn’t know.

Socrates-S probes further. He says that, if one knew Callistratus (τὸν Καλλίστρατον εἰδέναι, 388c8)—that is, if one knew who he is—one wouldn’t inquire who he is, though one might inquire where he is. Nor, if one knew where he was, would one inquire about that. Sisyphus agrees. But in that case, Socrates-S says, one is inquiring—that is, one can inquire—only about what one doesn’t know. Sisyphus was wrong, then, to say that one can inquire into what one knows (and that indeed one must know something about what one is inquiring into).

Socrates-S secures this result by turning from objectual to propositional inquiry. That is, whereas Sisyphus said that one can inquire about, for example, Callistratus only if one knows something about him but doesn’t know something else about him, Socrates-S focuses on propositions. He argues that one can inquire what the answer to a question is only if one doesn’t already know what it is. He is rejecting a matching version of a foreknowledge principle for propositional inquiry. Sisyphus, by contrast, was thinking of objectual inquiry, and saying that one can inquire about an object only if one knows something about it and then inquires about other features of the object that one doesn’t know to be true of it. Perhaps Socrates-S and Sisyphus are talking at cross purposes. But an alternative is that Socrates-S understands very well what Sisyphus means, but thinks that it is more illuminating or accurate to focus on propositional inquiry; and he thinks that, if we do so, we should say that one can inquire only into what one doesn’t know. To say only so much doesn’t involve taking a stand on the question of whether or not one must know something else: Socrates-S hasn’t yet either endorsed or rejected a stepping-stone version of a foreknowledge principle. All he’s done is to reject a matching version of a foreknowledge principle for propositional inquiry.

6.

The foregoing exchange between Socrates-S and Sisyphus is interesting not only in its own right, but also in relation to Meno’s Paradox. Like Socrates-P in Meno 80e3–4, Socrates-S uses the optative, which might mean that one wouldn’t inquire into what one knows, where that doesn’t imply that one couldn’t do so. In Meno 80e2–3, however, Socrates-P clearly says that one can’t inquire either into what one knows or into what one doesn’t know. In my view, in both the Meno and Sisyphus the force of the optative is ‘couldn’t.’

See Chapter 3. G. Ryle, in ‘Many Things are Odd about our Meno’ (Paideia 5 (1976), 1–9), distinguishes between the interrogative and the relative-clause senses of ‘know what one is inquiring
a dilemma according to which, whether one does or doesn’t know what one is inquiring into, one can’t inquire into it; and so, since knowing and not knowing are exclusive and exhaustive options, inquiry is impossible (80e2–5). There is dispute about how Socrates-P replies. On what is probably the most popular view, he accepts the second horn but rejects the first horn. That is, he concedes that, if one doesn’t know what one is inquiring into, one can’t inquire about it; but he argues that, contrary to the first horn, one can inquire into something even if—indeed only if—one knows what it is. On an alternative view, which I favor, he replies by rejecting the second horn. He argues that, contrary to it, one can inquire into what one doesn’t know, indeed, even if one has no knowledge at all. For one can inquire on the basis of mere true beliefs. True beliefs fall short of knowledge; but if one has and relies on relevant true beliefs, that is sufficient for inquiry. Hence, contrary to the second horn, one can inquire into what one doesn’t know. On this view, Socrates-P doesn’t accept either a matching or a stepping-stone version of a foreknowledge principle, since he doesn’t think knowledge is needed for inquiry.

Of course, he thinks one must ‘know what one is inquiring into,’ in the sense that one must understand the question being considered. But, in his view, understanding the question being considered doesn’t require genuine knowledge, as he conceives of knowledge in the *Meno*. In 98a, he explains that to know that *p* is true is for *p* to be true, to believe that *p* is true, and to be able to explain why *p* is true. In the cases that primarily interest him, to know why something is true requires knowing the relevant real essences. For example, to know whether virtue is teachable, one needs to know the real essence of virtue. Let’s call this ‘P-knowledge,’ for knowledge as Socrates-P conceives of it in the *Meno*. Though Socrates-P thinks that, to inquire about the answer to a question, one must understand the question, he doesn’t think that, to inquire, one needs to have any P-knowledge. Since, in his view, all knowledge is P-knowledge, he doesn’t think one needs to have any knowledge in order to inquire.

Having looked briefly at Meno’s Paradox and Socrates-P’s reply, we can now ask how Sisyphus and Socrates-S reply. Initially Sisyphus seems to think that one needs to know what one is inquiring into. Hence, since he thinks inquiry is possible, he seems to accept the second horn but reject the first horn. Socrates-S, by contrast, argues that one can inquire only into what one doesn’t know. So (like...
Socrates-P, on my view) he seems to reject the second horn. Here, however, we must be careful. First, Sisyphus initially seems to accept the second horn but reject the first horn for *objectual* inquiry; whereas Socrates-S accepts the first horn but rejects the second horn for *propositional* inquiry. Secondly, though Sisyphus initially requires knowledge for inquiry, he accepts Socrates-S’s substitution of ‘in thought’ for ‘knowing.’ So in the end, he might not accept any version of a foreknowledge principle; in that sense, he too might reject the second horn of the dilemma. Thirdly, when Socrates-P argues that knowledge isn’t needed for inquiry, he means that *P*-knowledge isn’t needed. Even though Sisyphus initially says that knowledge is needed for inquiry, he doesn’t mean that *P*-knowledge is needed. Rather, he means only that one must have some knowledge as he conceives of knowledge; and he takes knowledge to be more extensive than *P*-knowledge. Nor does Socrates-S seem to have *P*-knowledge in mind when he says that one can inquire only into what one doesn’t know.

7.

Socrates-S next suggests that Sisyphus might think his argument is eristic (λόγος ἐριστικός, 388d7): that is, that he put it forward not with a view to finding out how things are (πράγματος ἐνεκα, 388d8), but only for the sake of discussing, or talking (διαλέγεσθαι).

But, Socrates-S insists, he was *not* speaking eristically. To explain why, he develops his point further.

This is quite interesting. For in the *Meno*, when Meno challenges Socrates-P’s ability to inquire, Socrates-P accuses him of introducing an eristic argument (80e2). Here, by contrast, Socrates-S says that he himself might seem to have argued eristically. He then explains why he has not done so. So whereas Meno’s Paradox is said to be eristic, the present argument is said not to be.

Further, in the *Meno* Socrates-P opposes speaking eristically and speaking dialectically (75c8–d7). Socrates-S, by contrast, equates speaking eristically and speaking for the sake of discussion, or talking (διαλέγεσθαι). Of course, διαλέγεσθαι and διαλεκτικῶτερον (Meno 75d4) are different words.

But Socrates-P uses διαλέγεσθαι in *Meno* 75d3; and the way in which he does so suggests that he

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44 Cf. διαλεχθῆναι, 387d3; see n. 18.

45 Aronadio thinks that Socrates-S claims to be reasoning eristically (Dialoghi spuri di Platone, 58). However, 388e1–2 suggests that he wants to dispel that suggestion.

46 Socrates-S explicitly says what he means by ‘eristic.’ By contrast, Socrates-P doesn’t explain what he means in saying that Meno has introduced an eristic argument. So it is possible that the two dialogues use ‘eristic’ differently. Whether or not that’s so, it’s striking that Socrates-P says that Meno has introduced an eristic argument, whereas Socrates-S claims that he himself might seem to be, but isn’t, arguing eristically.

47 Grube, however, translates both as ‘discussion.’
takes it to be equivalent to speaking dialectically rather than eristically. It is therefore surprising that the *Sisyphus* combines διαλέγεσθαι with ἐρασικός.48

Socrates-S proceeds to give three examples, which are meant to make it plausible to think that, as he has just argued, one can inquire only about what one doesn’t know. Similarly, in the *Meno*, in replying to Meno’s Paradox, Socrates-P shows how an untutored slave can inquire even though he lacks knowledge. Further, just as Socrates-P questions the slave about a geometrical question, so Socrates-S’s first two examples are geometrical; and indeed the first example recalls the *Meno*’s. Further, neither the slave nor those at issue in the *Sisyphus*’ examples know the answer to the question they’re considering. However, Socrates-P doesn’t attribute any knowledge to the slave, whereas Socrates-S says that the geometers he has in mind have some geometrical knowledge.49

In his first example, Socrates-S says that geometers know that a given line is a diagonal; correspondingly, they don’t inquire whether it is a diagonal. Rather, they inquire ‘how long it is in relation to the sides of the area it bisects,’ which is something they don’t yet know. Though Socrates-S says only that the geometers know that a given line is a diagonal but not what its length is, and so inquire only about the latter, it becomes clear later that he means that one can’t inquire whether a given line is a diagonal if one already knows that it is. That, however, doesn’t imply that one must know that a given line is a diagonal in order to inquire what its length is.50

In the second example, geometers know that something is a cube; and they inquire, by reasoning (λόγω, 388e10),51 about how to double it.52 Once again, the

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48 Indeed, Müller thinks that the *Sisyphus*’ use of διαλέγεσθαι is sufficient to show that the dialogue is not by Plato (Die Kurzdialog der Appendix Platonica, 104). He thinks that Sophistici Elenchi 11, 171b4–12 and Metaphysics Γ2, 1004b17–26 show that the *Sisyphus*’ use of διαλέγεσθαι is Aristotelian. At least the second of these passages doesn’t seem to me to be evidence for that view. See, however, De Anima I 1, where Aristotle says that ‘the starting point of every demonstration is what a thing is. Hence definitions which lead to no information about attributes or do not even help us conjecture (ἐικάσως) about them are all just dialectical and empty’ (διαλεκτικὸς ἐίρηθαι καὶ κενὸς ἀπαντεῖς) (402b25–403a2).

49 However, it’s not clear that Socrates-S takes them to have P-knowledge. If the *Sisyphus* uses ‘knowledge’ to cover cases the *Meno* would classify as mere beliefs, there might not be a substantive difference.

50 We’ve seen that Sisyphus requires one to know something (or to be in the process of thought) about the thing one is inquiring into. However, that is not a point Socrates-S now focuses on. He focuses instead on explaining that one can inquire only into what one doesn’t know, in the sense that one doesn’t know the answer to the question one is considering.

51 With ‘by reasoning,’ cf. ἐν νοήσει at 388b6, discussed above. Cf. λογισμός at *Meno* 82d4l, 98a3; λογιζεται, EN VI 9, 1142b2. I am not sure whether ‘by reasoning’ suggests that the geometers mentioned in the *Sisyphus* were trying to discover how to double the cube by relying on pure geometry rather than by mechanical means.

52 According to Plutarch (*Quaestiones convivales* 718E–F), Plato was aware of the problem of how to double the cube, and perhaps even set others to solve it. (Cf. the *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy* 5.13–24.) Archytas (428–347 bc) is said to be the first to have solved the problem; hence, given his dates, the problem had probably been solved by the time the *Sisyphus* was written. Müller wonders why the problem is nonetheless mentioned here as though it was still unsolved (Die Kurzdialog der Appendix Platonica, 61, 105–6). However, I don’t think the dialogue implies that the
geometers know what something is, in the sense that they know that a given object is a cube; and they seek to discover something else about it, which they don’t yet know. This example is also designed to explain that one can inquire only about what one doesn’t know, in the sense that one doesn’t know the answer to the question one is considering. But, as in the first example, one knows something else. One knows what F is, in the sense that one can identify it; but one doesn’t know something else about F, and that’s what one is inquiring about. However, though the geometers are said to know something else, Socrates-S doesn’t suggest that they must know what F is (at least in the sense of being able to identify it) to inquire about it. The point he is concerned to make is just that one doesn’t, or can’t, inquire what the answer to a question is if one already knows what it is. That doesn’t address the question of whether one must know something else, in order to inquire what the answer to a question is.

In the third example, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, and the rest of the cosmologists (μεταρσιολέσχας, 389a2) try to discover whether air is infinite or finite; but they don’t ask whether this is air.⁵³ Though it’s not initially expressly said, the thought again seems to be that they know that this is air, but seek to discover something else about it that they don’t know (whether it is infinite or finite).

Socrates-S’s first two examples mention geometers who know (ἐπίστανται) that something is a diagonal, or a cube. Since he mentions geometers, one might think that the knowledge at issue is P-knowledge, or at least knowledge of a demanding sort. One might also think that the fact that ἐπίστασθαι is used supports that view.⁵⁴ However, all that the geometers are said to know is that something is a diagonal, or a cube. They know what they are inquiring into in the sense that they can identify the thing—the diagonal or cube—about which they are asking a question. It isn’t implied that they know what they are inquiring into in the problem had no known solution. For all it says, it could just be that the geometers mentioned here didn’t know the solution: even if Plato, or the author of the Sisyphus, knew of the, or a, solution, it doesn’t follow that all geometers did. But it’s also true that, as Müller among others notes, the problem continued to be worked on even once Archytas’ solution was known. So perhaps the geometers at issue in the dialogue knew of Archytas’ solution but were looking for another one. All in all, the mention of the problem doesn’t provide a clue to the dialogue’s date, except insofar as it was written after the problem was known.

⁵³ Aronadio notes that this is the only place in the Platonic corpus where Anaxagoras and Empedocles are mentioned together (Dialoghi spuri di Platone, 330 n. 9). However, each is mentioned individually elsewhere in the Platonic corpus. Aristotle mentions them together in, e.g., Physics I 6. μεταρσιολόχας is another ἅραξ, though Rep. VI, 489c6 has μεταρσιολόχας. Cf. Soulilé, Platon, 65.

⁵⁴ However, though Plato reserves ἐπίστασθαι for P-knowledge in the Meno, he does not always do so. In Euthyd., 293b7–8, for example, he uses it more broadly. Similarly, though Aristotle defines a technical sense of the term in APo. I 2, on which to ἐπίστασθαι something is a significant achievement, he sometimes uses the term more broadly. He does so, for example, in replying to Meno’s Paradox in APo. I 1. (I discuss Aristotle’s reply to Meno’s Paradox in G. Fine, The Possibility of Inquiry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), ch. 6.) Hence the mere fact that the Sisyphus uses ἐπίστασθαι does not show that P-knowledge is at issue. The word can be used more broadly, and seems to be used more broadly here. However, the fact that geometers are at issue—and indeed geometers who are apparently in a position to consider how to double the cube—suggests that the relevant cognitive level is superior to that had by the slave in the Meno. However, it’s not clear that that is significant.
sense that they know the real essence of the diagonal, or of the cube. Similarly, in
the third example, Anaxagoras and the other cosmologists don’t all know the real
essence of air. For one thing, they have different, indeed incompatible, views about
what it is. Anaxagoras and the other cosmologists have a good idea of what air is;
they can identify air and have some relevant true beliefs about it. But they don’t
have P-knowledge, or knowledge of any demanding sort, of what it is. Hence
Socrates-S doesn’t seem to be suggesting (either in his own right or as something
that Sisyphus is committed to) that one must have P-knowledge, or knowledge of
a demanding sort, in order to inquire.

Indeed, it’s not even clear that knowledge, however it is conceived of here, is
said to be necessary for inquiry. For, as we’ve seen, though the geometers and
cosmologists are said to know what they are inquiring about (in the sense that they
can identify the things about which they go on to raise questions), Socrates-S
doesn’t say that they must have that, or any other, knowledge in order to inquire.
He focuses just on the point that one can inquire only into what one doesn’t know,
in the sense that one can’t yet know the answer to the question one is considering.

At 389a5–8, Socrates-S draws his conclusion: one can’t inquire into what one
knows; one can inquire only into what one doesn’t know. Hence he is reinforcing
his earlier claim that one can inquire only into what one doesn’t know. So, when
he argued that earlier, he wasn’t arguing eristically.

How exactly has he defended himself against that charge? I think the point is
this. He might have been taken to mean that one can inquire, within a given
domain, only if one has no knowledge within that domain. Not only does one not
know the answer; but neither does one know anything relevant to finding out the
answer. His three examples make it clear that that’s not what he means. Rather, in
saying that one can inquire only into what one doesn’t know, he means only that
one can’t inquire what the answer to a question is if one already knows what the
answer is. He doesn’t mean that one can’t know anything else. He is trying to
make it clear that, in saying that one can inquire only into what one doesn’t know,
he is rejecting only a matching version of a foreknowledge principle for proposi-
tional inquiry. He is not rejecting a matching version of a foreknowledge prin-
ciple for objectual inquiry. Nor is he rejecting a stepping-stone version of a
foreknowledge principle for propositional inquiry. Though he hasn’t clearly
endorsed these latter two principles, what he says is compatible with them.⁵⁵

This concludes the second part of the dialogue, which focuses on the nature
of inquiry. Sisyphus initially suggests that one can inquire into something only
if one knows something of the thing itself, but doesn’t know something else about
it. Against this view, Socrates-S argues that one can inquire only into what one

⁵⁵ This matches an unclarity in Definition 1 that we noted before: it wasn’t clear how extensive the
deliberator’s lack of knowledge is.
doesn’t know, in the sense that one can’t inquire about the answer to a question if one already knows the answer.

8.

Let’s now turn to the third and final part of the dialogue. Having argued that one can inquire only into what one doesn’t know, Socrates-S, at 389b, returns to the nature of deliberation and, in particular, to Definition 2. According to it, as we’ve seen, deliberation is a type of inquiry. Socrates-S now challenges that claim. He begins by asking what prevents those who are inquiring from discovering (εξευρεῖν) what they are inquiring into (389b5–7): that is, what prevents them from discovering, through inquiry, the answer to whatever question they are considering? He says that it is a lack of knowledge (ἀνεπιστημοσύνην, 389c1) that does so. Earlier Socrates-S argued that one can inquire only into what one doesn’t know. Now he says that lack of knowledge is an impediment to discovering through inquiry. If we put these two claims together, it seems to follow that a necessary condition for inquiry is an impediment to successful inquiry.

There is, however, an easy way to avoid this result. As we’ve seen, when Socrates-S argues that one can inquire only into what one doesn’t know, he means that one can inquire what the answer to a question is only if one doesn’t already know what the answer is. He doesn’t mean that one can inquire only if one doesn’t know anything at all, or anything relevant to discovering the answer. The geometers know that a given line is a diagonal, though they don’t know what its length is. So perhaps his present point is that if one doesn’t know something else, one can’t discover what the answer is. That is, earlier he rejected a matching version of a foreknowledge principle for propositional inquiry; but he was neutral about a stepping-stone version. Perhaps he is now suggesting that discovery through inquiry is possible if, or perhaps only if, we accept a stepping-stone version of such a principle.

It’s not clear, however, that Socrates-S makes this point about inquiry, though he seems to make it about deliberation. For he proceeds to argue that one can’t deliberate about music if one doesn’t know music; and that one can’t deliberate about military or nautical matters if one doesn’t know about them.

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56 ἐδόκει at 389b2 makes it clear that he is returning to something already said. The implicit back reference is to 388b3–5.

57 This word is used in just three Platonic dialogues: the Charmides, Republic, and Theaetetus. Nor is it used often outside of Plato; Aristotle, for example, uses it just once, in History of Animals 626b4. When lack of knowledge is at issue, ἀγνοεῖσθαι is more often used (as at Sisyphus 388e3; cf. Rep. V, 477a4; 478c2–14). It’s not always clear whether ἀγνοεῖσθαι is mere lack of knowledge (in which case it can include true belief) or whether it involves being in a cognitive blank or, at any rate, lacking all belief.

58 Gallop translates as follows: ‘do you think it’s possible for a man to deliberate about music if he has no knowledge of music, and knows neither how to play the cithara nor how to perform any other
The idea seems to be that one needs to have some knowledge within a given domain to be in a position to deliberate within that domain. If I’m deliberating about how to play a Chopin Nocturne, I need to have some relevant musical knowledge. But I don’t need to know—and, to deliberate, can’t yet know—how to play the Nocturne. So Socrates-S now seems to be endorsing a stepping-stone version of a foreknowledge principle for deliberation.⁵⁹

At least, that’s what he seems to do at 389c5–d4. But at 389d5–7 he says that one can’t deliberate about what one doesn’t know.⁶⁰ He might mean that one can’t deliberate about music if one has no musical knowledge. But he might instead mean that one can’t deliberate whether to φ unless one already knows whether to φ; one can’t deliberate about how to play the Nocturne unless one already knows how to do so. If that’s what he means, he would be endorsing a matching version of a foreknowledge principle for deliberation.

kind of music?…And what about military or nautical expertise? Would someone who knew neither of these subjects be able to deliberate at all about what he should do in either field? Would he be able to deliberate about how to command a force or captain a vessel if he lacks all knowledge of military or nautical matters? (389c5–7; emphasis added). Nothing in the Greek corresponds to ‘no’ or ‘all.’ However, it seems likely that Socrates has in mind someone who lacks all (relevant) knowledge. For example, he explains not knowing music by saying that the person knows neither how to play the cithara nor how to perform any other kind of music. This seems designed to explain what the lack of knowledge consists in; the point seems to be that the person lacks all musical knowledge. As we’ve seen (n. 22), it’s disputed whether, in the Meno, not knowing and not knowing at all (παράπαν) are meant to be equivalent. Similarly here, sometimes Socrates-S speaks of not knowing, sometimes of not knowing at all. It seems reasonable to assume that no difference is intended in the sense that, if one doesn’t know whether p is true, one doesn’t at all know whether it’s true; and, if one doesn’t have musical knowledge, one doesn’t have any musical knowledge, i.e. one doesn’t know music at all. Neither the Meno nor the Sisyphus means to suggest that not knowing something is somehow weaker than not knowing it at all.

For the view that one can deliberate within a given domain only if one has some knowledge within it, see also Alc., 106d. In EN III 3, 1112a–b, Aristotle says that we don’t deliberate about, e.g. the diagonal; for no one deliberates about eternal things, but only about what is up to us. So from Aristotle’s point of view, Socrates-S’s earlier geometrical examples involved inquiry but not deliberation (which Socrates-S also seems to think). Aristotle goes on to say that we deliberate about medicine and navigation—and one of Socrates-S’s examples of deliberation is navigation. Socrates-S also gives the example of music. Aristotle doesn’t say whether one can deliberate about music. Denyer thinks that Alk., 106–7 assumes that one can deliberate about how to spell, and about music and gymnastics, though he thinks Aristotle wouldn’t allow that any of these are matters about which one can deliberate (Plato: Alcibiades, 105–6). Aristotle does say that we can’t deliberate about how to spell; but there is a right and a wrong way to spell a word, whereas there is more room for debate about how to play a given piece of music. The reason we can’t deliberate about how to spell a word doesn’t apply to the case of music. Denyer seems to say that Aristotle says that we can deliberate about navigation but not about gymnastics. But what Aristotle says is that we deliberate about navigation μᾶλλον about gymnastics. That might mean—and indeed Denyer himself translates as though he takes it to mean—that we deliberate about navigation more than about gymnastics; and that doesn’t imply that we can’t deliberate about gymnastics at all. So far as I can tell, Aristotle’s account of deliberation allows one to deliberate about music and gymnastics.

⁵⁹ For the view that one can deliberate within a given domain only if one has some knowledge within it, see also Alc., 106d. In EN III 3, 1112a–b, Aristotle says that we don’t deliberate about, e.g. the diagonal; for no one deliberates about eternal things, but only about what is up to us. So from Aristotle’s point of view, Socrates-S’s earlier geometrical examples involved inquiry but not deliberation (which Socrates-S also seems to think). Aristotle goes on to say that we deliberate about medicine and navigation—and one of Socrates-S’s examples of deliberation is navigation. Socrates-S also gives the example of music. Aristotle doesn’t say whether one can deliberate about music. Denyer thinks that Alk., 106–7 assumes that one can deliberate about how to spell, and about music and gymnastics, though he thinks Aristotle wouldn’t allow that any of these are matters about which one can deliberate (Plato: Alcibiades, 105–6). Aristotle does say that we can’t deliberate about how to spell; but there is a right and a wrong way to spell a word, whereas there is more room for debate about how to play a given piece of music. The reason we can’t deliberate about how to spell a word doesn’t apply to the case of music. Denyer seems to say that Aristotle says that we can deliberate about navigation but not about gymnastics. But what Aristotle says is that we deliberate about navigation μᾶλλον about gymnastics. That might mean—and indeed Denyer himself translates as though he takes it to mean—that we deliberate about navigation more than about gymnastics; and that doesn’t imply that we can’t deliberate about gymnastics at all. So far as I can tell, Aristotle’s account of deliberation allows one to deliberate about music and gymnastics.

⁶⁰ He says that one can’t know (εἰδέναι) or deliberate about things one doesn’t know (ἐπισταθαι). The first clause is odd. One might have expected ‘inquire’ rather than ‘know.’ The point would then be that one can’t inquire or deliberate about matters if one has no relevant knowledge. He would then be defending a stepping-stone version of a foreknowledge principle for both inquiry and deliberation. This would still allow him to conclude that deliberation isn’t a type of inquiry, if he endorses a matching version of a foreknowledge principle for deliberation but rejects one for inquiry. Endorsing a matching version for deliberation would not be very plausible; but, as I go on to say, Socrates-S might do so.
Be that as it may, Socrates-S next returns to inquiry. He repeats the point that one can inquire (only) about things one doesn’t know (389d8). He then infers that ‘inquiry and deliberation are no longer (ἐτι) the same’ (389e1–2). The idea seems to be that, though one can inquire (only) about what one doesn’t know, one can’t deliberate about what one doesn’t know. Hence, deliberation isn’t a type of inquiry after all. Definition 2 should therefore be rejected.

The argument for this conclusion is valid if it says that one can inquire (only) if one knows neither what one is inquiring into nor anything relevant to finding the answer, whereas one can deliberate only when one knows something relevant to finding out the answer. That is, the argument is valid if it assumes a stepping-stone version of a foreknowledge principle for deliberation, but rejects one for inquiry. But no reason has been given for rejecting a stepping-stone version of a foreknowledge principle for inquiry. Even if the examples of the geometers and cosmologists don’t assume one, they are compatible with one. The argument is also valid if it says that one can’t inquire about the answer to a question if one already knows the answer, but one can deliberate about what to do only if one already knows what to do. That is, it is valid if it assumes a matching version of a foreknowledge principle for deliberation but rejects one for inquiry. A matching version has been rejected for inquiry; and we saw that 389d5–7 can be read as affirming a matching version for deliberation. But a matching version for deliberation is implausible. Moreover, even if one is asserted at 389d5–7, the preceding argument seems to defend just a stepping-stone version.

In short, the argument for the claim that deliberation is not a type of inquiry is not very good. Either it confuses a matching and a stepping-stone version of a foreknowledge principle, or else it implausibly says that, in deliberation, one already knows what to do, or else it implausibly says that, in inquiry, one can’t know anything at all. Either the author of the *Sisyphus* is confused, or has very

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61 Strictly speaking, they were never taken to be the same, i.e. identical. Rather, deliberation was taken to be a type of inquiry. What he’s now arguing (or should be arguing) isn’t that deliberation and inquiry aren’t identical or coextensive, but that deliberation isn’t even a type of inquiry.

62 Malcolm Schofield (in discussion at the B-Club in Cambridge) suggested an alternative interpretation, according to which Socrates-S’s point is that inquiry involves knowledge that something is the case, whereas deliberation involves knowing how to do something; hence deliberation isn’t a type of inquiry. It’s true that, in discussing deliberation here, Socrates-S says that one can’t deliberate about music if one doesn’t know how to perform any kind of music; and that one can’t deliberate about how to command a force if one doesn’t know στρατηγεῖν, which is naturally taken to involve know-how. But similarly in the geometrical cases, one task was to explain how to double the cube. So knowing how to do something was relevant in inquiry too. Further, on one view, knowing how to do something is a species of propositional knowledge. If Socrates-S accepts this view, he would not want to infer from the fact that deliberation requires know-how that it is not a type of knowledge that; and hence he wouldn’t want to infer on that basis that it isn’t a type of inquiry. For the view that knowing how is a species of knowing that, see J. Stanley and T. Williamson, ‘Knowing How,’ *Journal of Philosophy* 98 (2001), 411–44, at 441–4. For criticism, see I. Rumfitt, ‘Savoir Faire,’ *Journal of Philosophy* 100 (2003), 158–66. No doubt Socrates-S doesn’t have a considered position on this issue. But he doesn’t seem to me to be arguing that knowing how isn’t even a species of knowing that. He just asks what one must, or can, or
implausible views—or he means us to see the flaw in his reasoning, thereby allowing us to retain Definition 2, for all that has been said so far.

9.

Socrates-S next says (389e7–10) that Sisyphus and the Pharsalians he was talking with the other day were inquiring about things they didn’t know. For, if they knew them, they wouldn’t—and indeed couldn’t—have inquired about them. For, again, one wouldn’t—and indeed can’t—inquire about what one knows. The remark seems odd. For initially, Sisyphus and the Pharsalians were said to be deliberating; and Socrates-S has just argued that deliberation is not a type of inquiry. In that case, Sisyphus and the Pharsalians were not inquiring. Yet Socrates-S now says they were doing so. Perhaps Socrates-S means that, given that Sisyphus and the Pharsalians lacked knowledge, and given that, as he has just argued, deliberation requires knowledge, Sisyphus and the Pharsalians weren’t deliberating after all; hence, they must have been inquiring instead. If so, he is retracting his earlier claim that they were deliberating, in favor of the claim that they were inquiring.

Yet at 390a6–b2, Socrates-S asks Sisyphus why, given that he and the Pharsalians lack knowledge, they bothered to deliberate about the best course of action to follow. Shouldn’t they instead have tried to learn from someone who knows? Here Socrates-S seems to allow that Sisyphus and the Pharsalians were inquiring; and he has argued that deliberation is not a type of inquiry. Further, he now says that they were deliberating about what they didn’t know; yet he has argued that one can deliberate only if one knows. Socrates-S next says that, rather than trying to learn (sc., from those who know), Sisyphus and the Pharsalians were making things up and divining (αὐτοσχεδιάζοντες καὶ διαμαντεύομενοι) matters about which they lacked can’t, know, compatibly with being able to inquire or deliberate: can one know the answer? Must one know something else? These questions don’t seem to focus on knowing how vs. knowing that.

Next comes a passage (389e10–390a5) that I shall bypass. But, in brief, it asks whether, if one doesn’t know something, one should inquire or learn, to which the reply is that one should learn, since one can discover more quickly and easily by learning from someone who knows than by trying to discover something on one’s own when one lacks knowledge. The passage is puzzling in various ways; and it clearly is not consistent with the Meno. But pursuing these issues here would take us too far afield from our main concerns.

Perhaps it’s not clear that Socrates-S now assumes they were deliberating. He asks: ‘Why didn’t you, not concerning yourself (ἀμελήσαντες) with deliberation…’ (390a6). One might argue that ‘concerning’ introduces an opaque context, such that, though they took themselves to be deliberating, they weren’t in fact doing so. Thanks to Terry Irwin for this suggestion.
knowledge (390b2–4). This recalls Definition 1. So perhaps, having rejected Definition 2, they are now reverting to Definition 1; and, according to it, Sisyphus and the Pharsalians were deliberating. On the other hand, part of the argument against Definition 2 relies on the claim that one can deliberate only if one *has* knowledge; and that seems to conflict with Definition 1, according to which one deliberates when one *lacks* knowledge.

Perhaps we are meant to be perplexed. For at 390b5–7 Socrates-S says that Sisyphus might think that he was jesting (πεπαγμένα, 390b6) at Sisyphus’s expense, merely for the sake of talking (διαλέγεσθαι). This recalls 388d7–8, where Socrates-S says that he might seem to have been arguing eristically and to have been speaking merely for the sake of talking (διαλέγεσθαι). διαλέγεσθαι recurs here, though ἐριστικῶς does not. But the word seems to be used in the same way as before, to indicate something that is said just for the sake of talking, not with a view to ascertaining the truth. Earlier Socrates-S defended himself against the charge of arguing eristically, explaining how he was making a serious point. It’s not clear that the same is true here. For Socrates-S seems to say that, however that may be—whether Sisyphus is or is not right to think that he was speaking in jest—what he says next is serious (σκόπειν ὑπὸν σπουδῇ, 390c2). Yet what he says next moves on to a new point. So Socrates-S doesn’t seem to take a stand on whether he was speaking in jest. Nonetheless, I incline to the view that he was speaking in jest insofar as he meant to perplex us. But he did so with a serious purpose: to get us to focus on the important question of whether deliberation does, or doesn’t, involve knowledge. And that’s the issue that he turns to next.

10.

At 390c2–5, Socrates-S suggests they grant (δοθείη, 390c2) that there is such a thing as deliberation and that, contrary to what they’ve discovered, it isn’t the same as lack of knowledge, guesswork (ἐικασία), and making things up

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66 However, as we’ve seen, there is a question how extensive the lack of knowledge in Definition 1 is meant to be. Notice that they move here from not knowing to making things up and divining them. That suggests they are treating knowledge and guessing as exhaustive options, though perhaps we are meant to see that there is a tertium quid.

67 The manuscripts have ἐπιστήμη, but I accept Susemihl’s conjecture of ἀνεπιστημοσύνη in 390c4, as do Souillé, Müller, and Gallop. (Heidel, by contrast, thinks the conjecture is ‘impossible,’ though he gives no reason for that view: Pseudo-Platonic, 24 n. 3.) For this makes much better sense of the passage. For example, Socrates-S says that if deliberation is p, ‘deliberation’ is a grand name for something that is not grand (390c4–5). But if deliberation involves knowledge, it is grand. Further, if deliberation involves knowledge, it doesn’t involve making things up and divining them. Moreover, Socrates-S suggests that, if they assume that deliberation is not what it was discovered to be, there is a difference between good and bad deliberators; and the ensuing argument compares deliberation to crafts. This too assumes that they are waiving the view that deliberation doesn’t involve knowledge, which favors ‘not knowing.’ So far as sense goes, the only consideration in favor of retaining the received text is that Socrates-S says that they will now assume something contrary to what they’ve just
archers, we the example of archers \(391a\). If we wanted to distinguish between good and bad doesn’t exist. Hence, deliberation is about what doesn’t exist. One can’t hit what doesn’t exist; hence one can’t hit it well or badly.

Sisyphus reasonably asks Socrates-S what he means. In reply, Socrates-S gives the example of archers \(391a\). If we wanted to distinguish between good and bad archers, we’d see who hit the target most often. That is, there is a distinction discovered. And, at 389e1–2, they concluded that deliberation involves knowledge. However, having argued for that conclusion, at 390a6–b5 Socrates-S asks why, given that Sisyphus lacked knowledge, he was deliberating rather than learning from someone with knowledge. This assumes that deliberation doesn’t involve knowledge. And this is the passage that immediately precedes the present one. So perhaps Socrates-S has it in mind when he says they should assume something contrary to what they’ve discovered. If so, all the considerations of sense favor Susemihl’s conjecture. Of course, it doesn’t follow that his conjecture is correct. Aronadio suggests a way of defending εἰπωτήμη, though he doesn’t firmly endorse it (Diatribe spuri di Platone, 333–4, n. 13).

The comparison of deliberators to craftsmen might lead one to think that the relevant knowledge is rather high level. Similarly, when Socrates-S discussed inquiry earlier, he mentioned geometers and cosmologists, which might lead one to think that the relevant knowledge is rather high level. However, we saw that in the earlier passage, it wasn’t clear how high level the knowledge at issue was meant to be. We can tell what level of knowledge is at issue in the present passage only by exploring the argument.

90d5–e10 contains several occurrences of εἶναι. As is well known, εἶναι can be used in various ways: for example, veridically, predicatively, and existentially. Only the existential use seems relevant here. In addition to saying that what’s in the future doesn’t exist, Socrates-S also says that it doesn’t have any nature (φύσις, 390e3). Alan Code interestingly suggested to me that perhaps the author of the Sisyphus is thinking of Aristotle’s conditions on scientific inquiry in APo. II. According to Aristotle, one can inquire about—or at any rate is in a position to discover—something’s real essence only if it has one; and, if it has one, it must exist. Hence, certain sorts of inquiries or discoveries require the existence of something with a real essence. Perhaps the author of the Sisyphus mistakenly applies the conditions for this sort of highly-theoretical inquiry or discovery to deliberation. In that case, one reply to the argument would be to say that the two sorts of inquiries are governed by different conditions; in particular, deliberation doesn’t require the antecedent existence of something that has a real essence. Even if this is one flaw in the argument, there are others; and in what follows I focus on them.

Here again Sisyphus questions Socrates-S at just the right place. See n. 30.

71 391a3, 5, 6. For target (ακοπός) in Plato, see Rep. V, 452e; VII, 519c; Theaetetus 194a3–4; Laws 705e, 717a, 934b. ακοπός is not explicitly used in the Meno. But J. Day (Plato’s Meno in Focus (London: Routledge, 1994)) and D. Sedley and A. Long (Plato: Meno and Phaedo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) use ‘target’ to capture the force of προθέμενος in Meno 80d7. Cf. Sextus Empiricus, M. VII 324–5 (though the point there isn’t that there is no target, but that no one knows the target). In 326, Sextus says this point was first made by Xenophanes; he doesn’t mention Plato.

72 On what is perhaps the most natural translation of 391a4–5, it says: ‘You would correctly (κατ’ ὀρθῶν) judge the person who hits the target most often to be the winner,’ i.e. the good deliberator is the person who most often hits the target. However, ‘correctly’ might go with βᾶλλοντα rather than with κρινόν, in which case the idea is presumably that the good deliberator not only hits the target often, but also does so correctly, where that might mean that she hits the target as the result of exercising her skill: it’s not a fluke that she hits the target; it’s not e.g. because the wind caused her arrow to veer off course in such a way as to hit the target. Burges translates κατ’ ὀρθῶν as ‘in a direct way,’ saying that he can ‘scarcely understand’ what that means, though he suggests that it must mean something like ‘in the
between good and bad archers only if there is a target for them to aim at; a good archer hits it often, whereas a bad archer is not so successful. If there were no target to aim at, but archers just shot at random, there would be no distinction between good and bad archers; there would be no craft of archery; and archery would not involve knowledge.

Socrates-S next says that, if alleged deliberators don’t know what they’re deliberating about (μὴ ἐπίσταντο περὶ ὧν βουλεύοντο, 391b2–3), there is no distinction between good and bad deliberators. This seems to say that one can deliberate only if one knows what one is deliberating about: both good and bad deliberators need to know what they are deliberating about. And that seems true, in the sense that one can deliberate only if one can say what it is that one is deliberating about: only if one can answer the question ‘What are you deliberating about?’ In deliberation, one lays down a goal, and then deliberates about how to achieve it. So, to deliberate, one must be able to specify what one’s goal is. Yet, as we’ve just seen, Socrates-S has also argued that, since the goal or target is in the future, there is no goal or target to aim at. Hence we can’t know what we are deliberating about, and so there can be no distinction between good and bad deliberators. All deliberators are just shooting at random. So, if deliberation requires knowledge, there is no such thing as deliberation.

Let’s call this the ‘Sisyphus’ Targeting Objection.’ It can be formulated as follows:

1. If deliberation involves knowledge, there are, or can be, both good and bad deliberators.
2. One can deliberate well or badly only if one knows what one is deliberating about.
3. One can know what one is deliberating about only if there is a target to aim at.
4. The target, in deliberation, is in the future.
5. The future doesn’t exist.
6. Therefore there is no target to aim at.

bull’s eye,’ that is, I take it, one hits the center of the target, rather than just barely grazing it. Gallop seems to translate κατ’ ὀρθὸν as ‘successfully,’ and so he too presumably takes it to go with βάλλοντα rather than with κρίνοις. In Tim., 44b7, κατ’ ὀρθὸν follows its verb. In Laws 813d3, κατ’ ὀρθὸν πλείστοι seems to mean something like ‘sails straight on,’ which perhaps means taking the most direct course, or not being blown off course. If κατ’ ὀρθὸν goes with βάλλοντα rather than with κρίνοις, the passage makes a more interesting and plausible point. Thanks to the audience in Oxford, especially Anthony Price and Christopher Taylor, for helpful discussion of the passage.

74 Cf. EN I 2, 1094a18–26: ‘Suppose, then, that the things achievable by action have some end (τέλος) that we wish for because of itself, and because of which we wish for the other things, and that we do not choose everything because of something else—for if we do, it will go on without limit, so that desire will prove to be empty and futile. Clearly, this end will be the good, that is to say, the best good. Then surely knowledge (γνῶσις) of this good also carries great weight [for determining the best] way of life; if we know it, we are more likely, like archers who have a target (σκοπός) to aim at, to hit the right mark. If so, we should try to grasp, in outline at any rate, what the good is and what its proper science (ἐπιστήμη) or capacity is’ (trans. T. Irwin, somewhat revised). Cf. EE II 10, 1227a5–18.
7. Therefore no one can know what they are deliberating about.
8. Therefore there aren’t, and can’t be, any good or bad deliberators.
9. Therefore, deliberation doesn’t involve knowledge. (1, 8)

The *Sisyphus*’ Targeting Objection recalls Meno’s Paradox. Meno asks how, if one doesn’t at all know what one is inquiring into, one can inquire into it. For, he proceeds to ask, ‘what sort of thing, among the things you do not know, will you put forward, in order to inquire into it?’ (80d6–7) He is raising what Gary Matthews calls the ‘Targeting Objection’: one needs to have a target to aim at in inquiry; for inquiry is a goal-directed activity, not a random shot in the dark. If one doesn’t know what one is inquiring into, one doesn’t have a target to aim at and so one can’t inquire.⁷⁵

There is, however, an important difference between the Meno’s and the Sisyphus’ Targeting Objections: Meno argues that if one doesn’t know what one is inquiring into, one doesn’t have a target to aim at. The Sisyphus argues that since there is no target to aim at, one can’t know what one is deliberating about. We can, however, put these two arguments together as follows: since there is no target to aim at, one can’t know what one is deliberating about (or inquiring into); if one doesn’t know what one is deliberating about (or inquiring into), one doesn’t have a target to aim at and so can’t deliberate (or inquire).

In addition to recalling the Meno’s Targeting Objection, the Sisyphus’ Targeting Objection also recalls one of the puzzles of false belief in the *Theaetetus* (188e–189b), according to which, just as one can’t see or touch what is not, so one can’t believe what is not. False belief involves believing what is not. So there is no such thing as false belief. Similarly here: just as one can’t hit what is not, so one can’t deliberate about what is not.

But let’s leave both the Meno’s Targeting Objection and the Theaetetus’ paradox of false belief to one side,⁷⁶ in order to focus on the Sisyphus’ Targeting Objection. If the key terms are used univocally, the argument is valid. Let’s assume for now that the key terms are used univocally.⁷⁷ We can then ask whether the argument is sound. Let’s grant that 1, 4, and 5 are true.⁷⁸

What, however, about 2? Above, I suggested that it is true if it means that one can deliberate only if one can answer the question, ‘What are you deliberating about?’ However, 2 is false if it means that one needs P-knowledge in order to deliberate.⁷⁹ Indeed, it is false if knowledge goes beyond mere true belief. For one

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⁷⁶ But see n. 82.
⁷⁷ However, later I shall distinguish between there being a target and one’s having a target.
⁷⁸ However, there are views of time on which the future exists. So one might challenge 5.
⁷⁹ 2 would also be false if it said that, in order to deliberate, one already needs to know what to do. But I shall set this possible reading to one side.
can answer the question ‘What are you deliberating about?’ on the basis of true belief; knowledge isn’t needed. So either 2 is false; or else it uses ‘knowledge’ so as to include true belief. Let’s read 2 so that it is true. If we do so, the knowledge at issue is very extensive.  

We can distinguish two readings of 3:

(3a) One can know what one is deliberating about only if there is an actually existing target to aim at.

(3b) One can know what one is deliberating about only if one has a target to aim at.

Let me illustrate the difference I have in mind with an example. Suppose I’m deliberating about how to relieve world hunger. (3a) says that I can know that’s what I’m deliberating about only if the state of affairs, of world hunger’s being relieved, actually exists. (3b) says that I can know that’s what I’m deliberating about only if I can say what I’m trying to achieve: only if I can say that my aim or target or goal is to relieve world hunger. (3a) requires an actually existing target. (3b) just requires an intentional object.

(3b) is true. For, in deliberation, one considers how to achieve some goal. But (3a) is false. I can deliberate about something—and so in that sense have a target or aim or goal—even if there is no actually existing target that I am aiming at. I can have the target, or aim, or goal of relieving world hunger, even if the state of affairs of world hunger’s being relieved doesn’t exist.

For the Sisyphus’ Targeting Objection to be valid, it has to assume (3a). But, as we’ve seen, (3a) is false. If we assume (3b) instead, (3) is true. But then the argument is invalid. For it then equivocates between there being an actually existing target for one to aim at, and one’s having to have a target to aim at, where that means just that the content of one’s deliberations is appropriately goal-directed. The Sisyphus’ Targeting Objection tries to persuade us that

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80 In that case, the comparison of deliberating to exercising craft knowledge is misleading, if it suggests that knowledge is a demanding cognitive condition. Even if knowledge includes true belief, it doesn’t follow that guesswork and knowledge are exhaustive; for not all false beliefs are mere guesses. However, if knowledge includes true belief, then, in contrast to the Meno, the solution doesn’t lie in appealing to true belief as a tertium quid.

81 Cf. EN III 3: ‘we posit (θέμενοι) the end (τέλος) and consider (ἀκοποίοι) the ways and means to achieve it’ (1112b15–16). Cf. EE II 10, 1226b29–30, which, however, uses ἀκοπός rather than τέλος. We specify a target or goal, and then deliberate about how to achieve it, that is, about how to bring it into existence.

82 Similarly, to solve the Theaetetus’ puzzle of false belief, we need to point out that the impossibility of seeing or touching what is not (that is, what doesn’t exist) doesn’t impugn the possibility of believing what is not (that is, what is false). To be sure, I can’t believe, and believe nothing: beliefs must have propositional content. But that content can be false; it can also be about what doesn’t exist at least in the sense that I can believe, for example, that horses have wings, which is a belief about a state of affairs that doesn’t exist. Similarly here: deliberation must have a certain sort of propositional content; but that content doesn’t need to be about something that exists. However, a different strategy is needed to disarm
deliberating is like literal aiming: just as one can’t literally aim at a nonexistent target, so one can’t deliberate about what doesn’t exist. But though literal aiming, which is involved in archery, requires an actually existing target, the same is not true in deliberating. ‘Aiming,’ in this context, involves just goal-directed thought; it doesn’t require a literal, physical target.\textsuperscript{[93]}

We should not, then, be persuaded by the \textit{Sisyphus’} Targeting Objection. Unfortunately, however, the dialogue doesn’t suggest a solution. Instead, it ends in \textit{aporia}. We can only speculate about whether the author is genuinely troubled by it or wants us to work out the solution for ourselves; in the latter case, we can only speculate about what he thinks the correct solution is.

11.

Suppose, however, that we are wrongly persuaded by the \textit{Sisyphus’} Targeting Objection. We then have two choices: either, since deliberation requires knowledge, there is no such thing as deliberation; or else there is such a thing as deliberation, but it doesn’t involve knowledge. Rather, it is mere guesswork. If, however, we are persuaded by the Targeting Objection, but are also troubled by the view the deliberation is mere guesswork, we will have to conclude that deliberation is impossible, whether or not it requires knowledge. We then arrive at the \textit{Sisyphus’} Paradox of Deliberation which, I suggest, structures the dialogue:

the Meno’s Targeting Objection. Meno’s worry is that if one is in a cognitive blank about something, one can’t inquire into it. He’s right to think that. However, Socrates-P replies by pointing out that, though they don’t know what they are inquiring into, neither are they in a cognitive blank about it. Rather, they have relevant true beliefs. Meno’s mistake is to think that not knowing something is tantamount to being in a cognitive blank about it; Socrates-P points out that having mere true beliefs that fall short of knowledge is another way of not knowing something. But, if one has and relies on suitable true beliefs, one can have a target to aim at; and that’s the condition they are in. Unlike the \textit{Sisyphus}, the \textit{Meno} doesn’t challenge the existence of a target. Rather, it just argues that it isn’t available to one who doesn’t know. Distinguishing ways of not knowing—being in a cognitive blank, having mere true belief—responds to Meno’s worry. But it doesn’t enable one to dissolve the \textit{Sisyphus’} Targeting Objection. To do that, we need to note that a target doesn’t need to exist in the sense it assumes.

\textsuperscript{[93]} Similarly, Taylor says that appealing to the notion of weighing, which is used in the \textit{Protagoras} to explain the measuring art as a model of deliberation, ‘is highly misleading’ C. C. W. (trans. and notes) (Taylor, \textit{Plato: Protagoras} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 196). For one weighs actual objects, but deliberates about prospective or hypothetical states of affairs, which one can’t literally weigh. Rather, deliberation involves ‘something much more complicated, involving hypotheses of the likely effects of possible actions, and some sort of imaginative comparison of the various effects thus envisaged’ (Taylor, \textit{Plato: Protagoras}).

According to another possible interpretation, the point is that we can’t hit or miss the target in deliberation, because doing so would involve having the truth, or a falsehood, about the future; yet there are no truths or falsehoods about the future, and so we can’t hit or miss it. It’s often thought that Aristotle, in for example \emph{De Interpretatione} 9, argues that there are no truths or falsehoods about the future, and uses that point to argue that there is no deliberation. I don’t myself favor that interpretation of \textit{Int.}, 9; but whether or not it is correct, the author of the \textit{Sisyphus} might be making that point (whether or not he knew \textit{Int.}, 9). Thanks here to Carlo Natali and Anthony Price. However, the argument seems to me to focus just on existence; it tries to persuade us that deliberating is like literal hitting, just as the \textit{Theaetetus’} puzzle about false belief tries to persuade us that believing is like perceiving. In both cases, the point is just that the relevant object must exist.
1. Deliberation either does, or does not, require knowledge.

2. If deliberation requires knowledge, deliberation is impossible.

3. If deliberation doesn’t require knowledge, it is impossible.

4. Therefore, deliberation is impossible.

The parallelism with Meno’s Paradox is unmistakable. We’ve glanced at Meno’s Paradox. But what should we say about the Sisyphus’ Paradox of Deliberation?

Considered on its own, in the abstract, it can be read in a variety of ways. But, on one reading, it is a valid argument: 1 is an instance of the Law of the Excluded Middle; 2 and 3 then argue that, whichever of its exclusive and exhaustive options we favor, deliberation is impossible.⁸⁴ Let’s suppose that is how we should read the argument. In that case, 1 is true; hence, we can avoid the conclusion only if we reject 2 or 3. Which if either premise we should reject depends on how knowing and not knowing are understood: though 1 tells us that they are exclusive and exhaustive options, it doesn’t tell us what either consists in. We’ve seen, however, that (in contrast to Socrates-P in the Meno) the dialogue seems to take knowledge to be quite extensive. On that assumption, 2 is false. To be sure, its antecedent is true: deliberation does require knowledge, in the sense that one can deliberate only if one knows what one is deliberating about—only, that is, if one can answer the question ‘What are you deliberating about?’ However, that sort of knowledge is attainable. Contrary to the Targeting Objection, we can have it even if the target we are aiming at doesn’t exist. So, though the antecedent of 2 is true, its conditional is false.⁸⁵

If the only alternative to knowing is guesswork, then 3 is true.⁸⁶ For, as Aristotle says, deliberation is not a matter of mere guesswork. Though one doesn’t yet know what to do, one knows, or has true beliefs, or at least some rationally grounded

⁸⁴ In my view, Meno’s Paradox is also of this form, mutatis mutandis. But there is dispute about precisely how to formulate it. On one account, for example, it equivocates. For discussion of this issue, see, e.g. Matthews, Socratic Perplexity, 61–2.

⁸⁵ If, however, 2 means that, if one already knows what to do, one can’t deliberate, then it is true. As we’ve seen, the argument for the claim that deliberation is not a type of inquiry might at one point assume that deliberation requires one to know what to do. If we understand 2 in this way, though, we should reject 3. For, if the argument is to remain valid, 3 would then have to mean that if one doesn’t know what to do, one can’t deliberate. But that is false. (At least, it’s false if, though one doesn’t know what to do, neither is one totally clueless or in a complete cognitive blank; rather one has and relies on relevant beliefs. In this case, however, ‘not knowing’ covers more than guessing.)

Another possibility is to say that knowledge, in the Paradox of Deliberation, is high level. In that case, 2 is still false. For, even if one has some high-level knowledge, one can deliberate. (However, if one has high-level knowledge of what to do, one can’t deliberate about what to do.) And 3 is also false, since even if one doesn’t have high-level knowledge, either about what to do or about anything else, one can deliberate. This would parallel Socrates-P’s reply to Meno’s Paradox: even if one doesn’t have P-knowledge, one can inquire.

There are also other possible readings of 2 and 3—ones that parallel possible readings of the corresponding premises in Meno’s Paradox. But on all of them, the Paradox of Deliberation either equivocates (if we read it in such a way that all the premises are true) or else has at least one false premise. Not surprisingly, the same is true of Meno’s Paradox.

⁸⁶ However, perhaps it is not the only alternative. But if knowledge is as extensive as I’ve suggested it seems to be here, no intermediary would seem to be relevant here.
beliefs, about matters that are relevant to what to do; and relying on them enables one to deliberate about what the best thing to do is.

We can therefore avoid the Paradox of Deliberation by rejecting its second premise. We can do that by rejecting Definition 1 and endorsing Definition 2—and so something very like Aristotle’s account of deliberation.

12.

The *Sisyphus* is a fascinating attempt to apply Meno’s Paradox to the nature of deliberation. And, at some stages, the dialogue seems quite clear and penetrating. For example, it initially seems clear about the difference between a matching and a stepping-stone version of a foreknowledge principle; and it argues plausibly that propositional inquiry is incompatible with the first but not with the second. Definition 2 plausibly suggests that deliberation is a type of inquiry in which, though one doesn’t yet know what to do, one is in thought—one is considering what to do in the light of relevant considerations. But the later parts of the dialogue seem confused: after a strong beginning, the dialogue goes downhill. For example, its argument for the claim that deliberation is not, after all, a type of inquiry either confuses a matching with a stepping-stone version of a foreknowledge principle or else has implausible views about which if either of them is required for deliberation or inquiry. Nor is the Targeting Objection successful. Having proposed plausible views, the dialogue argues badly against them. Either the author of the *Sisyphus* didn’t see that the dialogue has a good account of deliberation (Definition 2) that survives the arguments against it; or else he means us to see through those arguments and extract that account. Whichever is the case, just as Meno’s Paradox can be answered, so too the *Sisyphus*’ Paradox of Deliberation can be answered. But just as we can solve Meno’s Paradox only by thinking hard about the nature of knowledge and inquiry, so we can solve the *Sisyphus*’ Paradox of Deliberation only if we think hard about the nature of knowledge, inquiry, and deliberation.⑧⁷

⑧⁷ Thanks to David Bronstein, Lesley Brown, Terry Irwin, and Karen Nielsen for helpful discussion and written comments; to Ravi Sharma, my commentator when I presented an earlier version at Boston University under the auspices of BACAP; to an anonymous referee; to audiences at Boston University, the B-Club in Cambridge, Ca’Foscari in Venice, The Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome, and the Oxford Workshop in Ancient Philosophy; to Ian Hensley for editing the paper so as to conform to BACAP’s style requirements; and to Professor Carl Werner Müller for kindly sending me a copy of his very-valuable book, *Die Kurzdialoge der Appendix Platonica*. 
PART II

ARISTOTLE
Aristotle on Knowledge

1.

In *Posterior Analytics* (APo.) 1.2, Aristotle gives a definition of what it is to *epistasthai* something. In this chapter, I explore some features of this definition, along with some related issues about Aristotle’s epistemology in the APo., both in their own right and as they compare with Plato’s views in the *Meno*.

Before turning to the *APo.*, let me set the stage by saying something brief about the *Meno*.¹ In *Meno* 97aff., Socrates says that *epistêmê* and true belief have two things in common: both imply truth, and both imply belief. Meno then asks why knowledge is more highly prized, and Socrates says it is because knowledge involves not just truth and belief, but also being bound by *aitias logismos* (98a). That is, one has *epistêmê* that p if and only if (1) p is true; (2) one believes that p; and (3) one can explain why p is true.

On a familiar view of knowledge, knowledge is a truth-entailing cognitive condition that implies belief, but also something more than that.² I shall assume this conception of knowledge here. Given this account of knowledge, Plato, in defining *epistêmê*, is defining knowledge. Indeed, even if we understand knowledge more narrowly, as justified true belief, Plato is defining knowledge. (1) and (2) state the truth and belief conditions. (3) specifies the sort of justification Plato thinks is needed for turning true belief into knowledge. In his view, not any old justification will do; rather, the justification must explain why p is true. That is, I am justified in believing that p, in the way needed for knowing that p, only if I can explain why p is true.³

¹ I provide a more detailed discussion in Chapter 3.
² See e.g. D. Armstrong, *Belief, Truth and Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 137. He traces this ‘classic’ conception of knowledge to the *Meno* (though he miscites 97–8 as 87–8). Those who accept this broad account of knowledge differ among themselves about precisely how knowledge goes beyond true belief. But in doing so, they aren’t disagreeing about the sense of the term. Whether it’s plausible to say that knowledge is a species of, or even implies, belief depends, among other things, on how belief is conceived, an issue I consider below. The account of knowledge just described is an account of propositional knowledge: of what it is to know that something is so; and it will be my focus here. (Elsewhere in this volume, I generally assume a somewhat different account of knowledge.)
³ One might argue that if not any old justification will do, then Plato has not offered a version of the justified-true-belief account of knowledge, but, rather, a version of the view that knowledge is either
In defining epistêmê, Plato is defining knowledge as such, not just a favored kind of knowledge. In his view, any cognitive condition that fails to completely satisfy all three conditions is at best true belief; he doesn’t countenance any lower-grade sort of knowledge. Hence, at least from Meno 85c on, he uses epistasthai and its cognates interchangeably with eidenai, phronein, noein, sophia, and their cognates. If, in defining epistêmê, he were defining just one kind of knowledge, we might have expected him to use some of these other cognitive words for the other kinds of knowledge. Instead, he uses them all interchangeably with epistêmê, and contrasts them all with true belief. Hence in Plato’s view, one can know that p is true only if one knows why p is true; all knowledge requires a grasp of explanation. This is a demanding conception of knowledge, though it is worth remarking that some people, even nowadays, have a demanding conception of knowledge. But it is not as demanding as it might seem to be. At least, whatever may be true elsewhere, in the Meno Plato has a broad conception of what can be known. For example, he thinks one can know who Meno is, and the way to Larissa.

It is not uncontroversial to say that he uses these words interchangeably here. In A Commentary on Plato’s Meno (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), for example, J. Klein argues that phronêsis is a kind of epistêmê (215), not epistêmê as such. If Klein were right, Plato would be defining the genus, while allowing that it has species. But Klein doesn’t think phronêsis is weaker than epistêmê, which is the main point at issue here.

For example, in The Structure of Empirical Knowledge (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), L. BonJour articulates a conception of knowledge on which it results that ‘typical commonsense cases of knowledge are only loose approximations to an epistemic ideal which is seldom if ever fully realized’ (152–3).

One might suggest that knowing who Meno is and the way to Larissa are not instances of propositional knowledge, in which case, if they are instances of genuine knowledge, Plato’s definition of epistêmê is not a definition of knowledge as such, but just of one kind of knowledge, namely propositional knowledge. Thanks to Christopher Shields here. At 71b5, however, I take Plato to be discussing not knowing Meno, but knowing who Meno is, which is a straightforward case of propositional knowledge: to know who Meno is is to know that he is so-and-so. And I take it that to know the way to Larissa is to know that this is the way, or the best way, to get there. On this view, knowing who Meno is and knowing the way to Larissa are instances of propositional knowledge. Whether or not (as I believe) Plato takes all knowledge to be propositional, he at least thinks all knowledge requires propositional knowledge. Cf. n. 2 and n. 8.

Even if, as is sometimes argued, Plato mentions who Meno is and the way to Larissa as analogies rather than as literal examples of things one can know, his definition of knowledge leaves open the possibility that one can know sensible particulars. See Chapter 3.
I now turn to the APo. At the beginning of 1.2, Aristotle says:⁷

We think we epistasthai a thing without qualification (haplōs) (and not in the sophistical, incidental (kata sumbebēkos) way) whenever we think we ginôskein the explanation (aitia) because of which the thing is, ginôskein that it is the explanation of that thing, and ginôskein that it cannot be otherwise.

We may paraphrase this as follows:⁸

A epistatai haplōs X = df. (1) A ginôskei Y, which is the explanation of X, (2) A ginôskei that Y is the explanation of X, and (3) A ginôskei that X is necessary.

⁷ My translations of the APo. are generally drawn from those in T. Irwin and G. Fine, Aristotle: Selections (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995). I also often rely on the translations in J. Barnes, Aristotle: Posterior Analytics (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975 = 1st ed.; 1994 = 2nd ed.). I refer to the first edition as ‘B1’ and to the second edition as ‘B2.’ References to both versions are generally given in the text as (e.g.) B1, 78 or B2, 85. One advantage of the translation in B1 over that in B2 is that it uses a different cognitive word for each of Aristotle’s cognitive words, whereas B2 uses ‘know’ promiscuously (B2, 82).

In the definiendum, Aristotle uses the verb (epistasthai); elsewhere he uses the noun (epistêmê, 71a15). The noun can be used both for a cognitive condition (that is, for the state of the person who has epistêmê) and for its content (that is, for what one has epistêmê of). The fact that Aristotle uses the verb in the definiendum makes it clear that he is defining the cognitive condition; and it is my focus here. Aristotle introduces the definition as what ‘we think’ it is to epistasthai something; but he goes on to endorse the view that to epistasthai something should be so understood. He doesn’t explicitly say he’s defining to epistasthai. Whether or not he would count what he says as a definition in his strict sense, he at least specifies what he seems to view as necessary and sufficient conditions for one to epistasthai something. Barnes takes Aristotle to be offering a definition: see B1, 96; B2, 90.

⁸ My paraphrase basically follows Barnes’s (B1, 97; B2, 91), though mine has three clauses whereas his has two. Nor have I translated epistathai or ginôskein. Barnes translates epistêmê as ‘understanding,’ and epistathai as ‘to understand.’ It’s been argued that these are better translations than ‘knowledge’ and ‘to know,’ on the ground that Aristotle is not discussing knowledge (at least, not as that notion is understood nowadays), but a different phenomenon, understanding. I discuss this view below. As B2, 82, makes clear, this is not Barnes’s view; rather, he uses ‘understanding’ and ‘to understand’ just to indicate when epistêmê and epistathai are being used. Epistêmê is also sometimes translated as ‘scientific knowledge.’ I think this translation is misleading, not because ‘knowledge’ is, but because epistêmê ranges outside the bounds of science, as science is understood nowadays. In B1, Barnes translates ginôskein as ‘to be aware’; in B2, he translates it as ‘to know.’ I ask later how we should understand ginôskein and its cognates in the passages that are relevant here.

I have followed Barnes in using ‘X’ and ‘Y,’ since Aristotle speaks not only of having epistêmê that and why something is so, but also of having epistêmê of e.g. universals. However, as Barnes notes, the rest of 1.2 makes it clear that epistêmê ‘is, at least principally, a species of propositional knowledge’ (B1, 97); and sometimes (as in speaking of having epistêmê of the conclusions of demonstrations) propositions are clearly at issue. It’s also worth noting that even if we take the definiendum to be ‘to epistathai X,’ where substituends for X include but are not restricted to propositions, the definiens is phrased in terms of ginôskein that various things are so. So perhaps Aristotle thinks that knowledge of things is a kind of propositional knowledge: to know a universal, for example, is to know that it is such and so. Whether or not that is his view, he clearly thinks that knowing things requires knowing propositions about them. Be that as it may, my focus here will be on Aristotle’s views about propositional knowledge. Cf. n. 6.
Let’s ask first about the force of the adverb, haplōs (without qualification, simpliciter). At least three interpretations are in principle possible. Here are two of them:

A. haplōs indicates that Aristotle is defining just an ideal kind of epistêmê.⁹

B. haplōs indicates that Aristotle is defining epistêmê as such; anything that falls short of epistêmê as so defined isn’t genuine epistêmê, but at best approximates to it.¹⁰

Sometimes but not always being an ideal F and being an F strictly speaking diverge. Suppose that an ideal day is a sunny day with low humidity and in the low 70s. It doesn’t follow that a cold, rainy day just approximates to being a day, or isn’t a day strictly or properly speaking or in the same sense of the term. It’s just as much a day, in the same sense of the term, as a sunny day; it just isn’t as nice. In this case, being an ideal F and being an F strictly speaking—being a genuine F—are not coextensive. But sometimes they are coextensive. If something isn’t ideally straight, it isn’t strictly speaking straight; it just approximates to being straight.¹¹

If epistêmê functions like ‘straight,’ we need not choose between (A) and (B). At least, they would yield the same verdict about the scope of epistêmê: only ideal epistêmê is genuine epistêmê; there is no genuine epistêmê that falls short of the ideal. But if epistêmê functions like ‘day,’ the two views would yield different verdicts. In this case, we would have to choose between saying that (A) Aristotle is defining just ideal epistêmê, leaving open the possibility that there are other cases of genuine epistêmê that fall short of the ideal, and (B) Aristotle is defining all the epistêmê there is—epistêmê as such, not just a special kind of epistêmê—and anything that fails to satisfy the definition fully isn’t epistêmê, but at best approximates to it. In what follows, I shall understand the contrast between (A) and (B) in this way, as exclusive alternatives.

⁹ M. F. Burnyeat may favor this view. For though he doesn’t discuss the adverb in detail, he argues that 1.2 defines just a favored kind of epistêmê rather than epistêmê as such. See his ‘Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge,’ in E. Berti (ed.), Aristotle on Science: The 'Posterior Analytics' (Padua: Antenore, 1981), 97–139, at e.g. 100–1.

¹⁰ This may be Barnes’s view. For he says (B1, 90) that Aristotle here ‘offers an explicit definition of epistasthai’ (i.e. as such, not just of a favored kind). Cf. B1, 149 (‘Cases of the second type…official one’). B1, 96, first says that the definendum is ‘understanding simpliciter’ (i.e. epistêmê haplōs). But Barnes then goes on to speak of ‘the definition of understanding’ (i.e. of epistêmê), which again suggests that he takes Aristotle to be defining epistêmê as such, not just a special kind of epistêmê. Cf. B2, 89–92.

¹¹ For this view, see, for example, P. Unger, Philosophical Relativity (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). On an alternative view, predicates like ‘straight’ are relative to what they qualify. A geometrical line, for example, admits of no deviation; but a road can be genuinely straight for a road (not merely approximately straight) even if it deviates a bit.
There is also a third possibility:\textsuperscript{12}

C. Aristotle is defining \textit{epistêmê} as such, but in terms of paradigmatic \textit{epistêmê}.

That is, perhaps, in defining what it is to \textit{epistasthai} something without qualification, he means that there is both paradigmatic and non-paradigmatic \textit{epistêmê}, both of which count as genuine \textit{epistêmê} in a single sense of the term. Only paradigmatic \textit{epistêmê} satisfies the definition fully. But something can count as genuine \textit{epistêmê}, in the same sense of the term, even if it doesn’t fully satisfy the definition, so long as it comes sufficiently close to doing so. In this case, the definition would be implicitly disjunctive: something counts as a case of \textit{epistêmê} only if it either satisfies the definition fully, or comes sufficiently close to doing so.

I am not sure which of these three views is correct. In defense of (A) and (C), one might note that Aristotle sometimes uses \textit{epistêmê} in a way that falls short of his definition in 1.2.\textsuperscript{13} For example, he says that one can \textit{epistasthai hoti} \textit{p} without grasping why \textit{p} is true.\textsuperscript{14} If one can \textit{epistasthai} that \textit{p} is true without grasping why it is true, one’s cognitive condition doesn’t fully satisfy the definition of \textit{epistêmê} given in 1.2. Hence, the definition doesn’t exhaust the scope of \textit{epistêmê} as such.

I am, however, inclined to favor (B): Aristotle is defining \textit{epistêmê} as such, and thinks that anything that fails fully to satisfy the definition isn’t genuine \textit{epistêmê}; the broader uses of the term are loose and don’t indicate that there are further cases of genuine \textit{epistêmê} that fall short of \textit{epistêmê} as defined in 1.2. One virtue of this interpretation is that it is clear and straightforward. Nor does Aristotle ever systematically spell out the conditions for being genuine but non-paradigmatic \textit{epistêmê}, as one might expect him to do if (A) or (C) were correct. And though he

\textsuperscript{12} In N. Kretzmann and E. Stump (eds.), \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 160–95, MacDonald attributes something like this view to Aquinas, in his Commentary on the \textit{Posterior Analytics}.

Christopher Taylor has suggested to me that Aristotle thinks \textit{epistêmê} functions like ‘good’ or ‘healthy,’ such that \textit{epistêmê haplôs} contrasts with \textit{epistêmê} subject to some qualification, with the implication that understanding the former is central for understanding the concept, but that both are genuine \textit{epistêmê}. This might be a version of (C). Alternatively, it might make \textit{epistêmê} a case of focal connection, such that \textit{epistêmê haplôs} is the focal case of \textit{epistêmê}, and other cases count as \textit{epistêmê} in different senses of the term that are, however, in some way systematically related to the focal case. This would be a version of (A).

\textsuperscript{13} He also sometimes uses \textit{epistêmê} for our grasp of first principles, which (in my view) he takes to be a higher-level cognitive condition than \textit{epistêmê} as defined in 1.2. See n. 16. However that may be, in this chapter, I focus on the question of whether Aristotle recognizes any genuine \textit{epistêmê}, or knowledge, that falls short of \textit{epistêmê} as it is defined in 1.2. As I explain below, asking about the scope of \textit{epistêmê} and asking about the scope of knowledge may not come to the same thing.

\textsuperscript{14} 71a27–9, 71b26, 75a14, 78a22, 89a21, 89a23–4. These passages are cited by Burnyeat in ‘Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge,’ 105.
sometimes uses *epistêmê* in a way that falls short of the definition in 1.2, he also shows some reluctance in doing so.¹⁵

It is also a count against (A) and (C) that Aristotle often uses *epistêmê* without the adverb, even when *epistêmê* as defined in 1.2 is at issue; indeed he does so even within 1.2. At 71b19–20 he says: ‘if, then, *to epistasthai* is the sort of thing we assumed it is . . . ’ Since all he’s discussed is *epistêmê* haplòs, this suggests that *epistêmê* haplòs and *epistêmê* are one and the same. It would be misleading to drop the adverb, if it indicated that 1.2 is defining just one kind of *epistêmê*.¹⁶

I shall, at any rate, assume in what follows that (B) is correct. On this view, Aristotle is defining *epistêmê* as such, rather than just a special kind of *epistêmê*; and he thinks that anything that falls short of the definition fails to be genuine *epistêmê*. If this assumption is wrong, many of the claims that follow would need to be rephrased. But my main arguments would be unaffected.

3.

Suppose, then, that in 1.2 Aristotle is defining *epistêmê* as such, and thinks that anything that fails fully to satisfy his definition isn’t genuine *epistêmê*. What should we infer about his views about knowledge? At least three answers have been proposed:¹⁷

¹⁵ For example, he begins 2.1 by saying: ‘The things we seek are equal in number to the things we *epistametha*. We seek four things: the that (*to hoti*), the reason why (*to díhoti*), if something is, and what it is’ (89b23–5). Here he indicates that one can *epistasthai* that something is, even if one doesn’t *epistasthai* why it is. But allowing this violates the definition of *epistêmê* given in 1.2. So one might think this favors (A) or (C). However, after this initial occurrence of *epistasthai*, Aristotle drops the term in favor of *eidēnai* (89b28, 29, 30) and *gignôskein* (34). This perhaps suggests that the initial use of *epistasthai* in 2.1 is loose. (I discuss *eidēnai* and *gignôskein* below.)

B1, 90 (B2, 82), says that ‘[r]egularly, but not invariably, [Aristotle] uses *epistasthai* in accordance with this definition’ (i.e. in 1.2); cf. B1, 149. According to B2, 91, however, ‘Aristotle himself frequently and unapologetically employs these words [*epistêmê* and *epistasthai*] in ways which fall outside his definition.’

¹⁶ It’s true that the sentence just quoted continues as follows: ‘demonstrative *epistêmê* must also be derived from things that are true, primary, immediate . . . ’ Mentioning demonstrative *epistêmê*, rather than just *epistêmê*, may make it sound as though *epistêmê* haplòs (which is demonstrative *epistêmê*) is just a species of *epistêmê*. Moreover, in 71b16–17 Aristotle says he’ll ask later whether there is another *tropos*, kind, of *epistêmê*. This too might seem to suggest that he doesn’t take himself to be defining *epistêmê* as such: for if he were doing so, the question whether there is another kind of *epistêmê* would already have been settled in the negative. However, the only other alleged sort of *epistêmê* that Aristotle has in mind here is the grasp we can have of first principles. And when he turns to this question later, in 2.19, he doesn’t count this as *epistêmê*. At 100b15–17 he calls the state that grasps first principles nous, not *epistêmê*. This suggests that when he is being careful, he restricts *epistêmê* to what satisfies the definition given in 1.2; other uses of the term are loose.

¹⁷ M. Frede, in ‘Aristotle’s Rationalism,’ in M. Frede and G. Striker (eds.), *Rationality in Greek Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), ch. 5, favors 1. For he equates *epistêmê* as defined in 1.2 with ‘all knowledge, properly speaking’ (157), ‘strictly speaking’ (158), and with ‘true knowledge’ (159). This suggests that anything that falls short of *epistêmê* as defined in 1.2 isn’t genuine knowledge. He does say
1. Epistêmê as defined in 1.2 is all the knowledge there is; anything that falls short of epistêmê as defined in 1.2 isn’t knowledge—at least, not in the same sense of the term.

2. Epistêmê as defined in 1.2 is just an ideal kind of knowledge; there is also genuine knowledge, in the same sense of the term ‘knowledge,’ that falls short of epistêmê as so defined.

3. Epistêmê as defined in 1.2 isn’t knowledge—at least, not as knowledge is conceived of nowadays; rather, it’s understanding.

One might think that if (as I’ve suggested) Aristotle is defining epistêmê as such, rather than just an ideal kind of epistêmê, 1 follows. However, that inference would be too quick. Greek has a rich cognitive vocabulary. Perhaps Aristotle uses other cognitive words, such as eidenai or gignôskein and their cognates, for knowledge that falls short of epistêmê.¹⁸

that Aristotle also recognizes ‘experiential knowledge’; but he says that this is knowledge in ‘a debased sense of “knowledge”’ (157–8), which suggests that it’s knowledge only in a different sense of the term.

B2, 92, also seems to favor 1. For here Barnes says that Aristotle’s definition of epistêmê sets the bar for knowledge very high, and he asks what Aristotle would say about what we would view as lower-level cases of knowledge, e.g. of contingent facts. He replies that Aristotle thinks such ‘knowledge’ counts as knowledge ‘only by courtesy and in so far as it approximates to knowledge proper’: if it’s knowledge only by courtesy, it isn’t really knowledge.

C. C. W. Taylor, ‘Aristotle’s Epistemology,’ in S. Everson (ed.), Companions to Ancient Thought 1: Epistemology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), ch. 6, favors 2; for he talks about different kinds (118), types (122), and sorts (122) of knowledge, where knowledge is taken to be a non-accidental grasp of the truth (118). However, at one point he says that nous plus epistêmê (i.e. as defined in 1.2) is ‘an ideal type of knowledge, knowledge strictly or properly speaking, to which other kinds of knowledge can be seen as approximating’ (121–2). It’s one thing to speak of an ideal type or kind of knowledge, and quite another to speak of knowledge strictly or properly speaking. If nous plus epistêmê are ideal types or kinds of knowledge, there is room for further types or kinds of knowledge in the same sense of the term. But if they are all the knowledge there is ‘strictly or properly speaking,’ then other alleged cases of knowledge would be knowledge only in a different sense of the term. It’s one thing, in other words, to recognize different kinds of knowledge, and another to recognize different senses of the term. Horses and pigs are different kinds of animals, in a single sense of the term ‘animal’; river banks and financial banks are banks in different senses of the term ‘bank.’

In ‘Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge,’ Burnyeat seems tempted by 2 and 3. On 100–1, he suggests that epistêmê as defined in 1.2 is knowledge, though just of a favored kind. But on 101–2, he says that epistêmê is not knowledge ‘as knowledge is standardly conceived in philosophy’; and on 106, he says that epistêmê is ‘much closer to understanding than to the concept which contrasts with mere belief and which philosophers analyze in terms of justification.’ This suggests 3.

¹⁸ If, as I think, he uses eidenai more broadly than epistasthai, then he differs from Plato in the Meno. For as I noted in section 1, at least from 85c on, Plato uses epistasthai and eidenai interchangeably, for the cognitive condition he defines in 98a. It’s more difficult to say how Plato uses gignôskein in the Meno. But at least sometimes, as at 82b9, he seems to me to use it for mere true belief.

B1, 90, says that Aristotle ‘tacitly treats eidenai as a synonym’ for epistasthai. By contrast, J. L. Ackrill remarks that ‘nobody will claim that Aristotle in general makes a firm distinction between eidenai and epistasthai. Nevertheless the two terms have two different resonances, epistasthai being more suggestive of systematic knowledge, eidenai hinting at immediate experience’ (Ackrill, ‘Aristotle’s Theory of Definition: Some Questions on Posterior Analytics II 8–10,’ in E. Berti (ed.), Aristotle on Science: The ‘Posterior Analytics,’ (Padua: Antenore, 1981) 359–84, at 366). While I don’t think Aristotle in the APo. uses eidenai to hint at immediate experience, I agree that he sometimes uses it more broadly than he generally uses epistasthai, which is the crucial point Ackrill wants to make.
To decide between 1, 2, and 3, we need an account of knowledge. I’ve already said that, for the purposes of this chapter, I shall take knowledge to be a truth-entailing cognitive condition that implies belief, but that goes beyond true belief. Given this conception of knowledge, we can ask the following question: when Aristotle talks about *epistêmê*, is he talking about a truth-entailing cognitive condition that implies, but goes beyond, true belief?¹ If so, he is talking about knowledge (either as such or of a favored kind) not only in Plato’s sense but also in a familiar contemporary sense.²

4.

Let’s ask first whether Aristotle takes *epistêmê* to imply truth and belief.

Interestingly enough, his definition, unlike Plato’s, doesn’t explicitly mention truth. But he plainly takes his definition of *epistêmê* to imply that *epistêmê* is truth-entailing. For he proceeds to say that it follows from his definition that ‘demonstrative *epistêmê* must be derived from things that are true’ (71b19–21). If the premises of demonstrative *epistêmê* must be true, then the conclusions of demonstrations must also be true. Indeed, he seems to go on to say this explicitly: ‘<the conclusions of demonstrations> must be true, then, because we cannot have *epistêmê* of what is not <true> (for example, that the diagonal is commensurate)’ (71b25–6).²¹ In *APo*. 2.19, 100b5–9, he explicitly says that *epistêmê* and *nous* are always true.²²

Just as Aristotle’s definition of *epistêmê* doesn’t explicitly mention truth, neither does it explicitly mention belief; this again contrasts with Plato’s definition of *epistêmê* in the *Meno*. But just as Aristotle assumes, and says elsewhere, that *epistêmê* is truth entailing, so he might assume, and say elsewhere, that *epistêmê* is a species of, or implies, belief.

Before asking whether he does so, we need to clarify the relevant sense of ‘belief.’ On the view I favor, to believe that p is to take p to be true. That, at any

¹ I raise the same question below about Aristotle’s use of *eidênai* and *gignôskein*.
² If he’s talking about knowledge as such, option 1 above is correct. If he’s talking about a favored kind of knowledge, option 2 is correct. For now, I shall consider 1 and 2 together, in order to distinguish them both from 3.
²¹ B1, 98–9 (B2, 94–5), thinks Aristotle is still saying just that the *premises* of demonstrations must be true. Even if he is right, that wouldn’t undermine the claim that Aristotle takes *epistêmê* to be truth-entailing. For, again, if the premises of demonstrations must be true, their conclusions must also be true.

Even if Aristotle thinks one can have *epistêmê* of more than the conclusions of demonstrations (including non-propositional items), still, he thinks one can have *epistêmê* only if one properly grasps the conclusion of a demonstration as such; and so in that sense, since demonstrative *epistêmê* is truth-entailing, so too is all *epistêmê*.
²² Cf. *EN* 6.3, 1141a3–5, where he again says that *epistêmê* is truth entailing.
rate, is a familiar account of belief, and I think it’s the one generally assumed by
those who take knowledge to be a species of, or to imply, belief.²³

Just as more than one Greek word might be thought to indicate knowledge, so
more than one Greek word might be thought to indicate belief. Possible candi-
dates include doxa (often translated as ‘belief’²⁴), hupolêpsis (supposition), and
pistis (confidence). In the Meno, Plato uses doxa for belief as such, and he takes
epistêmê to be a species of belief (that is, of doxa). In APo. 1.33, Aristotle asks
whether one can have epistêmê and doxa of the same things. The way in which he
discusses the question might seem to suggest that he doesn’t take epistêmê to be a
species of, or even to imply, doxa.²⁵

But even if Aristotle doesn’t think epistêmê is a species of or implies doxa (as he
uses the latter term in 1.33), it doesn’t follow that he doesn’t take epistêmê to be a
species of, or to imply, belief, in the sense of ‘belief’ I’ve described. For in 1.33,
Aristotle doesn’t use doxa for belief in that sense. Rather, he uses it for mere belief:
that is, for belief conceived not as a genus of which knowledge might be a species,
but for belief and nothing more, for belief conceived as excluding any higher-level
cognitive conditions, if any, that include or require belief. And of course know-
ledge isn’t a species of, and doesn’t imply, belief, when belief is so understood. If
A knows that p, it doesn’t follow that A merely believes that p. On the contrary, it
follows that she doesn’t merely believe that p—she knows that p.²⁶

Despite the way in which he uses doxa in 1.33, Aristotle takes epistêmê not only
to imply, but actually to be a species of, belief, as I’m understanding belief here.
For at APo. 72a25–9, he says that '[s]ince our conviction (pisteuein) and know-
ledge (eidenai) about a thing must be based on our having the sort of deduction we
call a demonstration, and since we have this sort of deduction when its premises
obtain, not only must we be previously aware of (proginôskein) all or some of the
primary things; we must also be more (aware of them than of other things).’ If
one must be convinced of the conclusions of demonstrations in order to have

²³ See, for example, L. Zagzebski, ‘What Is Knowledge?,’ in J. Greco and E. Sosa (eds.), The Blackwell
Guide to Epistemology (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 92–116, at 95. I discuss accounts of belief in
Chapter 11.
²⁴ Other English-language translations include ‘opinion’ and ‘judgment.’
²⁵ However, he eventually spells out a way in which there can be epistêmê and doxa of some of the
same things. Hence he doesn’t accept the version of the so-called Two Worlds Theory that is often
ascribed to Plato, whereby the objects of knowledge and belief are mutually exclusive. I discuss Aristotle
and TW in Chapter 10. And I argue elsewhere that, at least in Republic 5–7, Plato doesn’t accept this
view either. See G. Fine, ‘Knowledge and Belief in Republic V’ and in ‘Knowledge and Belief in Republic
V–VII,’ both reprinted, with minor modifications, in my Plato on Knowledge and Forms: Selected Essays
(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003). Aristotle also distinguishes epistêmê from doxa in EN 6.3, 1140b31; and
in 7.2, 1145b37–1146a1.
²⁶ Aristotle generally seems to use doxa for mere belief, though it’s difficult to be sure about this. 1.33
is an especially clear case, however. Interestingly, though he uses doxa at 100b7, he doesn’t use it (or
pistis or hupolêpsis) in 2.19 to indicate a clearly demarcated stage of cognitive development. This is in
striking contrast to Plato, who spends so much time in, for example, the Meno and Republic 6–7, asking
how one can move from belief to knowledge.
epistêmê of them, one must believe them.² And in DA 427b24–6, he says: ‘There are varieties of hupolêpsis itself: epistêmê, doxa, phronêsis, and the opposites of these.’ Here he seems to use hupolêpsis as a general term for any cognitive condition that involves taking something to be true: in which case, he is using it for belief as such, as I am understanding belief here. Since Aristotle counts epistêmê as a species of hupolêpsis, he takes it to be a species of belief, in the relevant sense of ‘belief.’²⁸

It’s an interesting fact that in the Meno Plato explicitly defines epistêmê as a species of doxa,²⁹ whereas in APo. 1.33, Aristotle doesn’t seem to think that epistêmê even implies doxa. One might be tempted to infer that Plato but not Aristotle takes epistêmê to be a species of belief. But this temptation should be resisted. The key is to see that, at least in APo. 1.33, Aristotle uses doxa more narrowly than Plato does in the Meno—for mere belief (belief that excludes any higher-level cognitive condition), rather than for belief as such (where belief as such is a genus that contains as species any higher-level cognitive conditions that include or require belief). Despite this terminological difference, once we see that Aristotle classifies epistêmê as a species of hupolêpsis and says that it involves pîstis, we can see that he agrees with Plato that it is a species of belief, in the relevant sense of the term.

We’ve now seen that Aristotle’s definition of epistêmê satisfies both the truth and belief conditions on knowledge. He also plainly thinks that epistêmê goes beyond, and indeed is more valuable, than mere true belief. For he thinks that in addition to requiring truth and belief, epistêmê also requires grasping an aitia; and, as Met. 1.1 among other places makes clear, he thinks this additional requirement makes epistêmê more valuable than true belief.³⁰ Hence, epistêmê, as Aristotle conceives of it, is knowledge—either as such (= option 1 in section 3) or of a favored kind (= option 2 in section 3).

²⁷ At EN 6.3, 1139b33–4, Aristotle says that epistêmê implies a sort (pôs) of pîstis. The precise relation between doxa and pîstis is unclear. But in DA 428a20, Aristotle says that doxê(i) hepetai pîstis; I take this to mean that doxa implies pîstis. In EN 7.2, Aristotle distinguishes weak from strong pîstis, and seems to associate the former with doxa and the latter with epistêmê.

²⁸ EN 6.6, 1140b31–2, also takes epistêmê to be a species of hupolêpsis. It’s true that at EN 1139b15ff, he distinguishes epistêmê from hupolêpsis on the ground that the latter but not the former can be false. But that plainly doesn’t imply that epistêmê isn’t a species of hupolêpsis. To say that hupolêpsis as such can be false is not to say that every kind of hupolêpsis can be. Belief as such can be false; but not every species of belief can be, since true belief can’t be.

²⁹ Which is not to say that he always does so. In Tm. 50–1, for example, he seems to use doxa for mere belief.

³⁰ Met. 1.1 doesn’t explicitly contrast epistêmê with true belief. But it contrasts it with less exalted cognitive conditions, and makes it clear that the fact that when one has epistêmê one grasps an aitia makes epistêmê more valuable than lower-level cognitive conditions. At Meno 97diff., Plato makes it clear that he too thinks that knowledge is more valuable than true belief.
In section 3, I asked whether Aristotle, in defining epistêmê, is defining knowledge as such, just a favored kind of knowledge, or something other than knowledge (at least, as knowledge is conceived of nowadays). I’ve now in effect eliminated the third answer. Before trying to choose between the remaining two answers, I’ll ask briefly why the third answer has sometimes been defended. Its main defender is Burnyeat, so I shall focus on his account.³¹ His main reason is that as knowledge is conceived of nowadays, it’s justified true belief; but what Aristotle requires for epistêmê is explanation, not justification.³²

First it’s worth noting that very few people nowadays take knowledge to be justified true belief.³³ Some take knowledge to be justified true belief plus something; others argue that justification isn’t necessary for knowledge. Given the latter view, even if Aristotle doesn’t think epistêmê requires justification, it doesn’t automatically follow that it isn’t knowledge, even as knowledge is conceived of nowadays. It’s sufficient for him to be talking about knowledge—even as it is conceived of nowadays—that he be talking about a truth-entailing cognitive condition that implies belief, but that goes beyond true belief; and we’ve seen that epistêmê as he conceives of it is such a condition.

One might argue that I’ve secured the result that epistêmê is knowledge (either as such or of a favored kind) only by defining ‘knowledge’ differently from Burnyeat: I say it’s a truth-entailing cognitive condition that implies belief but also involves something further than true belief; Burnyeat says it’s justified true belief. However, I shall now argue that even if we take knowledge to be justified true belief, epistêmê still counts as knowledge (either as such, or of a favored kind).³⁴

It’s true that in saying that to have epistêmê one needs to grasp an aitia, Aristotle means that one must grasp an explanation. It’s also true that explanation

³¹ As I’ve noted (n. 17), this is just one of his views.
³² See Burnyeat ‘Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge,’ 101–2, 105–6, 110, 115, 117, 119, 126. He also argues that Aristotle’s views about epistêmê (or about epistêmê haplôs) are more plausible if they are taken to be about understanding than if they are taken to be about knowledge: see esp. his sect. II. His arguments here seem to me to show at most that we have reason to hope that epistêmê doesn’t exhaust the scope of knowledge; they don’t show that we have reason to hope that epistêmê isn’t even a kind of knowledge (as knowledge is being conceived of here). 109–10 suggest Burnyeat may agree. But, as noted above, he sometimes seems to suggest that epistêmê isn’t even a kind of knowledge, but something else, viz. understanding. It’s this latter, stronger claim I take issue with. ³³ Burnyeat’s article was published in 1981. In ‘Socrates’ Disavowal of Knowledge,’ Philosophical Quarterly 35 (1985), 1–31, Gregory Vlastos says that nowadays most philosophers would deny that knowledge is justified true belief (n. 25). Many people abandoned the justified-true-belief account of knowledge in the wake of E. Gettier’s famous paper, ‘Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?’, Analysis 23 (1963), 121–3. Others, however, argue that he refuted the view only on an account of justification not intended by those who favor the justified-true-belief account of knowledge. I took this line in Chapter 3. For detailed discussion of replies to Gettier, see R. Shope, The Analysis of Knowing (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
and justification are different. But they are not exclusive. In particular, one might argue that one can be justified in believing that p, in the way needed for satisfying the justification condition on knowledge, only if one can explain why p is so. That is Plato’s view: he takes knowledge to be justified true belief; and he thinks that to have the sort of justification that turns true belief into knowledge, one must be able to explain why what one knows is true.⁵

It seems to me that Aristotle also thinks that epistêmê is knowledge conceived of as justified true belief, where the justification consists in or requires explanation.⁶ So, for example, it’s usually thought that if one has a good argument for p, one is justified in believing that p.⁷ In Aristotle’s view, epistêmê requires demonstration. A demonstration that p is true is a good argument for p par excellence: it shows why p is necessarily so. Hence, it counts as a justification for believing that p: one believes that p because one has demonstrated why p is necessarily so.

Epistêmê, then, is knowledge; indeed, it’s knowledge conceived as justified true belief, where the relevant justification requires or consists in explanation. It’s not something other than knowledge.

But does Aristotle take epistêmê to be knowledge as such, or just a favored kind of knowledge? Before attempting to answer that question, it’s worth noting that if he takes epistêmê as defined in 1.2 to be all the knowledge there is, there’s a way in which he agrees with Plato, and a way in which he disagrees with him. They would, in this case, agree that epistêmê exhausts the scope of knowledge. For when Plato defines epistêmê in the Meno, he’s defining knowledge as such, not just a favored kind of knowledge. Plato and Aristotle would, however, in this case disagree about the scope of knowledge. In particular, Aristotle would have a more demanding conception of knowledge than Plato does. For 1.2 restricts epistêmê to what’s necessary, whereas Plato does not do so in the Meno.³⁸

³⁵ See section 1, and Chapter 3.
³⁶ This is not to say that Aristotle agrees with Plato that the only sort of justification that can convert a true belief into knowledge requires or consists in explanation. Rather, the present point is that he takes epistêmê to be justified true belief, where the relevant justification requires or consists in explanation. I ask later whether he agrees with Plato that all knowledge-constituting justification must involve explanation, or whether he differs from Plato in having a more expansive view of the sort of justification that can convert true belief into knowledge. That is, at the moment I’m asking about epistêmê as Aristotle defines it in 1.2; I ask later whether he takes epistêmê so conceived to exhaust the scope of knowledge.
³⁷ This also seems to be Burnyeat’s view: ‘[j]ustification is expressed in argument to show that a proposition is true’ (‘Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge,’ 101). But then it’s unclear why he opposes explanation and justification as sharply as he does. For, as I go on to say, a demonstration is an argument that shows why a proposition is true, and so it counts as a kind of justification. (To be sure, it shows more than that a proposition is true: it shows why it’s necessarily true. But it also shows that it is true.) There may well be other kinds of justification that can convert true belief into knowledge. But then we should conclude, not that epistêmê as defined in 1.2 isn’t knowledge at all, but that it’s just one kind of knowledge. Again, though Burnyeat sometimes suggests this view, not everything he says fits well with it.
³⁸ This is clearly so if Plato mentions the way to Larissa and who Meno is as literal examples of things one can know. But even if these are analogies rather than examples, still, nothing in his definition of knowledge, or in his more general discussion of it, restricts knowledge to what’s necessary. See n. 6.
If, however, Aristotle doesn’t think *epistêmê* as defined in 1.2 is all the knowledge there is, then we aren’t yet in a position to know whether he has a more, or a less, demanding conception of knowledge than Plato does. To decide about that, we would need to know more about the knowledge Aristotle countenances that ranges outside the bounds of *epistêmê* as defined in 1.2: if he countenances such knowledge at all, which is an issue we haven’t yet considered.

6.

Accordingly, I shall now consider four arguments that have been adduced for the claim that Aristotle countenances genuine knowledge that is weaker than *epistêmê* as defined in 1.2:

1. Aristotle sometimes says that one can *eidēnai hoti* *p* without *eidēnai dihoti* *p*.\footnote{As we’ve seen (section 2), he also says that one can *epistathai hoti* *p* even if one doesn’t *epistathai dihoti* *p*. However, as I’ve said, it’s not clear whether he means that this is genuine *epistêmê* that falls short of the paradigm, i.e. of unqualified *epistêmê*, or whether he is speaking loosely or using the term in a different sense. I shall leave this issue to one side, and ask instead whether Aristotle thinks one can know that *p* is true (when knowledge is understood as we’re understanding it here, as a truth-entailing cognitive condition that implies belief but goes beyond true belief) without knowing why *p* is true. \footnote{Burnyeat offers all these arguments.}} Hence he thinks one can know that something is true without knowing why it is true. So not only does he expand the scope of knowledge beyond *epistêmê* as defined in 1.2; he also expands it beyond the scope of anything Plato would count as knowledge, since for Plato all knowledge requires a grasp of an explanation. Aristotle, by contrast, thinks there is a lower grade of knowledge that doesn’t require a grasp of an explanation.

2. Aristotle distinguishes incidental (*kata sumbebêkos*) from unqualified (*haplôs*) knowledge, and takes the former to be genuine knowledge that falls short of *epistêmê* as defined in 1.2.\footnote{Burnyeat offers all these arguments.}

3. Aristotle sometimes uses *gnôsis* (*gignôskein, ginôskein, gnôrizein*\footnote{I shall follow Burnyeat in not distinguishing among these three verbs.}) for genuine knowledge that is weaker both than *epistêmê* and than anything Plato would count as knowledge. Here I shall consider two cases:

3a. Aristotle distinguishes what’s *gnôrimon phusei* from what’s *gnôrimon hêmin*—on a familiar translation, what’s better known by nature and what’s better known to us. What Aristotle says about what’s *gnôrimon to...
one shows that he thinks there is genuine knowledge that falls short of *epistêmê* as defined in 1.2.

3b. Aristotle says that perception (*aisthêsis*) is *gnôsis*; hence he counts it as genuine knowledge. But it is weaker both than *epistêmê*, and than anything Plato would count as knowledge.

A full discussion of all these arguments is beyond the scope of this chapter. But I shall say something brief about each of them, beginning with (1).

7.

It’s worth noting, to begin with, that it’s somewhat controversial say that to *eidenai hoti* p is to know that p. J. L. Ackrill, for example, suggests that, in at least some places in the *APo.*, to *eidenai hoti* p may be just to have the true belief that p.

To decide whether to *eidenai hoti* p (without *eidenai dihoti* p) is to know that p, we need to know how Aristotle characterizes the notion in more detail. If it is a truth-entailing cognitive condition that implies belief, but that goes beyond true belief, then it’s knowledge, as we are conceiving of knowledge here.

It’s difficult to decide about this, because Aristotle doesn’t lay out the conditions for one to *eidenai hoti* p in the same explicit way in which, in 1.2, he lays out the conditions for having *epistêmê*. However, he gives some examples and general descriptions. In 1.13, for example, he contrasts sound deductive arguments in general with demonstration in particular. The latter is needed for *epistêmê*; but the former is sufficient for one to *eidenai hoti* p. Though having a sound deductive argument may not be necessary for one to *eidenai hoti* p, having some good argument or other seems to be. Moreover, one can *eidenai hoti* p only if p is true.

Providing a good argument for p that falls short of demonstrating that p is a way of justifying one’s belief that p; and one can do so without explaining why p is so. It’s then tempting to infer that to *eidenai hoti* p (in a way that doesn’t involve grasping why p is so) is to have a justified true belief that p, where the justification needn’t involve an explanation of why p is so, but does involve a good argument for its being the case that p. If this is right, then, to *eidenai hoti* p is to know that p.

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43 In 1.31, Aristotle says flatly that *aisthêsis* is not *epistêmê*: or, at least, that we can’t achieve *epistêmê* through *aisthêsis*. It’s worth noting, though, that in *EN* 1147b15–17, he implies that a certain sort of perception (not necessarily every sort) is a kind of *epistêmê*, though it isn’t *epistêmê* properly speaking (*kuriôs*). It’s again unclear whether we should say that he is speaking loosely, or that there is more genuine *epistêmê* than is sanctioned by his definition. Certainly often in the *EN* he uses *epistêmê* in a way that would preclude there being any perceptual *epistêmê*; see, e.g., 6.3.

44 Ackrill, *Aristotle’s Theory of Definition*, 366. He says Aristotle sometimes uses forms of *eidenai* either for true belief or for a weak form of knowledge; he doesn’t choose between these alternatives.
where knowledge is taken to be justified true belief, and where the justification must be at least as strong as having a good argument for \( p \). Aristotle therefore expands the bounds of knowledge beyond those imposed on epistêmê as defined in 1.2. He also expands them further than Plato does in the *Meno*; for unlike Plato, he doesn’t require explanation for all knowledge. He requires it for epistêmê; but epistêmê doesn’t exhaust the scope of knowledge.

Although the conditions for one to eidenai hoti \( p \) are weaker than the conditions for one to eidenai dihoti \( p \) (i.e. for one to have epistêmê that \( p \)), they may be stronger than I’ve so far suggested. Ackrill, for example, thinks that, for one to eidenai hoti \( p \), one must grasp that \( p \) can be explained.\(^{45}\) If this is right, eidenai hoti is closer to eidenai dihoti than one might have thought.\(^{46}\)

8.

I turn next to Aristotle’s account of incidental knowledge. He mentions the notion in several places.\(^{47}\) I shall consider just one passage—in *APo*. 1.5—where he discusses the notion at length. Here is what he says:…

45 Ackrill, ‘Aristotle’s Theory of Definition,’ 376–81. However, he may think that this is a condition on what it is to eidenai hoti \( p \) only in the context of scientific investigation: see 377. That would leave open the possibility that it is not a general requirement on what it is to eidenai hoti \( p \). See also previous note.
46 Further, as B1, 150, notes, some of the cases Aristotle describes in 1.13 of knowing that without knowing why in fact count as knowing why on some accounts of explanation: once again, then, Aristotle’s notion of knowing-that may be higher level than one might take it to be. Cf. S. LaBarge, ‘Aristotle on Empeiria,’ *Ancient Philosophy* 26 (2006), 23–44.
47 See, for example, 1.2, 1.5 (though, see next note), 1.8, 1.9, 2.8, and 2.10. Cf. *EN* 1135a23–30 and 1139b31–5.
48 Aristotle contrasts a case in which one oide (which I render throughout as ‘know’) something haplôs with a case in which one oide that same thing in the sophistical way: ‘incidental knowledge’ isn’t explicitly mentioned. But 1.2 seems to identify knowing something in the sophistical way with knowing it incidentally. Nonetheless, it’s worth noting that, aside from 1.2, when Aristotle explicitly mentions or discusses incidental knowledge, he doesn’t also mention sophistical knowledge. However, although there are differences among the various cases of incidental or sophistical knowledge that he discusses, I don’t see anything that would explain calling the one in 1.5 sophistical, the others incidental. So I don’t think the variation in terminology is significant. Hence in what follows I shall speak interchangeably of incidental and sophistical knowledge.
According to Burnyeat (‘Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge,’ 100), Aristotle is contrasting two ways of knowing that every isosceles triangle has 2R (which is how I shall abbreviate ‘having angles equal to two right angles’). One can know this in virtue of knowing that it belongs to every triangle as such to have angles equal to have 2R. Alternatively, one can know that every isosceles triangle has 2R without knowing the more general fact. In this case, the person has explicitly entertained the proposition that every isosceles triangle has 2R, and perhaps even has a sound proof of the fact; but she doesn’t know that it’s in virtue of being a triangle as such that every triangle has 2R. In the former case, one has unqualified knowledge; in the latter case, one has incidental knowledge. The difference between the two cases lies in the different sorts of grounds one has. If one has unqualified knowledge that every isosceles triangle has 2R, one knows not only that but also why it does so. If one has merely incidental knowledge, one knows that, but not why, every isosceles triangle has 2R. This is the sort of knowledge—that discussed in the previous section. It counts as genuine knowledge, though not of the favored kind.

However, Aristotle is not contrasting two ways of knowing that every isosceles triangle has 2R. Rather, he is contrasting two ways of knowing that every triangle has 2R. One way of knowing that every triangle has 2R is to know this ‘for every triangle taken as a kind,’ or, as Aristotle also puts it, to know ‘that it belongs to a triangle insofar as it is a triangle.’ One has this sort of knowledge when one knows both that and why every triangle has 2R. This is unqualified knowledge: epistêmê as defined in 1.2. The other way of knowing that every triangle has 2R is the sort Aristotle calls sophistical. One has it when one knows that every isosceles triangle has 2R, that every scalene triangle has 2R, and that every equilateral triangle has 2R—but doesn’t know (except sophistically) that it belongs to every triangle to have 2R.

As Barnes explains, Aristotle’s point is as follows.⁴⁹ From:

1. A knows that (x)(Ex → Rx) and A knows that (x)(Sx → Rx) and A knows that (x) (Ix → Rx)

we cannot infer either that:

3. A knows that (x)(Tx → Rx) (74a27)

or that A knows that:

4. (R holds universally of T) (74a29).

⁴⁹ See B1, 122–3; B2, 124.
This is so even if we add:

2. \((x)(Tx \rightarrow Ex \text{ or } Sx \text{ or } Ix)\).

However, from 1 and 2, however, we can infer that:

5. \((F)(\text{if } F \text{ is a species of } T, \text{ then } A \text{ knows that: } (x)(Fx \rightarrow Rx))\).

On this account, someone who knows only in the sophistical way that every triangle has 2R lacks *de dicto* knowledge that every triangle has 2R. She knows *of* every triangle that it has 2R; but she doesn’t *know* that every triangle has 2R. To be sure, it’s not that one has merely the true belief that every triangle has 2R. Rather, one has no *de dicto* grasp of the universal fact at all. As David Charles puts it, one ‘has not grasped [that p] in the way required for [one] to be able to use it in [one’s] reasoning.’

50 Of course, her knowledge of every triangle’s having 2R is based on her *de dicto* knowledge that every isosceles etc. triangle has 2R. But she doesn’t have *de dicto* knowledge that every triangle has 2R. She is not aware of the truth of the *dictum* ‘Every triangle has 2R,’ even though she is aware of the truth of closely related *dicta*.

Aristotle first says that the person doesn’t know (except in the sophistical way) that every triangle has 2R. He then explains this (gar, 74a30) by saying ‘For you do not know that it belongs to a triangle insofar as it is a triangle, nor that it belongs to every triangle.’ Focusing on the first clause, one might think Aristotle is denying only that the person knows that it belongs to every triangle as such to have 2R, which would allow him to have the sort of knowledge that every triangle has 2R that we explored in the last section. (This is the interpretation suggested in Irwin and Fine, *Aristotle: Selections.*) However, the second clause says flatly that neither does the person know that it belongs to every triangle (sc. to have 2R); ‘except in the sophistical way’ is not repeated. I take Aristotle to mean that the person doesn’t know either that it belongs to every triangle as such to have 2R, or even that every triangle has 2R, where the latter is the sort of knowledge-that explored briefly in the last section. ‘Sophistical’ therefore has a sort of canceling effect; it suggests that the sort of ‘knowledge’ that p that’s at issue isn’t genuine knowledge that p, though it may be closely related to it. See also next note.

51 Here I agree with Burnyeat, ‘Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge,’ 100–1, n. 5. (Contrast R. Bolton, in his review of J. Barnes, M. Schofield, and R. Sorabji (eds.), *Articles on Aristotle* 1, in *Philosophical Review* 86 (1977), 564–5.) In this same note, Burnyeat notes that 93a25–6 moves from *kata sumbebêkos* eido*men* to oude* gar . . . ismen*, and says ‘that for this very reason, *ismen* must mean *ismen haplôs.*’ That is, he thinks Aristotle is saying that when we know only incidentally, all that’s true of us is that we lack non-incidental knowledge which, in turn, means just that we lack *epistêmê* as it is defined in 1.2. But Aristotle seems to be making a stronger point than that the person lacks *epistêmê* as defined in 1.2. He seems to contrast incidental knowledge not only with knowing what something is (i.e. grasping its essence) but also with knowing non-incidentally that it is. That is, he seems to recognize two kinds of knowledge—that (incidental and non- incidental), both of which fall short of *epistêmê* as defined in 1.2. In the previous section, we briefly explored non incidental knowledge that p. One non-incidentally knows that p, without knowing why p, when p is true, one believes that p, and one has a good argument to justify one’s belief that p, though it falls short of explaining why p is so. Incidental knowledge that p doesn’t seem to be a lower-grade of knowledge—that along the same dimension. For one doesn’t have a *de dicto* grasp of p at all. One might think that since, in 1.2, Aristotle contrasts *epistêmê* haplôs *with* *epistêmê* *kata sumbebêkos*, every instance of the latter is opposed simply to *epistêmê* as defined in 1.2. However, the haplôs/kata sumbebêkos contrast is context relative. In 1.1, for example, *eidê* *nai* haplôs (71a25) and *epistasthai* haplôs (71a28–9) do not conform to the definition in 1.2, but, as Barnes puts it, simply express ‘an ordinary knowledge claim’ (B, 94).

52 D. Charles, *Aristotle on Meaning and Essence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 100. He is commenting, not on 1.5 in particular, but on Aristotle’s account of incidental—or what he calls accidental—knowledge more generally.
In the last section, we saw that Aristotle extends the scope of knowledge, as we are conceiving of it here, beyond the bounds of epistêmê as defined in 1.2. For he allows that one can know that something is so without knowing why it is so. One knows that p is so, in the sense explored in the last section, when p is true, one believes that p is true, and one has a good argument for believing that p is true, though (if one doesn’t also know why p is so) the argument falls short of explaining why p is true. This sort of knowledge—that involves a de dicto grasp of the proposition that one knows. It is what Aristotle, in 2.8 and 2.10, seems to view as non- INCIDENTAL knowledge that something is so.⁵ The sophistical knowledge described in 1.5 is not a weaker sort of knowledge along the same dimension. It’s not as though one has de dicto knowledge that p, which, however, is based on even weaker grounds for believing it. To say that one has sophistical knowledge that p is not to say that p is true, that one believes that p, and that one has a good argument for p’s being the case. Interesting though Aristotle’s discussion in 1.5 is, it therefore doesn’t help us answer the main question I’m now focusing on, which is: how extensive does Aristotle take the bounds of knowledge to be, when knowledge is conceived as I’ve been conceiving of it? His account of sophistical or incidental knowledge in 1.5 doesn’t help us answer that question, for the simple reason that it’s not knowledge in that sense of the term.

9.

Let’s look now at Aristotle’s distinction between what’s gnôrimon hêmin and what’s gnôrimon phusei. In Aristotle’s view, learning proceeds from the former to the latter.⁵⁴ When one grasps something that’s gnôrimon phusei in the right way, one plainly has genuine knowledge. Suppose, however, that p is gnôrimon to me but not gnôrimon phusei.⁵⁵ Do I thereby know that p?⁵⁶ That is, does it follow

Burnyeat suggests we compare the discussion in 1.24 (’Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge,’ 101). Here (86a21–30) Aristotle says that someone who knows that every triangle has 2R but doesn’t know that the isosceles is a triangle knows that the isosceles has 2R only potentially. He also says that someone who knows only that the isosceles has 2R does not know the universal (i.e. that every triangle has 2R) either potentially or actually. It’s this latter case that is analogous to the one discussed in 1.5. What Aristotle says in 1.24 therefore seems to support my suggestion that the sophistical knowledge that every triangle has 2R at issue in 1.5 is not genuine de dicto knowledge that every triangle has 2R.

See n. 51.

⁵⁴ See e.g. Top. 101a36–b4; 141b17–19; Phys. 1.1; EN 1098a33–b4; 1139b28–31, 1151a16–18. Burnyeat also cites these passages: see ’Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge,’ 116.

⁵⁵ What’s gnôrimon hêmin may not be restricted to propositions. But, again, I am focusing here on the bounds Aristotle places on propositional knowledge, and so I restrict my attention to Aristotle’s account of what’s involved in a proposition’s being gnôrimon to one.

⁵⁶ Burnyeat’s answer may be ‘no.’ For in ’Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge,’ 128f., n. 53, he notes that there is dispute about whether gnôrimon means ‘known’ or ‘knowable.’ He suggests that ‘known’ is too strong, ‘knowable’ too weak, but that these are not exhaustive options. He suggests that to say that something is gnôrimon is to say that ‘it has, as it were, a tendency to be known and it will actually be known if you attend to it or think about it in the appropriate way. What the appropriate way
from the fact that p is gnôrimon to me that I believe that p, that p is true, and that my grasp of p goes beyond the true belief that p? There is reason to think that this is not Aristotle’s view. For one thing, in Met. 7 he says: 57

For it is useful to advance towards what is more gnôrimon. For this is how we succeed in learning, by advancing through things less gnôrima by nature to things gnôrima mallon <by nature>. In questions about action, our task is to advance from what is good to ourselves, and so to make what is good without reservation good to ourselves. In the same way, then, we should advance from things that are more gnôrima to ourselves, and so make the things gnôrima by nature gnôrima to ourselves. Admittedly, things that are gnôrima first to any given type of person are only slightly gnôrima and have little or no hold on being. Still, we must begin from things that are poorly gnôsta but gnôsta to us and try to gnônai the things that are gnôsta without reservation, by advancing, as has been said, through these very things <that are gnôsta to us>. (Met. 1029b3–12)

To say that what’s gnôrimon hêmin sometimes ‘has little or no hold on being’ might be to say that not everything that’s gnôrimon hêmin is true. If something that’s not true can be gnôrimon to one, then not everything that’s gnôrimon hêmin can be known. For knowledge is truth entailing. 58

Similarly, in Phys. 1.1, Aristotle apparently gives as an example of something that’s gnôrimon to one, a child who calls all men ‘father.’ Plainly the child doesn’t know, and can’t know, that all men are his father, since it isn’t true that all men are his father. 59

is will be different for gnôrima të(i) phusei and gnôrima hêmin.’ He refers to Top. 142a2ff., but doesn’t say how he interprets the passage; hence it’s not clear what he thinks it takes for one to attend to something that’s gnôrimon to one in the appropriate way for one to have actual knowledge of it. However, Burnyeat clearly believes that what Aristotle says about what’s gnôrimon hêmin shows that he expands the scope of knowledge beyond epistêmê as defined in 1.2.

The translation is modified from the one in Irwin and Fine. There is dispute about the proper location of this passage. The MSs place it after the first sentence of what is now 7.4; the OCT transposes it to the end of 7.3. The location of the passage is relevant to its precise interpretation. For a recent discussion of the passage, see M. F. Burnyeat, A Map of Metaphysics Zeta (Pittsburgh: Mathesis, 2001), 17–18.

57 On an alternative interpretation suggested to me by Christopher Taylor, Aristotle means that mere sensible familiarity with something gives one very little grasp of what it is. If the grasp is weak enough, presumably it doesn’t count as knowledge, as knowledge is being conceived of here. Hence on this interpretation too, the passage suggests that we can’t infer from the fact that something is gnôrimon to one, that one knows it, though it wouldn’t follow that it couldn’t be known.

58 It’s not entirely clear what’s gnôrimon to the child who calls all men ‘father’: his father, all the men he’s encountered, the property of being a father (which he can’t differentiate from the property of being a man), or the proposition ‘All men are my father.’ No matter which of these is meant, he doesn’t seem to have knowledge as it is being conceived of here. Either the child straightforwardly has a false belief, whether it’s ‘All men are my father’ or something else; or else he has a vague sort of familiarity with some range of things (his father, all men, certain properties) that doesn’t count as knowledge (as knowledge is being conceived of here), since it doesn’t involve being in a truth-entailing cognitive condition that implies belief but goes beyond true belief. Here again I am indebted to Christopher Taylor.
Or again, endoxa are among the things that are gnôrimon hēmin. But not all endoxa are true.⁶⁰ Once again, then, the mere fact that one grasps a proposition that’s gnôrimon to one doesn’t imply that one knows it, or even that one can know it. We can’t infer from the fact that p is gnôrimon to one, that one knows that p, or even that p is knowable. For p might be false.⁵¹

Aristotle says one has gnôsis of what’s gnôrimon to one.⁶² But if not everything that’s gnôrimon hēmin is true, not everything that’s gnôrimon hēmin can be known. Earlier we saw that epistêmê is too narrow to capture everything Aristotle counts as knowledge. We now know that gnôsis is too broad to do so.

I do not deny that Aristotle often uses gnôsis (and related words such as gignôskein) for genuine knowledge. My claim is just that he sometimes uses it more broadly than for knowledge, as knowledge is being conceived of here. Hence, the mere fact that he says we have gnôsis of something doesn’t imply that he takes us to have knowledge of it. We have to decide from the context how high- or low-level a cognitive condition is at issue.⁶³

I now turn to the final argument I shall consider here for thinking that Aristotle extends the scope of knowledge (in the sense at issue here) beyond the bounds of

⁶⁰ Top. 100a25–b19, 162b27.

⁶¹ Christopher Taylor asks whether Aristotle might mean that false endoxa are familiar to us in the sense that we know that they are false (cp. ’That’s a well-known falsehood’); and he suggests that the fact that one can have gnôsis of something that’s false in that way doesn’t show that gnôsis isn’t a kind of knowledge. But in saying that endoxa are gnôrima hēmin, I take Aristotle to mean that they are believed—taken to be true—by some range of people: by all or most people, or by the wise. Hence, if some endoxa are false, but all are things one can have gnôsis of (since all are gnôrima hēmin), gnôsis isn’t always knowledge, since in some cases it involves believing that p, when p is false. To be sure, if p is an endoxon, it’s perhaps plausible, or is in some way on the right track. But that’s not enough to make it true; and so it’s not enough to make it a candidate for being knowable.

⁶² See the passage cited from Met. 7 in section 9. Of course, he doesn’t mean that each of us has gnôsis of all the things that are gnôrimon hēmin, i.e. that fall into that general category, since different things within it are accessible to different people. His point is that if p is gnôrimon to one, one has gnôsis that p. If Aristotle thinks that, if p is gnôrimon to one, one has gnôsis of p, then to say that p is gnôrimon to one is not to say that p is known, knowable, or has a tendency to be known. For p might be false. Perhaps it is to say that one believes that p, where p has some sort of initial credibility, even if it turns out in the end to be false. If this is right, the familiar translation ‘better known to one’ is misleading.

⁶³ My suggestion, then, is that Aristotle uses gignôskein and its cognates more broadly than he uses eidenai and its cognates; and that he uses eidenai and its cognates more broadly than he uses epistasthai and its cognates. See note 18. Contrast Burnyeat, ‘Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge,’ 103–5.

The Latin translation of gnôsis is cognitio, and at least Aquinas recognizes false cognitio: ‘lac tamen differentia servata, quae supra circa veritatem dicta est, quod falsitas in intellecti esse potest, non solum quia cognitio intellectus falsa est, sed quia intellectus eam cognoscit, sicut et veritatem, in sensu autem falsitas non est ut cognita, ut dictum est’ (Summa Theologiae 1a.17.3; emphasis added). Thanks to Scott MacDonald and Terry Irwin for calling this passage to my attention. Since gnôsis can be false, perhaps we should translate the term not as ‘knowledge,’ but as ‘cognition,’ from the Latin cognitio. Even if all gnôsis is true, not all of it amounts to knowledge; some of it need be no more than awareness that falls short of knowledge (e.g. true belief). That too provides a reason for favoring ‘cognition’ over ‘knowledge.’ At least, to my ear ‘cognition’ is broader than ‘knowledge.’
epistêmê as defined in 1.2, and beyond the bounds of anything Plato would count as knowledge. In 2.19, 99b38–9, and elsewhere, Aristotle counts perception as a kind of gnôsis. According to Burnyeat, ‘this is not to say that perception does not yield knowledge. aisthêsis is not epistêmê but it is (one type of) gnôsis’ (‘Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge,’ 114). Here Burnyeat takes the mere fact that Aristotle calls aisthêsis gnôsis to imply that it is, or yields, knowledge. But, as we have seen, that is too quick; for gnôsis is more extensive than knowledge. And whatever may be true elsewhere, I do not think that 2.19, 99b38–9, means to say that perception is, or by itself yields, knowledge.⁶⁴ For one thing, it is had from birth; but Aristotle rejects the existence of innate knowledge.⁶⁵ For another, the sort of perception he mentions here is one animals have. Yet he doesn’t think animals even have belief.⁶⁶ A fortiori, the sort of perception he considers here isn’t knowledge, as we are conceiving of knowledge.⁶⁷ Aristotle isn’t claiming that animals have knowledge from birth. Rather, his point is that we are born with a capacity (dunamis, 99b32–3), the exercise of which partly explains how normal humans are able to acquire knowledge in due course. The gnôsis at issue isn’t, and doesn’t by itself yield, knowledge. Rather, it’s a sort of awareness that serves as a starting point for acquiring knowledge. Aristotle proceeds to describe our cognitive development, from perception through memory and experience, all the way to epistêmê. It’s difficult to say where knowledge first emerges in this process. Be that as it may, it seems clear that, though perception is present from birth, knowledge isn’t. Hence at least this reference to perception’s being gnôsis doesn’t show that Aristotle takes perception to be knowledge, or to be sufficient for having knowledge, as knowledge is being conceived of here.

11.

Let me now conclude by pulling together various threads. I’ve been concerned to explore the limits Aristotle places on knowledge, when we conceive of knowledge

⁶⁴ Christopher Taylor, referring to our passage, says that ‘perception is frequently counted by Aristotle as a sort of knowledge or acquaintance’ (‘Aristotle’s Epistemology,’ 118). Perhaps he uses ‘or acquaintance’ because he is not entirely happy saying flat out that perception counts as knowledge: it gives us acquaintance with things; but that falls short of giving us knowledge.

⁶⁵ It’s true that in 2.19, he explicitly rejects the existence of innate knowledge only of ‘primitive, immediate principles’; but I think he rejects innate knowledge as such.

⁶⁶ See e.g. DA 3.3.

⁶⁷ One might argue that even if animal gnôsis isn’t knowledge as we are conceiving of it here, it’s knowledge in a different sense of the term. Once again, though, my focus is on the bounds Aristotle places on knowledge when it is conceived as a truth-entailing cognitive condition that implies but goes beyond true belief. Animal gnôsis doesn’t count as knowledge in that sense of the term. The view that perception, in at least some passages in 2.19, is as low level as I am taking it to be is controversial. In Recollection and Experience: Plato’s Theory of Learning and Its Successors (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), for example, D. Scott may think that Aristotle throughout has in view only higher-level learning: see esp. ch. 4. Though I think that is Aristotle’s primary focus, I don’t think it exhausts his concern.
in a familiar way, as a truth-entailing cognitive condition that implies belief, but that goes beyond true belief. I’ve argued that if we so conceive of knowledge, then *epistêmê*, as Aristotle defines it in 1.2, counts as knowledge. Indeed, even if we conceive of knowledge more narrowly, as justified true belief, *epistêmê* as Aristotle conceives of it counts as knowledge.

*Epistêmê* as Aristotle defines it in 1.2 is quite demanding—more demanding than Plato’s own notion of *epistêmê* in the *Meno*. But we should not infer that Aristotle has a more demanding conception of knowledge than Plato does. For unlike Plato in the *Meno*, Aristotle uses *epistêmê* for just one kind of knowledge, not for knowledge as such. And though Aristotle has more demanding standards for *epistêmê* than Plato does, he has less demanding standards for what it takes to have knowledge. For unlike Plato, he allows one to know that something is so without knowing why it is so.

However, it’s not clear how far Aristotle extends the scope of knowledge, as we are conceiving of knowledge here. For one thing, it’s not clear exactly what the conditions for *eidênaî hoti* are; and so it’s not clear how weak a condition it can be.

Further, some of the other evidence sometimes adduced for the claim that Aristotle has a generous conception of the scope of knowledge doesn’t show that he does so. At least, it doesn’t show that he has a generous conception of knowledge, as knowledge is being conceiving of here. For example, Aristotle’s discussion of incidental or sophistical knowledge in 1.5 isn’t that sort of knowledge. Nor is the sort of perception that animals and humans have from birth and that counts as *gnôsis* in 2.19 that sort of knowledge.

Another reason it’s difficult to decide what bounds Aristotle places on the scope of knowledge, as knowledge is being conceived of here, is that whereas for Plato the contrast between knowledge and mere true belief is of central concern, for Aristotle it doesn’t seem to be; at least, he pays far less attention to it than Plato does. One interesting question that I haven’t explored here is why Plato highlights that distinction, whereas Aristotle does not do so. I close with a speculation about this. In *EN* 7, he argues that the distinction between knowledge and true belief doesn’t matter in explaining *akrasia*. Perhaps he believes that, in general, the interesting epistemological questions lie elsewhere.

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68 1146b24–31. (Here, I think, he differs from Plato.) Instead, he proceeds to explain *akrasia* by distinguishing different kinds of knowledge (*to epistasthai*), though he also sometimes speaks of belief (*doxa*), as at 1147aff.

69 In this he anticipates the Stoics, who likewise largely ignore the distinction between knowledge and true belief. At least, they don’t explicitly ask how *orthê doxa* or *aîthê doxa* differs from *epistêmê* or from what it is for one to *eidênaî* something. Instead, they ask how *epistêmê* differs from *doxa*, and from mere *katalêpsis*. Figuring out where they draw the line between knowledge and true belief is a difficult, perhaps impossible, task.

70 Thanks to Sarah Broadie, Walter Cavini, Dominic Scott, and David Sedley for helpful discussion; and to Christopher Shields and Christopher Taylor for insightful and detailed written comments.
10

Aristotle’s Two Worlds: Knowledge and Belief in *Posterior Analytics* 1.33

1.

In a famous and much-discussed passage in *Republic* 5, Plato distinguishes *epistêmê* from *doxa*—knowledge from belief. What’s less well known is that Aristotle devotes a chapter of the *Posterior Analytics* (1.33) to drawing his own distinction between *epistêmê* and *doxa*. In this chapter, I explore his way of distinguishing them and compare it with Plato’s. About Plato, however, I shall have to be brief.¹

2.

On a familiar interpretation of the argument in *Rep*. 5, Plato distinguishes knowledge from belief in terms of their disjoint objects: knowledge is of forms, belief is of sensibles. If one has knowledge, it’s only about forms; if one has a belief, it’s only about sensibles. One can’t have any knowledge about sensibles, or any beliefs about forms. I’ll call this a Strong Two Worlds Theory for Objects (STWO).

On a second view, Plato favors a Weak Two Worlds Theory for Objects (WTWO), according to which, though one can’t know sensibles, one can have beliefs about forms. On this view, the set of objects one can know and the set of objects one can have beliefs about are different but not disjoint.

I favor a third view, according to which Plato distinguishes knowledge from belief, not in terms of their disjoint or even different objects, but in terms of the truth implications of their contents: knowledge but not belief implies truth. I’ll call this the Propositional reading (P).²

² I defend this interpretation in the articles cited in n. 1. Propositions have been understood in many ways. As I use the term, propositions are truth evaluable. Sentences express, but are different from, propositions. Propositions also differ from states of affairs: the former are made true by the latter; the proposition that fire is hot is made true by the state of affairs of fire’s being hot.
To say that Plato distinguishes knowledge from belief in terms of the different truth implications of their contents is not to say that he thinks knowledge and belief are of propositions rather than of objects. Rather, he thinks one knows an object by knowing that it is thus and so: by knowing that certain propositions are true of it. Similarly, one has beliefs about an object by believing that it is thus and so: by believing that certain propositions are true of it.

P leaves open the possibility, though it does not imply, that the objects that can be known and that one can have beliefs about are the same. Hence, on P, the argument in Rep. 5 doesn’t commit Plato to either STWO or WTWO. Nor, on P, does it commit him to either a Strong or a Weak Two Worlds Theory for Propositions (STWP, WTWP): that is, it doesn’t commit him either to the view that no proposition that can be known can be believed or to the view that some propositions can be known but not believed. P leaves open the possibility that every proposition that can be known can be believed. (However, P of course doesn’t leave open the possibility that every proposition that can be believed can be known. For there are false beliefs; they can’t be known since knowledge is truth entailing.)

One key piece of evidence in deciding how Plato distinguishes knowledge from belief is his opening claim (476e10–477a4) that knowledge is set over what is (epi to(i) onti), coupled with his claim that belief is set over what is and is not.³ On one view, Plato uses ‘is’ existentially, to make the point that knowledge is restricted to objects that exist (which turn out to be forms), whereas belief is restricted to objects that both do and don’t exist, or that half exist (which turn out to be sensibles). On what is probably the most popular interpretation, Plato uses ‘is’ predicatively, to make the point that knowledge is set over objects that are F (and not also not F), which turn out to be forms; whereas belief is set over objects that are both F and not F, which turn out to be sensible or perceptible particulars (e.g. the Parthenon) and/or sensible or perceptible properties (e.g. bright color). The form of beauty, for example, is beautiful but not also ugly, whereas bright color is both beautiful (in this Klee painting) and ugly (when added to a somber Rembrandt). On P, which is the view I favor and shall assume here, Plato uses ‘is’ veridically, to make the point that knowledge but not belief implies truth.⁴

Though Plato says that knowledge implies truth, he doesn’t say that it implies necessary truth.⁵ To be sure, at 477e7 he says that knowledge but not belief is infallible (anhamartêton). But all he means is that necessarily, if one knows that p,
then p, whereas it is not the case that necessarily, if one believes that p, then p. If this is what he means, then he does not make the mistake allegedly ‘made every five years in Mind,’ that of inferring from the necessity of the conditional to the necessity of the consequent.⁶

In arguing that knowledge but not belief implies truth, Plato is distinguishing knowledge as such from belief as such, where this leaves open the possibility that knowledge is a species of belief. However, at some points in the argument he uses ‘belief’ (doxa) for mere belief: for belief that necessarily falls short of knowledge. He uses ‘belief’ in this way when he argues that the so-called sightlovers—who acknowledge sensibles but not forms—have belief but not knowledge. When belief is so conceived, knowledge is not a species of, and does not imply, belief. On the contrary, when belief is mere belief, the same person can’t, at t1, both know and believe that p. But even when belief is mere belief, it remains possible that every proposition that can be known can be believed. It’s just that, if p is both known and believed, it will be either by same person at different times or by different people at the same time or at different times.

3.

With this background in mind, let’s now turn to APo. 1.33. Aristotle begins by saying:⁷

What can be known (to epistêton) and knowledge (epistêmê) differ from what can be believed (to doxaston) and belief (doxa) because knowledge is universal and through (di’) necessities; and what is necessary cannot be otherwise. But there are some things that are true and are beings (esti de tina alêthê men kai onta), but that can also be otherwise. So it is clear that knowledge cannot be about (peri) these things; for then what can be otherwise could not be otherwise. But nor is understanding (nous) <about them> (for by ‘understanding’ I mean a principle of knowledge), nor non-demonstrative knowledge. (This is supposition (hupolépsis) of an immediate proposition (protasis).) But it is understanding, knowledge, belief, and what is called after them, that are true. Hence it remains that belief is

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⁶ J. Barnes, in Aristotle: Posterior Analytics (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975; 2nd ed. 1993), 97 (1st ed.), says that it is ‘quite conceivable’ that Aristotle makes this mistake; however, he also suggests an alternative explanation of why Aristotle restricts knowledge to what’s necessary. The remark is omitted in the second edition.

⁷ I generally follow the translations in Barnes’s Aristotle: Posterior Analytics (making use of both the first (1975) and second (1993) editions), though I sometimes alter them without comment. I take it that in saying that epistêmê is universal and through necessities, Aristotle means that the conclusions of demonstrations are universal propositions that have been inferred from premises that are necessarily true. (Here it’s worth recalling that Aristotle doesn’t restrict necessity to logical necessity.)
about what is true or false but can also be otherwise. This is supposition of a proposition that is immediate and not necessary. (88b30–89a4)

Like Plato in Republic 5, Aristotle contrasts epistêmê and doxa. As we’ve seen, Plato’s contrast, at least at some stages of his argument, is between knowledge and belief as such. That, however, is not the contrast Aristotle is drawing. First, he is not using epistêmê for all knowledge as he conceives of it, but only for what I shall call High-Level Knowledge (HLK): that is, for knowledge of the premises and conclusions of demonstrations grasped as such.⁸ Aristotle thinks knowledge is more extensive than HLK. But in this chapter he leaves lower-level sorts of knowledge to one side.⁹

Secondly, in 1.33 Aristotle uses doxa just for mere belief: for belief that necessarily falls short of knowledge. He uses ‘supposition’ (hupolêpsis) for the genus of which doxa and epistêmê are species.¹⁰ As mentioned above, when doxa is mere belief, knowledge isn’t a species of and doesn’t imply doxa. It doesn’t follow, however, that if a proposition can be known it can’t be believed. All that follows is that if it is both known and believed, it will be either by the same person at different times or by different people at the same time or at different times. Nor does it follow from the fact that Aristotle uses doxa for mere belief, that he doesn’t think knowledge is a species of belief as we understand belief: as taking a proposition to be true.¹¹ On the contrary, in saying that doxa is a species of supposition, he implies that it is a species of belief in ‘our’ sense of the term.

Though Aristotle’s contrast is between HLK and mere belief, rather than between knowledge and belief as such, for the sake of convenience I shall nonetheless from now on generally ask how he distinguishes knowledge from belief.

4.

At the beginning of the chapter, Aristotle plainly restricts knowledge to what’s universal and necessary. But it’s not clear whether he restricts belief to what’s contingent or merely means that belief includes what’s contingent. Nor is it clear

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⁸ Aristotle initially uses epistêmê just for the cognitive condition that apprehends the conclusions of demonstrations as such, reserving nous for the apprehension of immediates, which are, or at least include, real definitions. However, he also calls nous non-demonstrative epistêmê (88b36). (I agree with W. D. Ross, Aristotle’s Prior and Posterior Analytics (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949, 606–7), and Barnes, Aristotle: Posterior Analytics, 190, that ‘nor’ (ouden) in 88b36 is epexegetic.) So he uses epistêmê both narrowly, for the cognitive condition that apprehends the conclusions of demonstrations, and also more broadly, so as to include nous.

⁹ I discuss Aristotle on the scope of knowledge in Chapter 9. If lower-level knowledge falls under doxa, Aristotle’s distinction between epistêmê and doxa is exhaustive; otherwise, it isn’t.

¹⁰ Cf. De An. 427b25.

whether he is distinguishing knowledge from belief in terms of their different or disjoint propositions or in terms of their different or disjoint objects. There are at least three possibilities:

(a) Only propositions are at issue: knowledge is of universal (i.e. general) propositions that are necessarily true, whereas belief is either wholly or partly of propositions that are contingently true and contingently false.¹²

(b) Only objects are at issue: knowledge is of universals (which are beings, onta) that necessarily exist; belief is either wholly or partly of objects whose existence is contingent.

(c) Both propositions and objects are at issue: knowledge is both of universal propositions that are necessarily true and also of universal objects that necessarily exist. Belief is either wholly or partly of true and false propositions, and of objects whose existence is contingent.

On (a), Aristotle distinguishes knowledge from belief in terms of the truth implications of their contents. On (b), he distinguishes knowledge from belief in terms of the sorts of objects one can know and have beliefs about. On (c), he distinguishes knowledge from belief both in terms of the truth implications of their contents and also in terms of their objects. As we’ve seen, there are disputes about whether Plato, in Republic 5, distinguishes knowledge from belief in terms of their different truth implications or in terms of their different or disjoint objects. The same issue arises in interpreting 1.33.

One piece of evidence occurs in 88b32–3, where Aristotle uses the phrase ‘there are some things that are true and are beings.’¹³ One might take ‘and’ to be epexegetic, and argue that ‘true’ is being used for beings, in the sense of objects whose existence is contingent. That would favor (b).¹⁴ However, at least two other readings of the phrase are possible. First, perhaps ‘and’ is epexegetic in the other direction, such that ‘beings’ is used veridically, for truth.¹⁵ That would favor (a). Alternatively, perhaps ‘and’ is conjunctive: belief is either wholly or partly both of contingent truths and falsehoods and also of objects whose existence is contingent. That would favor (c).¹⁶

¹² Contingently true and false propositions include some general propositions: e.g. ‘Some men are tall,’ which is about a universal not spoken of universally. See De Int. 7, 17b7–12.
¹³ Cf. Rep. 508d4: alêtheia te kai to on; Tht. 178b6–7: alêthê te oietai hauto(i) kai onta.
¹⁴ For this interpretation, see M. Mignucci, L’argumentazione dimostrativa in Aristotele. Commento agli Analitici Secondi (Padua: Antenore, 1975), 647. The main passages that have been thought to show that Aristotle uses ‘true’ for objects (sometimes construed broadly so as to include states of affairs) are Met. 5.29 and Met. 9.10, 1051a34–1051b9.
¹⁵ This is how it is used in, for example, Met. 1017a31–5. Cf. APo. 71b25–6.
¹⁶ According to Philoponus (M. Wallies (ed.), Philoponus: in Aristotelis Analytica Posteriora Commentaria cum Anonymo in Librum II, in Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca 13.3 (Berlin: Reimer, 1909), 323.15–27), Alexander favors this interpretation (in his commentary on the Posterior Analytics, which unfortunately is no longer extant). Philoponus also seems sympathetic to it.
Of these three readings, I favor the second, according to which 'beings' is used veridically for truth. For Aristotle says that understanding is the supposition of an immediate proposition (protasis), and that belief is the supposition of an immediate proposition that is not necessary. If understanding and belief are supposition of a proposition, so too, presumably, is knowledge. Aristotle also says that knowledge, understanding, belief, and what is named from them (i.e. what can be known, understood, and believed), are true, and that belief is about what is true or false and can be otherwise (89a2–3). In speaking of knowledge, understanding, and belief as true, Aristotle means that these cognitive conditions can be spoken of as being true; and, he goes on to imply, belief can also be spoken of as being false. They are so called in virtue of the fact that they are of is true or, in the case of belief, either true or false; and he makes it clear that these are propositions. Hence Aristotle is thinking of propositional truth and falsity.

Aristotle’s claim, then, is that knowledge and understanding (that is, non-demonstrative epistêmê, i.e. epistêmê that can’t itself be demonstrated) imply truth, indeed necessary truth; whereas belief is either restricted to, or at least includes, contingent truths and falsehoods. So Aristotle—like Plato on my interpretation of him—distinguishes knowledge from belief in terms of their different truth implications; and they both do so by using einai veridically (though Aristotle clarifies the point by adding alêthê). They differ, however, in that Plato merely says that, necessarily, knowledge implies truth, whereas Aristotle says that knowledge implies necessary truth. (It doesn’t follow that he makes the mistake allegedly ‘made every five years in Mind’: he might hold the view on other grounds.)

Aristotle next defends his way of distinguishing knowledge from belief by saying that it agrees with two appearances (phainomena) (89a4–5). Perhaps looking at them will help us decide whether he thinks belief merely includes, or is restricted to, contingent truths and falsehoods. Perhaps it will also either reinforce or challenge my suggestion that he distinguishes knowledge from belief in terms of the truth implications of their contents.

17 It’s not clear why Aristotle says this about belief. But the crucial point is that he correlates belief with a certain sort of protasis, and so with a certain sort of proposition. Aristotle sometimes uses protasis for premises rather than for propositions as such; but I don’t think he does so here. But even if he does so, still, premises are a kind of proposition. So either way, belief is correlated with a certain kind of proposition.

18 If protasis is being used for premises, and knowledge is restricted to the conclusions of demonstrations, then knowledge isn’t a supposition of a protasis. But if Aristotle correlates belief and understanding with certain sorts of premises, presumably he correlates knowledge with conclusions and so with a certain sort of proposition. See previous note.
According to the first appearance, belief is unstable (abebaios).¹ Aristotle doesn’t say what stability amounts to here. It can be understood in at least three ways.

First, at the end of APo. 1.2, Aristotle says ‘it is not possible to be more confident (pisteuomen mallon) of what one in fact neither knows (eidenai) nor is more happily disposed towards than if one in fact knew it, than one is of what one knows’ (72a32–34); someone who has knowledge can’t be persuaded out of it (ametapeiston, 72b3–4). Since one is more confident of what one knows than of what one merely believes, one is less likely to lose one’s knowledge than one’s mere beliefs; hence knowledge is more stable than belief.

The point can be put in terms of the cognitive condition: I’m more liable to cease being in the cognitive condition of believing that p than to cease being in the cognitive condition of knowing that p. It can also be put in terms of the propositions that are known and believed: if I know that p, p is stable in the sense that it isn’t likely to cease being known by me; whereas, if I merely believe that p, p is unstable in the sense that it is more likely to cease being believed by me.

What’s at issue here is rational confidence, not subjective certainty. A proposition p is stable for the person who knows that p, because she sees why p is true; hence she is unlikely to abandon p in the face of counterarguments. A dogmatic believer who holds on to her beliefs come what may isn’t in a stable condition in the relevant sense.²

If this is Aristotle’s point, it leaves open the possibility, though it doesn’t imply, that there can be belief about every proposition that can be known. For the claim is just that if one knows that p, one’s supposition that p is stable in the right way; whereas, if one merely believes that p, it isn’t.

A second interpretation rests on Aristotle’s view that some propositions can change their truth value.²¹ For example, the proposition that Socrates is standing is true when he is standing; but it changes to being false when he sits down. If Aristotle has this point in mind, perhaps the first appearance means that, if A knows that p, p is stable in the sense that it is always true and can’t change from being true to being false. By contrast, if p can change its truth value, it can’t be known even when it’s true; one can in this case at most believe that p.

Can one not only know but also believe propositions that are always true and that can’t change from being true to being false? So Aristotle seems to allow in

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¹ Aristotle adds: ‘and that sort of nature’ (kai hè phusis hè toiautê). B1 translates: ‘and so too is the nature of the things in question,’ which suggests that both the cognitive condition and what it is of are unstable. But Aristotle need not be so understood: he might mean that just as belief is unstable, so too is whatever is relevantly like belief. However, see EN 1139a6–11.

² Cf. EN 1146b29–31; MM 1200b36; Cat. 8b27–8. This is the point Plato has in mind when he argues in the Meno that knowledge enjoys a sort of stability (monimoi, 98a6) that mere true belief lacks. See Chapter 3.

²¹ Cat. 4a34–b13; Top. 123a15–17; SE 178b25–9; Met. 1051b13–18. Cf. Barnes, Aristotle: Posterior Analytics, 189, 126.
Met. 1051b15–17: ‘beliefs (doxa) and statements (logos) about things that cannot be otherwise do not come to be at one time true and at another time false, but the same ones are always true and always false.’ Here Aristotle allows one to believe that \( p \) even if \( p \) is always true.²²

On a third interpretation, the first appearance says that the only objects one can know are stable, whereas the objects one can have beliefs about are either restricted to, or include, objects that are not stable. Aristotle does sometimes restrict knowledge to what’s stable in the sense of being everlasting.²³ But when he does so, he doesn’t restrict belief to objects that aren’t everlasting. Usually he doesn’t address the issue one way or the other. But in EN 1111b31–3 he explicitly allows beliefs about what’s everlasting: ‘belief (doxa) seems to be about everything, no less about things that are everlasting (\( \text{ta aidia} \)) and things that are impossible [for us] than about things that are up to us’ (Irwin transl. somewhat revised).²⁴

The first appearance, then, doesn’t help us decide whether Aristotle distinguishes knowledge from belief in terms of objects, propositions, or both. For elsewhere he makes a stability point both about propositions and about objects (and about cognitive conditions). When he makes one or another stability point elsewhere, he doesn’t restrict belief to what’s unstable. Indeed, in some passages he explicitly allows belief about what’s stable in the sense at issue there. The first appearance doesn’t explicitly say there can be belief about what’s stable. But it seems to leave that possibility open.²⁵

6.

Let’s now turn to the second appearance:

no one thinks (\( \text{oiêtai} \)) he believes something when he thinks it can’t be otherwise; rather, he thinks he knows it. But when he thinks it is so but nothing prevents it from being otherwise, he thinks he believes it, assuming that belief is of this sort of thing and that knowledge is of what is necessary. (89a7–10)

Aristotle claims that when someone takes \( p \) to be a necessary truth, she takes herself to know it and not to believe it; and when she takes \( p \) to be a contingent truth, she takes herself to believe it and not to know it. Why do people reason in

²² However, doxa might be being used here for belief as such rather than for mere belief. If so, the passage doesn’t show that one can merely believe a proposition that is always true.

²³ See e.g. APo. 1.8 (where, however, the perishability at issue involves propositional truth); Met. 1040a; EN 1139b22–4.

²⁴ Here, again, though, doxa might be belief as such; if so, the point made in n. 22 applies here as well.

²⁵ But see n. 22 and n. 24.
this way? Because they think belief is restricted to what’s contingently true or false, knowledge to what’s necessarily true.

In fact, not everyone thinks knowledge is restricted to what’s necessarily true, belief to what’s contingently true or false. Some people think contingent truths can be known. And some people think one can merely believe a proposition that’s necessarily true. One might, for example, believe that Fermat’s last theorem is necessarily true, but deny that one knows that it is, since (unlike Andrew Wiles) one can’t prove that it is.

Further, even if one thinks knowledge is restricted to what’s necessarily true, belief to what’s contingently true or false, one shouldn’t infer from one’s thinking that p is a necessary truth that one knows it, or from one’s thinking that p is a contingent truth that one merely believes it. For one might be wrong about its modal status.

Be that as it may, the crucial point for our purposes is that, according to the second appearance, knowledge is restricted to what’s necessary, belief to what’s contingent. Hence, if Aristotle accepts it wholesale, he’s committed to some version of a Strong Two Worlds Theory, on which what can be known and believed are disjoint. If, as I’ve assumed so far, propositions are at issue, the second appearance assumes STWP, on which the propositions that can be known and believed are disjoint. However, the second appearance can also be explained in terms of objects. The idea, in this case, would be that one can know an object only if it necessarily exists; if an object’s existence is contingent, one can at best have beliefs about that object. Further, one can’t have beliefs about any object whose existence is necessary. So, though the second appearance assumes a Strong Two Worlds Theory, it’s not clear whether it assumes STWO, STWP, or both.

But before assuming that Aristotle accepts either appearance wholesale, we should see what happens next. For, though Aristotle doesn’t express any misgivings about either appearance here, he sometimes modifies or clarifies appearances.

7.

Aristotle proceeds to ask two questions:

In what way (pòs), then, is it possible to believe and to know the same thing (to auto)? And why will belief not be knowledge, if one posits that it’s possible to believe everything one knows (oiden)? (89a11–13)

The first question asks whether, despite what’s been argued so far, there’s nonetheless a way in which it’s possible to believe and to know the same thing. The question is indeterminate in at least two ways. First, it’s not clear whether objects and/or propositions are at issue. Secondly, it’s not clear if the question is whether there can be belief about everything, or about anything, that can be known.
However we resolve these issues, perhaps Aristotle raises the first question because he realizes that he seems to have argued that nothing that can be known can be believed; he sees that that’s counterintuitive and wonders whether there’s a way out. The second question suggests that at least one way out leads to difficulty: for it suggests that if every proposition that can be known can be believed, belief will be knowledge.

The two questions taken together therefore raise an *aporia*: difficulties arise whether or not we say that what can be known can be believed. The rest of the chapter is devoted to resolving this *aporia*.

It may seem clear that even if every proposition that can be known can be believed, belief would not be knowledge. For, as Plato and Aristotle agree, there are false propositions and they can’t be known. However, the second question seems to be asking whether *true* belief would be knowledge, if every proposition that can be known can be believed. For if p can be known, it’s true. Hence if someone believes that p, her belief is true. What, then, determines whether she knows, or just has a true belief, that p? Nonetheless, I’ll continue to follow Aristotle’s lead and ask, as he does, how to distinguish belief from knowledge.

Before replying to either question, Aristotle explains why it might seem problematical to allow that everything that can be known can be believed:

For the knower (*eidōs*) and the believer will follow <the same steps> through the middle terms until they come to the immediates; so that (*hōste*) since the former knows, the believer also knows. For just as one can believe the fact (*to hōti*), so too <one can believe> the reason why (*to dihōti*); and that is the middle term.

(89a13–16)

Aristotle plainly has propositions in mind here: he’s considering a case in which two people—a knower and an alleged mere believer—consider a demonstrated conclusion and trace it back to its grounds, eventually to its ultimate grounds. The suggestion is that, in this case, the alleged mere believer has knowledge. For he accepts exactly the same propositions as the knower does. Hence, if every proposition that can be known can be believed, belief will be knowledge.

On the assumption that belief is not knowledge, there are two ways of responding to this argument. First, one might accept the conditional and argue that not every proposition that can be known can be believed. There are at least some propositions that can be known but not believed. If one accepts such a proposition, one thereby knows it; mere belief isn’t an option.²⁶ Secondly, one might

²⁶ For recent discussion and criticism of the closely-related view that there are some propositions such that to understand them is to know them, see T. Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).
reject the conditional and argue that belief would not be knowledge even if every proposition that can be known can be believed.²⁷

8.

Which of these replies does Aristotle favor? He begins by saying:²⁸

Or (ē) if he supposes something about what cannot be otherwise in the way in which he grasps (echei) the definitions through which demonstrations <proceed>, won’t he not believe (doxasei) but know it? While if he supposes that they are true but not that they belong to them in virtue of their essence and form (kat’ousian kai kata to eidos), won’t he believe and not truly know—both the fact and the reason why, if he believes through the immediates, but if not through the immediates, he will believe only the fact? (89a16–23)

The passage is terse and difficult to interpret. But on what is perhaps the most natural interpretation, Aristotle is asking whether we should say that, where p is a necessary truth, one knows, and doesn’t believe, that p when one grasps that it is a necessary truth, whereas one believes but doesn’t know that p when one doesn’t grasp that it is a necessary truth.²⁹ On this interpretation, if Aristotle answers ‘yes’ to the question he asks here, he rejects the conditional considered in 89a11–13. He would be suggesting that even if every proposition that can be known can be believed, belief would not be knowledge. Whether a given necessary truth p is known or believed depends on whether one grasps that it is a necessary truth.

But it’s not clear that Aristotle endorses the suggestion he considers here; to see whether he does so, we need to look at what he says next. Before doing so, however, it’s worth noting that, if he does endorse the suggestion, he is committed to the view that if p is necessarily true and one supposes that it is necessarily true, one thereby knows that p. Yet it seems that any proposition can be accepted on inadequate grounds. For example, I might suppose that p is necessarily true (when it is) because I read that it is in a well-respected journal. Unbeknownst to me, however, there was a typo, and the author meant to claim that the proposition is not necessarily true. If Aristotle believes that taking a proposition to be

²⁷ One might also challenge the argument Aristotle gives on behalf of the conditional, but I shall not do so here. It compares interestingly with the geometrical discussion in the Meno: though the slave in some sense follows a proof, Socrates says he doesn’t know the answer (85bd).
²⁸ I retain echei. Though the OCT deletes it, it is found in most MSs.
²⁹ Aristotle speaks both of what can’t be otherwise (i.e. of what’s necessary) and of essence. I shall focus on necessity.
necessarily true, when it is, is sufficient for knowing that it is true, we should be disappointed.²⁰

9.

Aristotle proceeds to argue—characteristically—that ‘there is not belief and knowledge of the same thing (tou autou) in every way’ (89a23–4). But neither, he argues, do they exclude one another in every way. For just as there’s a way in which there can be true and false belief about the same thing, so there’s a way in which there can be knowledge and belief about the same thing. So his resolution to the aporia raised by the two questions in 89a11–13 is: there’s a way in which one can believe and know the same thing, and a way in which one can’t. What are these ways?

Let’s look first at Aristotle’s explanation of how there can be true and false belief about the same thing. For it is meant to illuminate the way in which there can be knowledge and belief about the same thing. Aristotle explains that:³¹

> to believe truly that the diagonal is commensurate is absurd. But because the diagonal that the beliefs are about (peri) is the same, in this way they are of the same thing, though what it is to be each of them in respect of its account is not the same. (89a29–32)

One can’t believe truly that the diagonal is commensurate (sc. because it isn’t). But one can have the false belief that the diagonal is commensurate. One can also have the true belief that it is incommensurate. That is, one person can have the true belief that it is incommensurate, and someone else can have the false belief that it is commensurate; or the same person can have first one of these beliefs, then the other. Here the ‘same thing’ is an object, the diagonal. The propositions expressing true and false belief are different; but they are about the same object.

Aristotle’s language is reminiscent of the Sophist, which explains false belief as believing, of x, what isn’t true of x.³² At t₁, I might falsely believe, of Theaetetus, that he is flying; and you might believe truly, of him, that he is sitting. The thing, x, is the same, but the propositions about x are different.

Aristotle proceeds to use this account of how there can be true and false belief about the same thing, to show how there can be belief about what can be known:

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²¹ Aristotle offers two accounts of false belief, rejecting the first but accepting the second. I focus on the second account.
²² Sophist 262e–264b. There’s considerable dispute about precisely how the Sophist explains false statement and belief. Fortunately, this need not concern us here.
Aristotle immediately infers:

It is clear from this that it is not possible to believe and to know the same thing at the same time. For then one would at the same time have the supposition that the same thing can be otherwise and that it cannot be otherwise—which is not possible. In different people it is possible for there to be each of these attitudes with regard to the same thing, as has been said. But in the same person it is not possible even in this way. For he would at the same time have the supposition that e.g. a man is just what is an animal (for this is what it is for it not to be possible for a man not to be an animal), and also the supposition that man is not just what is an animal (for let that be what it is for it to be possible).

(89a38–b6)

Aristotle has now provided his considered account of the way in which there can, and the way in which there can’t, be knowledge and belief of the same thing.

10.

But what are these ways? Aristotle summarizes them in 89a36–7: knowledge and belief can both be of the same thing, e.g. man. But ‘they are not the same in the way they take man to be.’

On the most natural interpretation of this remark, the point is that if to auto is an object, there can be belief about everything that can be known: one can both know, and have beliefs about, e.g. man. If, however, to auto is a proposition, nothing that can be known can be believed. Consider, for example, suppositions about what man is. If one’s supposition amounts to knowledge, one knows the proposition ‘Man is necessarily an animal.’ If, however, one’s supposition is a mere belief, one believes that, as Aristotle puts it, ‘the same thing [man] can be otherwise’: that is, one believes the proposition ‘Man is not necessarily an animal.’ Strictly speaking, knowledge is of the form ‘x is necessarily F,’ and belief is of the form ‘x is not necessarily F’ (or: ‘x is contingently F’). Let’s call this the Same

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33 In speaking of ‘the animal,’ Aristotle means e.g. man, which he goes on to discuss.
34 To auto. Here we might have expected tou autou, for Aristotle’s point is not that knowledge and belief are the same, but that what can be known and believed is the same.
Object, Different Proposition view (SODP). On it, Aristotle claims that no propositions can be both known and believed. If Aristotle advocates SODP, his answer to the question raised in 89a16–23 is ‘no.’ He pulls back, and suggests a different view (though one that still assumes that, if one supposes that p is necessarily true, when it is, one thereby knows that p).

SODP has much to recommend it (as an interpretation of the chapter: whether it is philosophically plausible is another matter). First, 89a36–7 says that knowledge and belief are of the same thing, because man is the same; they differ in how they take man to be. This is most naturally taken to mean that, though the same object (e.g. man) can be both known and believed, the propositions expressing knowledge and belief are different.

Secondly, we should expect Aristotle’s considered view to turn on a difference between objects and propositions. For he uses his account of true and false belief to explain how there can be belief about everything that can be known; and the key move in that account is to distinguish between propositions and objects. He then uses that account to explain that, just as there can be true and false beliefs about the same objects, though the propositions by which one does so are disjoint, so there can be knowledge and belief about the same objects, though the propositions by which one does so are disjoint.

Thirdly, SODP provides a clear account of how Aristotle answers the two questions raised at 89a11–13. The first question, we’ve seen, asks how it’s possible to know and believe the same thing. According to SODP, one can do so if ‘the same thing’ is an object, but not if it is a proposition. The second question, we’ve seen, asks whether belief would be knowledge, if every proposition that can be known can be believed. SODP accepts this conditional; to avoid the consequent, it says that no propositions can be both known and believed.

Fourthly, notice that in the example Aristotle gives, the belief about what man is, is false. Why does Aristotle suggest this? SODP provides an answer. For if Aristotle thinks that no propositions can be both known and believed, there can’t be both knowledge and true belief about any proposition saying what man is. Aristotle thinks there can be knowledge about what man is. Hence there can’t also be true belief about what man is. So either there are no beliefs about what man is, or else there can be false beliefs here. Aristotle plumps for the latter option.⁵

Even if there can’t be any mere true beliefs about what man is (for here one has either knowledge or a false belief), there can be mere true beliefs about man. One might e.g. have the true belief that man is tall (i.e. that some men are tall).

Fifthly, Aristotle says that ‘it is clear from this that it is not possible to believe and to know the same thing at the same time’ (89a38–9). We might have expected him to say that the reason is that no one can simultaneously know, and merely

⁵ Cf. Met. 9.10, where Aristotle seems to say that in the case of essences, one either grasps the truth or is out of touch; error is impossible, except accidentally.
believe, that p. For, as we’ve seen, ‘belief,’ here, is mere belief; and one can’t, at t1, both know and merely believe that p. But that is not the reason he gives. Rather, he says that if one knew and believed the same thing at the same time, one would be supposing that the same thing, x, both can and can’t be otherwise: one would simultaneously accept the propositions that (e.g.) ‘Man is necessarily an animal’ and ‘Man is not necessarily an animal’; one would be committed to accepting contradictory claims. This suggests that knowledge is always of the form ‘x is necessarily F,’ whereas belief is always of the form ‘x is not necessarily F.’ On SOPD, it’s clear why Aristotle says this: he thinks belief would be knowledge, if every proposition that can be known can be believed. To avoid that result, he suggests that the propositions that can be known and believed are disjoint.

Sixthly, on SODP, the chapter is clear and straightforward: we can now see that Aristotle’s opening remarks say that knowledge is restricted to necessary truths, belief to contingent truths. Aristotle then supports that view with two appearances, the second of which relies on the assumption that everyone thinks that belief is restricted to contingent truths, knowledge to necessary truths. Aristotle doesn’t revise or modify that view; he accepts it as is. He proceeds to note, however, that his view seems to conflict with the intuition that the same thing can be known and believed. To avoid the conflict, he turns from propositions to objects.

Though SODP fits the chapter well, one might think it has at least two disadvantages. First, Aristotle is often thought to believe that, where p is a proposition that can be known, one first believes that p is true, and then acquires HLK that it is true either (if p is demonstrable) by demonstrating it or (if it is a first principle) by coming to have nous of it. On SODP, Aristotle would be speaking loosely when he speaks that way. Strictly speaking, one first believes one proposition, and then comes to know a different proposition.³⁶ Secondly, one might find SODP philosophically unattractive; for one might think that propositions that can be known can be believed.

Neither objection is as serious as it might seem to be. As to the first, at most once in the Analytics (at 76b28–34) does Aristotle suggest that one can first have the doxa that p and then come to know that p.³⁷ And perhaps Aristotle is speaking loosely there: the passage occurs before 1.33; and he sometimes speaks loosely before turning to a deeper and more technical discussion. As to the second objection, while it’s true that, on SODP, no proposition that can be known can


³⁷ Thanks to David Bronstein for calling this passage to my attention. Though Aristotle doesn’t elsewhere say that one can first have the doxa that p and then come to know that p, he does elsewhere say that one can first know (eidênaí) that p and then come to know why p is so. See e.g. APo. 2.1., 89b29–31; cf. 38–9 (gnôntes).
be believed, that doesn’t imply that the same proposition can’t be grasped in more than one way. Perhaps, for example, before demonstrating that p, one can entertain p, or consider it, or wonder whether it’s true.³⁸

Still, it may be worthwhile to consider a second interpretation. Perhaps Aristotle thinks that every proposition that can be known can be believed, but the knower and believer accept the same propositions in different ways. One can, for example, both know and believe the proposition ‘Man is an animal.’ When one knows it, one sees that it expresses a necessary truth. When one believes it, one does not see this: one either has no views about its modality or else takes it to express a contingent truth. (In fact, as we’ve seen, Aristotle plumps for the latter option, since he says that the believer supposes that man is not just what is an animal, and that it is possible for man not to be an animal.) Let’s call this the Same Proposition, Different Mode of Apprehension view (SPDM).³⁹

On SPDM, Aristotle answers the first question raised in 89a11–13, about whether the same thing can be known and believed, by saying that every proposition that can be known can be believed. And it answers the second question raised there by rejecting the conditional and saying that, though every proposition that can be known can also be believed, belief isn’t knowledge because the modes of apprehension differ.

In favor of SPDM is the fact that it allows Aristotle to say that one can first believe that p and then come to know that p. For one might hope he allows this, even though he rarely speaks that way. One might also favor SPDM if one thinks Aristotle answers ‘yes’ to the question raised in 89a16–23.

However, SPDM has disadvantages. First, we’ve seen that Aristotle’s account of true and false belief relies crucially on a distinction between objects and propositions. On SPDM, the role played by objects is played by propositions; and the role played by propositions is played by modes of apprehension. The parallelism is not nearly as neat as it is on SODP; indeed, on SPDM the discussion of true and false belief might seem misleading.

Secondly, when Aristotle introduces the second appearance, he doesn’t express any misgivings about it. But on SPDM, he rejects it outright. If he were going to do so, it would be odd that he initially mentions the second appearance in support of his own view.

Thirdly, we’ve seen that Aristotle suggests that mere beliefs about what man is are false. On SPDM, he should say instead just that the mere believer believes that

³⁸ Thanks to Linda Zagzebski and Ursula Coope for discussion of this point.
³⁹ This interpretation may be favored by Philoponus (in M. Wallies (ed.), Philoponus: in Aristotelis Analytica Posteriora Commentaria cum Anonymo in Librum II, in Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca 13.3 (Berlin: Reimer, 1909), 328.14–329.2), and by J. Zabarella, In Duos Aristotelis Libros Posterioriores Analyticos Commentarii, in Opera Logica (Cologne, 1597; rev. ed. 1966), esp. p. 1025, though I am not sure about that. They may instead favor TFP, which I consider shortly.
man is an animal. He need not say that the mere believer falsely believes that man is not necessarily an animal. Yet that is what he says.

Further, SPDM aims to show how every proposition that can be known can be believed. But even if it shows how ‘Man is an animal’ can be both known and believed, it doesn’t seem to show how ‘Man is necessarily an animal’ can be both known and believed. For here modality is part of the content of the proposition. We could stipulate that modality is never part of the content of a proposition. But that seems ad hoc. Nor does it seem to be Aristotle’s usual view. In his modal syllogistic, for example, modality seems to be a part of some propositions.

So let’s consider a third interpretation, according to which some but not all of the propositions that can be known can be believed. Propositions like ‘Man is an animal’ can be both known and believed, but propositions like ‘Man is necessarily an animal’ can be known but not believed. Let’s call propositions of the former sort ‘truncated propositions,’ and propositions of the latter sort ‘full propositions.’ According to the third interpretation, every truncated proposition that can be known can be believed, but no full proposition can be both known and believed. Let’s call this the Truncated vs. Full Proposition view (TFP).

TFP answers the first question in 89a11–13 by saying that every truncated proposition that can be known can be believed, but no full proposition that can be known can be believed. It answers the second question in 89a11–13 by rejecting the conditional if it is read in terms of truncated propositions, but by accepting it if it is read in terms of full propositions.

TFP fares better than SPDM does. First, whereas SPDM rejects the second appearance, TFP modifies or clarifies it: it is false understood in terms of truncated propositions, but true understood in terms of full propositions. Though it would be odd if Aristotle rejected the second appearance outright, it would not be odd if he modified or clarified it. Secondly, TFP allows Aristotle to say that, though the believer believes that man is an animal (and so to that extent has a true belief), he is committed to accepting the corresponding full proposition that ‘Man is not necessarily an animal,’ which is false. So it fits better than SPDM does with Aristotle’s suggestion that mere beliefs about what man is are false. Thirdly, TFP doesn’t need to say that modality is never part of a proposition.

Though TFP fares better than SPDM does, it doesn’t fit the chapter as well as SODP does. First, we’ve seen that the crucial distinction in the discussion of true and false belief is between objects and propositions. TFP transfers the role played by objects to truncated propositions, and the role played by propositions to full propositions. The parallelism is not as neat on TFP as it is on SODP. Secondly, Aristotle says that knowledge and belief are of the same thing because they are both of man. On TFP, one would expect him to say instead that they are of the same thing because they are both of the proposition that man is an animal. But that is not what he says. Thirdly, though it would not in principle be problematic were Aristotle to modify or clarify an appearance, the chapter reads more
smoothly if he doesn’t modify the ones at issue here. Rather, he adduces them in his support, and then moves on to other issues. And that’s what happens on SODP. On TFP, by contrast, he modifies or clarifies the second appearance without calling attention to the fact. Fourthly, TPF may seem little more than a sop to those who find it counterintuitive to suppose that no propositions can be both known and believed. To them, Aristotle says: the same truncated propositions can be both known and believed. But he then adds that, strictly speaking, no one ever supposes just a truncated proposition; in accepting any proposition, one is committed to accepting a full proposition. This doesn’t show that TFP doesn’t fit the chapter. But it perhaps gives us a reason to doubt its philosophical credentials; and that, in turn, might make us more inclined to favor the more straightforward SOPD.

I’ve suggested three interpretations of Aristotle’s final view. According to SODP, one can have beliefs about every object that can be known, but no proposition can be both known and believed. According to SPDM, every proposition that can be known can be believed; knowledge and belief differ in the way in which they accept propositions. According to TFP, no full proposition can be both known and believed; but every truncated proposition that can be known can be believed. Each of these interpretations has advantages and disadvantages. But all things considered, SODP seems the best interpretation, with TFP being the runner up.

11.

By way of conclusion, let’s ask how 1.33 compares with Plato’s argument in Rep. 5. As we’ve seen, the argument in Rep. 5 doesn’t commit Plato to either STWO or WTWO: it leaves open the possibility that there can be knowledge and belief of exactly the same objects. Nor does the argument commit Plato to either STWP or WTWP: it leaves open the possibility that every proposition that can be known can be believed.

On all the interpretations I’ve considered, 1.33 rejects STWO but accepts WTWO. For it restricts the objects that can be known to those that necessarily exist, but it allows us to have beliefs about them. Hence, unlike the argument in Rep. 5, 1.33 is committed to a Weak Two Worlds Theory for Objects.⁴⁰ (Of course, if, unlike me, one thinks the Rep. 5 argument defends STWO, then it is committed to a more robust Two Worlds Theory for Objects than 1.33 is. If, unlike me, one thinks the argument in Rep. 5 defends WTWO, then it agrees with 1.33 on this point. In either of these two cases, though, Plato and Aristotle would still differ

⁴⁰ If, however, as I’ve argued, Aristotle focuses on the different truth implications of knowledge and belief, then his commitment to WTWO is more implied than stated.
insofar as different objects would be at issue: forms vs. sensibles for Plato; what’s necessary vs. what’s contingent for Aristotle.

As to propositions, whereas Plato says just that knowledge but not belief implies truth, Aristotle, on all the interpretations I’ve considered, says that knowledge implies necessary truth. Hence, just as 1.33 has a more restrictive view than *Rep.* 5 does about the range of objects that can be known, so it has a more restrictive view about the range of propositions that can be known. In denying that contingent truths can be known, 1.33 is committed to a Weak Two Worlds Theory for Propositions.

What about a Strong Two Worlds Theory for Propositions? The three interpretations we’ve considered answer this question differently. On SPDM, Aristotle rejects a Strong Two Worlds Theory for Propositions. However, SPDM is the least plausible interpretation. TFP avoids a Strong Two Worlds Theory for Propositions in the case of truncated propositions; but it accepts one for full propositions. SODP straightforwardly simply accepts a Strong Two Worlds Theory for Propositions.

It’s often thought that, in *Rep.* 5, Plato defends some version of a Two Worlds Theory, though in my view he does not do so. However that may be, if the argument of this chapter is correct, Aristotle is committed to a Weak Two Worlds Theory for both Objects and Propositions; and on the two most plausible of the three interpretations we’ve considered, he’s also committed to some version of a Strong Two Worlds Theory for Propositions. It’s therefore Aristotle, not Plato, who defends a Two Worlds Theory.⁴¹

⁴¹ Earlier versions were read at Oxford, Yale, Cambridge, Bologna, and the Aristotelian Society. Thanks to the audiences for helpful discussion. Thanks too to Ursula Coope, Paolo Crivelli, Dominic Scott, David Sedley, and Linda Zagzebski for helpful discussion; to Walter Cavini, Andrew Chignell, Michail Peramatzis, and Malcolm Schofield for helpful written comments; and to David Bronstein for helpful written and oral comments, and for sharing his own paper on 1.33 with me.
PART III
SEXTUS
One of the most vexed questions about ancient skepticism is whether ancient skeptics disavow all, or only some, beliefs. On what I shall call the No Belief View, skeptics claim to have no beliefs whatsoever. On what I shall call the Some Belief View, skeptics disavow only some beliefs.¹ It is difficult to adjudicate this debate. One reason is the intractability of the texts. Another is that it is unclear precisely what question is being asked. Here it is useful to distinguish two questions:

1. Do skeptics disavow all, or only some, dogmata?²
2. Do they disavow all, or only some, beliefs, as we understand belief?

1 is an internal question: it asks what the skeptics say in their own words. 2 is an external question: it asks whether we should say that skeptics claim to have beliefs, given ‘our’ concept of belief. The answer to 1 is in a way easy: for in PH I 13, Sextus explicitly says that skeptics have dogmata.³ But this leaves unanswered a more difficult question: whether, in doing so, he means that skeptics have beliefs, as we might wish to understand belief. This leads to another difficult question: for there is no agreed concept of belief that ‘we’ all share: belief is understood in various ways. Accordingly, I proceed in two stages. First I say how I propose to understand

¹ Note that my question is whether skeptics claim to have some, or no beliefs. (There is evidently a difficulty in claiming to have no beliefs; but I shall not pursue that issue here.) I am not asking whether they in fact have some, or no, beliefs.


³ Similarly, in PH I 229–30, he says that there is a way or sense in which skeptics ‘go along with’ (peithesthai) various things: a different way or sense, according to Sextus, from that in which Academics go along with things. In M XI 118, he says that skeptics believe (doxazein) that nothing is good or bad by nature. M XI, however, may well be at odds with PH in various ways. I don’t know of a place in PH where Sextus says that skeptics have doxai, though he several times says that they live adoxastos: see n. 65.
belief here, and I contrast my understanding of belief with another one. I then ask whether, when Sextus says that skeptics have *dogmata*, he means to say that they have beliefs, as I shall understand belief here.⁴

2.

Quite a lot of attention has been devoted to asking what knowledge is. But the notion of belief is often taken for granted, as though it raised no special difficulties. Richard Braithwaite, for example, says: ‘I intend to discuss a comparatively minor problem . . . that of the analysis of the cognitive relations in which I can stand to propositions, and in particular the most practically important of them, the relation of believing.’⁵ Far from being ‘a comparatively minor problem,’ however, the analysis of belief is both very important and very difficult. It would take us too far afield to provide a full discussion here. Instead, I shall focus on how Michael Frede and Myles Burnyeat understand belief; for they are among the main contributors to the debate between the Some Belief and the No Belief Views.⁶ I shall also say how I propose to use ‘belief.’ Once we have fixed a sense of the term, we can ask whether Sextus accords skeptics beliefs in that sense.

According to Burnyeat, if A believes p, A takes p to be true.⁷ This view is hardly idiosyncratic. On the contrary, it is usually thought to be definitionally true that to

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⁴ My scope is therefore limited: I make no claims about whether non-Pyrrhonian skeptics claim to have beliefs; nor do I make any claims about Pyrrhonists other than Sextus, or even about Sextus outside of *PH I* 13 and some related passages, especially I 19–22 (which claim to elucidate I 13). My focus on Sextus is justified by the fact that he is our main source for Pyrrhonian skepticism. My focus on I 13 is justified by the fact that it is the only passage in which Sextus explicitly says that skeptics have *dogmata*, and explains what this means. Moreover, the early sections of *PH I* play a special role, since here Sextus explicitly says how all of what follows is to be understood. A fuller study would discuss not only more passages, but also Sextus’s use of *doxa* and its cognates, as well as of *peithesthai* and its cognates.


⁷ See e.g. Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 121. Burnyeat also thinks that beliefs are responsive to reason and that that is implied by the fact that belief aims at the truth (‘Can,’ 137). This point, with which I agree, is well articulated by D. Velleman, in ‘The Possibility of Practical Reason,’ *Ethics* 106 (1996), 694–726, esp. 706–7. I focus here on the issue of whether belief involves taking to be true; I shall not ask separately whether it involves being responsive to reason. On the view I favor, there is no need to do so; for on that view, since belief involves taking to be true, it is also responsive to reason.
believe p is to take p to be true. Whatever other disputes there are about belief, this much, at least, is generally agreed. I shall therefore call this ‘the standard view of belief.’

Frede rejects the standard view. He argues that one can believe p without taking p to be true. In ‘The Skeptic’s Two Kinds of Assent,’ he does so by distinguishing between (a) having a view and (b) making a claim or taking a position, where these are meant to be two kinds of belief or assent. He argues that skeptics have beliefs of sort (a), but not of sort (b). In explaining (a), he says that ‘[t]o just have a view is to find oneself being left with an impression, to find oneself having an impression after having considered the matter . . . But however carefully one has considered a matter it does not follow that the impression one is left with is true, nor that one thinks that it is true’ (206). Now, one can certainly have the impression that p, without p’s actually being true. But if p is a belief, that shows only that one can have false beliefs. What Frede wants to say, however, is that one can have an impression that one doesn’t take to be true, which is nonetheless a belief.

One can certainly have an impression that p that one does not take to be true, if the impression is not a belief: if my impression that p is a non-doxastic appearance, then I have the impression that p without taking p to be true. To explain this, I need to say something about non-doxastic appearances. A classic example of a non-doxastic appearance is its appearing to me that an oar is bent in water, though I do not believe the oar is bent. However, non-doxastic appearances are not restricted to perceptual illusions, or even to the perceptual sphere: an argument might look sound to me even if I do not believe, even tentatively, that it is sound.

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10 206ff. In addition to suggesting that belief needn’t involve taking to be true, Frede also suggests that it need not be responsive to reason; but see n. 7. In ‘The Skeptic’s Beliefs,’ Frede distinguishes between believing p, and believing that p is really so. I shall not discuss this distinction in any detail here; but see n. 18 and n. 73. Frede’s arguments are also discussed by C. Shields, in ‘Socrates among the Sceptics,’ in P. Vander Waerdt (ed.), The Socratic Movement (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 341–66, at 350–3.

11 Or, as Frede (‘The Skeptic’s Beliefs,’ 189) and Burnyeat (‘Can,’ 136) call them, non-epistemic appearances. I prefer ‘non-doxastic,’ since the relevant appearances aren’t supposed to be beliefs (doxai) any more than they are supposed to be knowledge (epistêmê).
Perhaps, for example, I do not think I am in a position to evaluate its premises; or perhaps it has been propounded by Jones, who is well known for presenting arguments that seem sound but that contain subtle flaws.¹² So, it can non-doxastically appear to one that p, without one’s taking p to be true. But this can’t (or shouldn’t) be what Frede has in mind. For he argues that the ‘beliefs’ at issue here are not non-doxastic appearances.¹³ So we need to press further.

Frede goes on to say that ‘[t]o be left with the impression or thought that p . . . does not involve the further thought that it is true that p’ (206, emphasis added). Now, one can of course have the thought that p without saying or thinking, in addition, ‘Moreover, I think that p is true.’ Indeed, it would be odd to say or think ‘I believe it’s raining,’ and then go on to say or think, as a further thought, ‘Moreover, I believe that it’s true that it’s raining.’ But in saying that belief involves taking to be true, the standard view doesn’t mean that, when one believes p, one also has an explicit (or even an implicit) further thought that p is true. Rather, according to the standard view, to believe p consists in, or essentially involves, taking p to be true. To say that water consists in or essentially is H₂O doesn’t mean that wherever there’s water, there is, in addition, H₂O. Rather, water is H₂O; and belief is (or essentially involves) taking to be true.

Frede next notes that Sextus uses eudokein (to acquiesce in or consent to something) in explaining skeptical assent. He says that eudokein can indicate either an explicit act of acknowledgment or ‘a passive acquiescence or acceptance of something, in the way in which a people might accept a ruler, not by some act of approval or acknowledgement, but by acquiescence in his rule, by failing to resist, to effectively reject his rule’ (207). Similarly, he suggests, there are two ways of accepting an impression or, as I shall say, of accepting an appearance.¹⁴ For the Stoics, assent to an appearance involves taking it to be true;¹⁵ this, Frede suggests, is analogous to accepting a ruler by an explicit act of acknowledgment. Alternatively, ‘[o]ne might, having considered matters, just acquiesce in the impression one is left with, without though taking the step to accept the impression positively by thinking the further thought that the impression is true’ (208).

¹² It’s disputed whether there are non-doxastic appearances outside the perceptual sphere. I think there are; whether or not I’m right about that, Sextus seems to think there are. He says, for example, that the whole of PH merely records how things appear to him to be (I 4); and the appearances he records range outside the perceptual sphere. Hence he speaks not only of things appearing to sense, but also of things appearing to reason (PH II 10). See Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ for a good defense of these claims.

¹³ This is a central argument of Frede, ‘The Skeptic’s Beliefs’; see 186ff.

¹⁴ Frede translates phantasia as ‘impression’; I prefer ‘appearance,’ since that preserves the connection with phainesthai.

¹⁵ See the passages collected in A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, The Hellenistic Philosophers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), sects. 40–1. According to the Stoics, assent (sunkatathesis) issues either in doxa (which the Stoics seem to think involves taking to be true) or katalêpsis (which they clearly think involves taking to be true). To be sure, they may recognize a sort of acceptance that falls short of taking to be true, which is characteristic of animals and children. However, their technical term for this seems to have been eikein: see B. Inwood, Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism (Oxford, 1985), ch. 3, esp. 72–91.
This is supposed to be analogous to acquiescing in someone’s rule by failing to resist it, and so on.¹⁶

The analogy seems to be that, just as one acquiesces in someone’s rule if one fails to resist it, so one accepts one’s impression (appearance) that p if one doesn’t object to p.¹⁷ However, not objecting to p is too weak for believing that p. There are many claims I do not object to, that I do not believe. I might not object to your claim that you are a genius, not because I believe you, but because, though I don’t believe you, I don’t want to undermine your self-esteem.¹⁸

In addition to saying that having a view involves not objecting, Frede also says that ‘[i]t might be the case that the action does not require that one take the impression one is acting on to be true’ (208). I agree that one can act on the basis of a view one does not take to be true. That is what one does in, for example, play acting, in assuming something as a hypothesis to be explored, and in various dialectical contexts. Here it’s useful to introduce a distinction between what Robert Stalnaker calls acceptance and belief.¹⁹ According to Stalnaker, if one

¹⁶ Frede also discusses an analogy or example of a ruler in 'The Skeptic’s Beliefs,' 194. He is interpreting a passage in Polybius; see further, section 4 below. In PH I 229–30, Sextus distinguishes two ways of 'going along with' (peithesthai) something: (i) ‘as a boy is said to go along with his chaperon; and (ii) ‘as a dissolute man goes along with someone who urges dissolute living.’ In (i), one follows ‘without strong inclination or adherence (prosphatieis).’ In (ii), one assents to something ‘by choice and, as it were, sympathy.’ Sextus says that Pyrrhonists go along with various things only in the first way. Sextus’s example (or analogy) is reminiscent of Frede’s ruler analogy, although Frede curiously doesn’t explicitly discuss this passage in any detail. Whatever we make of it, I don’t think it illustrates believing something without taking it to be true. Either the boy doesn’t believe his chaperon at all, but just acts as the chaperon tells him to; or else he believes what the chaperon says without, however, being deeply wedded to it—he just unreflectively takes it over. The choice between these two interpretations may affect our view as to whether Pyrrhonists claim to have any beliefs (a topic I turn to later). But our present concern is whether belief involves taking something to be true. I don’t think I 229–30 denies that it does. Annas and Barnes, 61 n. 253, agree insofar as they say that (i) doesn’t articulate any notion of belief: hence it doesn’t, in their view, articulate a notion of belief that does not involve taking to be true.

¹⁷ On an alternative interpretation, Frede means that one accepts the fact that one has a given impression (appearance) without, however, taking the impression (appearance) itself to be true: one accepts that it appears to one that p, but one doesn’t take p to be true. If this is what Frede means, however, then I’d say that one believes, and takes it to be true, that one has a given impression (appearance); but one doesn’t believe or take it to be true that the content of the appearance is true. On this interpretation, there is nothing one believes but doesn’t take to be true. Though this seems to be a natural interpretation of the passage just quoted from Frede, I don’t think it is what has in mind. For it doesn’t seem to be analogous to failing to resist a ruler. Moreover, Frede argues against the view that skeptical dogmata are (only) about the skeptic’s own appearances (see e.g. 'The Skeptic’s Beliefs,' 186).

¹⁸ Frede is aware of this objection: see 'The Skeptic’s Beliefs,' 197. His reply is that the skeptic does believe that, for example, it is raining; but he doesn’t believe that it is really raining. I’m not entirely sure how to understand this distinction. At times, Frede seems to mean that the skeptic doesn’t have a scientific explanation of the nature of rain; at other times, he seems to mean that the skeptic isn’t certain that it’s raining. However, one can take it to be true that it’s raining even if one has no scientific explanation of the nature of rain and even if one isn’t certain that it’s raining. At other times, Frede seems to mean that the skeptic ‘insulates’ his ‘ordinary’ beliefs from theoretical beliefs, so that even if, for example, he doesn’t believe time exists, he will nonetheless believe that Socrates died in 399 BC ('The Skeptic’s Beliefs,' 190–1). As against this, see Burney, 'The Skeptic in His Place and Time.'

¹⁹ See Inquiry, esp. 79–81. The same sort of distinction has been drawn by others, though the details of the distinction are sometimes drawn in somewhat different ways, and different terminology is sometimes used. In 'Sceptical Strategies,' 111–12, Striker also invokes the distinction between (what I call) acceptance
believes p, one takes it to be true; if one accepts p, one treats it as true, without necessarily thinking that it is true. Acceptance is a broader propositional attitude than belief; it includes not only belief but also entertaining a proposition, and adopting a hypothesis for the sake of argument or in order to test it. Now, Frede says that one can act on the basis of an appearance without taking it to be true. He thinks this shows that one can believe p without taking p to be true. If, however, he has in mind the sorts of cases just mentioned—entertaining a hypothesis, and so on—then I think it would be better to say that one can accept p, and act according to p, without believing p. For, or so it seems to me, if we expand the notion of belief beyond the limits of the standard view, to include every sort of acceptance attitude, we stretch the notion too far for it to be useful, thereby obscuring important distinctions.

But I’m not sure whether Frede means to advert to the notion of acceptance. At least, the illustration he goes on to provide suggests a different point: he says that an expert craftsman ‘is still acting on his expert beliefs, even though he is not actually thinking of what he is doing when he is acting on them’ . . . But having finished his work he might well explain to us which views guided his activity. And for some of these views, it might be true that this would be the first time he ever formulated them, either to himself or to somebody else’ (209). This doesn’t seem to me to involve the notion of acceptance just described. Rather, it suggests the different point that one’s actions are sometimes guided by one’s unconscious or implicit beliefs.²⁰ But neither unconscious nor implicit beliefs are beliefs one doesn’t take to be true. They would be, of course, if taking to be true necessarily involved explicitly saying to oneself, as a separate thought, ‘p is true.’ But, as we’ve seen, that is not what the standard view says. In the case to hand, it will say that if I unconsciously or implicitly believe p, I unconsciously or implicitly take p to be true.

Frede, however, seems to think that taking to be true requires explicitly thinking, as a separate thought, ‘p is true.’ For he undertakes to explain how one can ‘have the view that p without thinking that it is the case that p or that it is true that p’ (208); but he then says that the craftsman example shows that ‘it is not necessary that in order to act on it [a view one has] we on that occasion have to entertain explicitly the corresponding thought and assent positively to it’ (208–9, emphasis added). The second point is true; but it does not establish the first point.²¹

and belief, and she uses it in order to argue that skeptics act on the basis of propositions they don’t take to be true. (She is discussing Carneades, not Sextus; but see her n. 58.) Like Frede, and unlike me, she seems to think that acceptance in the broad sense constitutes belief.

²⁰ On p. 209, Frede talks of implicit acceptance; he doesn’t mention unconscious acceptance. I’m not sure what if any difference he intends between the two.

²¹ Similarly, consider his immediately ensuing discussion of the Stoic doctrine of the eulogon, which he relates to the craftsman example (209–10). He says that the Stoic wise man’s action involves implicit acceptance. But then he immediately says that ‘[t]his, then, would seem to be a kind of case where acceptance of, or assent to, an impression does not involve taking it to be true.’ But this does not follow; for one can implicitly take something to be true.
Frede also seems to think that taking to be true is necessarily active, so that if someone passively goes along with something, one has a belief one doesn’t take to be true.²² It’s difficult to assess this view, since it’s not entirely clear what activity and passivity amount to here. If, however, passive beliefs are beliefs one has without having gone through a conscious, explicit, deliberate process of reasoning, then passive beliefs can easily involve taking to be true: there are many claims I take to be true, though I didn’t arrive at them by conscious, explicit deliberation. It’s true that the Stoics think that belief not only involves taking to be true but is also voluntary, and so in a sense active; and Descartes, for one, agrees with them.²³ But their view is quite controversial; many people argue that belief is both passive (not voluntary, not a matter of the will) and involves taking to be true. Indeed, it has been argued that belief is passive, precisely because it involves taking to be true.²⁴

I’m therefore not persuaded by Frede’s arguments for the claim that one can believe p without taking p to be true. Some of his arguments show that one can accept something without believing it; others show that there are unconscious or implicit beliefs; others show that one can believe p without explicitly thinking, as a further thought, ‘Moreover, I believe that p is true’; others challenge the view that belief is always in some sense active. All of these claims are true and important. But none of them shows that one can believe p without taking p to be true.

I therefore propose to stick with the standard view. As I shall use ‘belief,’ A believes p only if A takes p to be true (where this doesn’t mean either that A needs to have the explicit, further thought that ‘p is true,’ or that A actively and consciously decides to believe p). Given this understanding of belief, we should conclude that skeptics have beliefs only if there are claims they take to be true. If Sextus, when he claims that skeptics have dogmata, doesn’t mean that there are

Frede also says that the Stoic doctrine of the eulogon explains how one can believe p without taking p to be true, on the ground that ‘it allows the Stoic wise man to accept impressions and thus not to be reduced to inaction, without thereby taking them to be true. It is in this way that the Stoic wise man avoids having false beliefs, even though some of his impressions, however reasonable, may be false. For though he goes by the impression that p, he does not accept it as true, but only as reasonable’ (210). However, in these cases the Stoic wise man doesn’t believe p at all (rather, he believes that p is reasonable, which is quite a different matter). If he doesn’t believe p, he doesn’t believe p without believing that it is true.

²² In 'The Skeptic’s Two Kinds of Assent,' Frede writes of ‘two kinds of assent, merely passive acceptance and active acceptance as true’ (210).
²³ For the Stoics, see Long and Sedley, The Hellenistic Philosophers, sects. 41 and 62. For Descartes, see Meditation IV.
²⁴ See, for example, Williams, 'Deciding to Believe,' and L. Jonathan Cohen, An Essay on Belief and Acceptance (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). Hume, A Treatise on Human Nature, pt. I, also argues that belief is in some sense passive. When Williams, for example, says that belief is passive, he means that it is not a matter of the will, in the sense that one can’t simply decide to believe something. When the Stoics describe belief as active, they don’t clearly mean to deny this point; they seem to mean that one comes to believe things by attention to evidence (which does not commit them to the view that all of one’s beliefs are arrived at by conscious, deliberate, explicit reasoning).
some claims they take to be true, then, given our understanding of belief, we
should not conclude that he thinks skeptics have beliefs.

One final point before proceeding. Frede argues that ancient skeptics claim to
have beliefs; Burnyeat argues that they disclaim all beliefs. As we’ve seen, however,
Burnyeat and Frede have different conceptions of belief. Despite this difference,
they agree that ancient skeptics don’t claim to take anything to be true. Hence they
agree that ancient skeptics disclaim all beliefs, as I propose to understand belief
here. To be sure, this in principle leaves room for significant disagreements
between them: for even if they agree that ancient skeptics don’t claim to take
anything to be true, they might disagree about what alternative cognitive condi-
tion ancient skeptics claim to be in. Whether they in fact disagree about this is not
an issue I shall explore here. Instead, I shall focus on the question of whether they
are right to say that skeptics don’t claim to have any beliefs, as we are under-
standing belief.

3.

In PH I 13, Sextus asks: ‘Does the sceptic dogmatizein?’ He replies as follows:

(A) When we say that the sceptic does not dogmatizein, we do not use dogma in
the more general sense (koinoterón) in which some say that dogma is acquiescing
in (eudokein) something, for the sceptic assents (sunkatatithetai) to the affections
(pathê) forced upon him by an appearance (kata phantasian). For example, he
would not say, when heated (thermainomenos) (or chilled: psychomenos), ‘dokô
I am not heated (or: chilled).’ (B) Rather, we say that he does not dogmatizein in
the sense in which some say that dogma is assent to some unclear object of
investigation in the sciences. For Pyrrhonists do not assent to anything unclear.

In (A) Sextus says that if to have a dogma is to acquiesce in (eudokein) something,
then the skeptic has dogmata; for he ‘assents to the affections forced upon him by
an appearance.’ He then gives an example to illustrate this claim. (I consider the

25 In ‘Can,’ n. 51, Burnyeat notes that he has a different concept of belief from Striker. He doesn’t
mention Frede. Perhaps this is because he is responding to Frede’s views in ‘The Skeptic’s Beliefs,’
where the view that belief needn’t involve taking to be true is more muted than it is in the later ‘The
Skeptic’s Two Kinds of Assent.’

26 My translation of this passage has been influenced not only by Annas and Barnes’s, but also by
Burnyeat’s, in ‘The Skeptic in His Place and Time.’ See also R. Barney, ‘Appearances and Impressions,’
Phronesis 37 (1992), 283–313, at 300. I’ve divided the passage into two parts, (A) and (B), for ease of
exposition.

27 Annas and Barnes translate pathos as ‘feeling’; Burnyeat and Barney use ‘experience.’ Both
translations are misleading, insofar as they suggest that pathê are subjective—a suggestion that is
controversial. I therefore prefer the more neutral ‘affection’ (even though, as will emerge, I think that
the pathê at issue here are subjective in a recognizable sense of the term).
example later.) In (B) he says that if to have a dogma is to ‘assent to some unclear object of investigation in the sciences,’ then the skeptic has no dogmata; for skeptics do not assent to anything unclear, period.²⁸

To assent or dogmatizein is to be in a cognitive condition. When one assents (or when one dogmatizei), one acquires a dogma; a dogma is the content of the cognitive condition.²⁹ (A) tells us that skeptics do, in some way or sense or circumstances, assent, and so they have dogmata. (B) tells us that, in some way or sense or circumstances, skeptics do not assent and so, in that way or sense or circumstance, they do not have dogmata. There are, accordingly, two different issues we need to try to understand: first, what cognitive conditions are at issue here? In particular, when a skeptic assents, does she have a belief, as we are understanding belief? Secondly, what is the content of skeptical dogmata?

Before attempting to answer these difficult questions, it will be helpful to compare PH I 13 with a few parallel passages. In I 19–20, Sextus refers back to I 13, but he puts the same point a bit differently:

Those who say that the sceptics reject what is apparent (ta phainomena) have not, I think, listened to what we say. As we said before, we do not overturn the things which lead us, without our willing it, to assent in accordance with a passive appearance (kata phantasian pathētikêns); and these things are precisely what is apparent (ta phainomena). When we investigate whether underlying things³⁰ are such as they appear, we grant (didomen) that they appear, and what we investigate is not what is apparent but what is said about what is apparent—and this is different from investigating what is apparent itself. [20] For example, it appears to us that honey sweetens (phainetai hêmin glukazein to meli): we concede (sunchôroumen) this inasmuch as we are sweetened perceptually (glukazometha aisthêtikôs). But we investigate whether it is sweet (as far as the argument goes)—and this is not what is apparent but something said about what is apparent.

²⁸ Though Sextus says that skeptics don’t assent to anything unclear, perhaps he ought to have said that they don’t assent to anything they take to be unclear. But for the sake of simplicity, I shall speak as he does.
²⁹ That is, Sextus says that when a skeptic assents or dogmatizei, she acquires a dogma. His language doesn’t correspond exactly with that used by either the Stoics or Academics when they speak of assent (see n. 15 and n. 45). In saying that assent is a cognitive condition, I don’t mean that it is always a discrete mental act; I mean only that it is some sort of psychological state, broadly conceived (where no particular psychological theory or ontology is being assumed). I take the content of a cognitive condition to be a proposition. In saying this, I don’t intend any fancy or technical notion of propositions; I have in mind only the intuitive idea that one in some sense assents that something or other is so. In addition to speaking of the content of a cognitive condition, we may also speak of the content of a dogma; the content of the dogma that p is p. ‘Belief’ is used both for a psychological state, and for what someone believes. Hence we may ask not only whether skeptics are ever in the psychological state of believing something, but also whether any of the propositions in their repertoire are beliefs.
³⁰ The Greek here is to hupokeimenon, what underlies, that is, a subject. Annas and Barnes translate this as ‘an existing thing;’ but that misleadingly suggests that only ta hupokeimena exist.
In I 21, he says: ‘That we attend to what is apparent (hoti de tois phainomenois prosechomen) is clear from what we say about the criterion of the skeptical way.’ This is partly explained in I 22:

We say, then, that the criterion of the sceptical way is what is apparent (to phainomenon), implicitly meaning (dunamei) by this the appearance of it (tên phantasian autou). For it consists in a passive and unwilled affection; and it is not an object of investigation (azêtêtos). Hence no-one, presumably, will raise a controversy over whether an underlying thing appears this way or that; rather, they investigate whether it is such as it appears.

In I 13, Sextus says that skeptics assent to the affections (pathê) forced upon them by appearances (kata phantasian). To have a pathos is to be affected in some way. When, for example, the sun warms a stone, the stone is affected, and so it has a pathos. Phantasiai are a kind of pathos: to have a phantasia is to be appeared to in some way. In I 13, Sextus first mentions the genus (affection), but then adds kata phantasian to indicate the relevant species (being appeared to). In I 19, Sextus says that skeptics assent to phainomena. So he first says that they assent to pathê, where the relevant sort of pathos is a phantasia; he then says that they assent to phainomena. This suggests that here, at any rate, phainomena are phantasiai. This suggestion seems to be confirmed by I 22. For here Sextus says that, in saying that the skeptical criterion is the phainomenon, he implicitly means (dunamei) the phantasia of it (that is, of the phainomenon). ‘dunamei’ perhaps indicates that one wouldn’t expect him to use ‘phantasia’ in this way (one would expect him to use ‘phantaiomenon’ for what the phantasia is of): but that that is what he is going to do.

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31 Annas and Barnes translate ‘en’ as ‘depends on,’ but ‘consists in’ seems preferable: a phantasia doesn’t merely depend on a pathos; it is a kind of pathos.

32 Phantasiai, here, are not mental entities like sense data. Rather, they are mental states or conditions (see n. 29): in particular, the condition of being appeared to in a given way. That condition has content, but that content is not a sense datum either. Nor are phantasiai limited to perceptual cases: when an argument appears sound to me, I have the phantasia that it is sound: I am in the mental state of its appearing to me that an argument is sound.

33 I 19 does not explicitly say this: it says that ta phainomena lead the skeptic to assent, and that the skeptic doesn’t overturn them. But I think Sextus must mean that skeptics assent to ta phainomena: for otherwise he isn’t making the same point as before, as he claims to do.

34 Sextus speaks in the same way elsewhere too. In I 203, for example, he says that a pathos is phainomenon to the one who experiences it (tô(i) paschonti). As we’ve seen, the Stoics speak of assenting to a phantasia, by which they mean taking its content to be true. It was objected to them that they should have said instead that assent is to an axiôma (M VII 154). Sextus seems to agree with the Stoics that assent is to a phantasia: but he goes out of his way to avoid speaking in this way, preferring to say instead that assent is to a pathos (I 13) or to the phainomenon (I 19 with 22), where this is to be understood to mean ‘phantasia.’ Perhaps Sextus wants to avoid speaking exactly as the Stoics do, in order to make it clear that skeptical assent doesn’t involve taking the content of a phantasia to be true. I develop this view below.
As Barnes notes, a phainomenon can be either to phantaston (what appears and causes a phantasía), or the phantasía itself. Barnes thinks that Sextus usually understands ta phainomena in the former way, which he explains, not quite as I have done, but as ‘(external) objects that cause our phantasías and perceptual pathè.’ I’m not convinced that Sextus uses ta phainomena for external objects as often as Barnes suggests. Be that as it may, the important point here is that in I 22—and so in I 19—ta phainomena are not external objects, but phantasías.

Although Sextus speaks (in I 13) of assenting to a pathos—to a state—the expression of the assent is propositional. In I 20, for example, the skeptic concedes (sunchôroumen) (that is, I take it, assents to the claim) that it appears to me that honey sweetens. Similarly, in I 19 Sextus says that ‘[w]hen we investigate whether underlying things are such as they appear, we grant that they appear. What we investigate is not what is apparent, but what is said about what is apparent.’ Once again, assent is propositional: skeptics grant that something appears, or is apparent.

4.

These preliminaries out of the way, we can now address the two questions raised in the previous section: what cognitive condition is the skeptic in when she assents: in particular, is she in a belief state? And what is the content of skeptical dogmata? Let’s begin with the first question.

One might think that the mere fact that Sextus says that skeptics have dogmata shows that he thinks they have beliefs: for ‘dogma’ means ‘belief.’ But this is much too quick. First,
although it’s often claimed that ‘dogma’ means ‘belief,’ this seeming agreement masks a serious disagreement. When Barnes and Burnyeat say that ‘dogma’ means ‘belief,’ they mean that it involves taking to be true.¹ Though Frede also says that ‘dogma’ means ‘belief,’ he denies that it must involve taking to be true. Just as there is dispute about whether belief involves taking to be true, so there is dispute about whether dogma involves taking to be true: and so, in my terms, there is dispute about whether ‘dogma’ means ‘belief.’ I agree with Barnes and Burnyeat that it does, though a detailed study of how ‘dogma’ is standardly used is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Secondly, no matter what ‘dogma’ standardly means, Sextus might use the term in a nonstandard way. Indeed, Barnes, who argues that skeptical dogmata are not beliefs, concludes that Sextus’s use is unique.²

So we shouldn’t immediately infer from the fact that Sextus says that skeptics have dogmata, that he means that they have beliefs. However, the fact that he says that skeptics have dogmata creates a prima facie presumption in favor of that view. For, as I’ve said, I think ‘dogma’ standardly means ‘belief’; and Sextus says that skeptics have dogmata in a recognized sense of the term.³ But prima facie considerations are defeasible, so we need to press further.

Sextus says that skeptics have dogmata in the broad sense that they acquiesce (to eudokein). So one might naturally look to this word for help in deciding whether skeptical dogmata are beliefs. Here, however, we must be careful. According to Frede, the word ‘hardly appears at all in philosophical texts; as a philosophical term, it occurs nowhere else. Thus, it has no philosophical or technical meaning, no philosophical associations and is connected with no special philosophical claims.’⁴ Though the term is rare in philosophical contexts, it is common in non-philosophical ones—for example, in legal ones. Barnes says that eudokein tini means “be content with something.” Often the contentment is minimal, and ‘acquiesce in’ is an appropriate English translation; sometimes—particularly in

³⁹ Though Barnes argues that dogma means ‘belief,’ he doesn’t say how he understands belief. However, he seems to think that it involves taking to be true. For he argues that when Sextus says that skeptics have dogmata, he doesn’t mean that they take anything to be true. Barnes infers that skeptical dogmata are not beliefs; and in n. 68 he says that he doesn’t know of any other texts that use the term so weakly—that is, PH I 13 apart, ‘dogma’ means ‘belief’ in the sense of taking to be true. So far as I can tell, Barnes also thinks that doxa involves taking to be true. Burnyeat seems to agree that, at least so far as Sextus’s use of the terms (aside from Sextus’s claim, in the first part of PH I 13, that skeptics have dogmata) is concerned. For he says that Sextus does not distinguish between doxa and dogma, and takes both to mean ‘belief’ (Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 137); and, as we’ve seen, Burnyeat thinks that belief involves taking to be true. (In ‘Can,’ Burnyeat argues that ‘dogma’ is used for belief as such; in reply to criticism by Sedley and Barnes, he retracts this claim in the later ‘The Sceptic in His Place and Time,’ in favor of their view that dogma, in Hellenistic philosophy, is used only for a subclass of beliefs. But this does not alter the fact that he thinks that both doxa and dogma involve taking to be true.)

⁴⁰ Barnes, ‘The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist,’ 10 and n. 68.

⁴¹ He says that skeptics have dogmata ‘in the sense in which some say, quite generally, that dogma is acquiescing in something’ (emphasis added).

⁴² Frede, ‘The Skeptic’s Beliefs,’ 193.
Christian texts—the contentment is maximal, and ‘rejoice in’ is required.” The Suda, sv eudokein, lists ‘assent’ as a synonym.

Now, ‘eudokein’ does sometimes seem to be used in a way that does not involve taking to be true. This is not surprising, for the word is used in connection with, for example, decisions, which are not naturally said to be true or false (as opposed to being, say, justified or unjustified). Or again, one can ‘acquiesce’ in the sense of not objecting to something. But, as before, one can fail to object to something without believing it: I might not object to what you say, even though I don’t believe you, because I want to avoid a quarrel. In these cases, eudokia doesn’t involve taking to be true; but neither does it involve belief. To say that eudokein doesn’t involve taking to be true in contexts where belief isn’t at issue doesn’t help us with our question, which is whether it involves taking to be true when, as in our context, it is used to explain dogma. The mere use of the word doesn’t allow us to answer this question: the word is used in too many ways, and it lacks a clear philosophical sense.\(^4^4\)

Sextus goes on to say that skeptics acquiesce because, or in that (gar), they sometimes assent. So perhaps we should focus, not on the claim that skeptics acquiesce, but on the claim that they assent: for Sextus uses the latter to explain the former. Now, as the Stoics understand assent, it involves taking to be true.\(^4^5\) But we shouldn’t infer that skeptical assent also involves taking to be true: perhaps Sextus rejects the Stoic view that assent involves taking to be true.\(^4^6\)

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\(^4^3\) Barnes, ‘The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist,’ 9–10.

\(^4^4\) One might agree that the mere use of the word, on its own, is of no help, but argue that there are illuminating parallels to our passage that do help. This is Frede’s strategy. He cites a passage that he thinks (i) involves an ordinary use of eudokein, (ii) doesn’t involve taking to be true, and (iii) helps us to understand PH I 13. The passage is Polybius I, 8, 4: hoste...pantas...eudokesai strategon hauton hyparchein Hierona. Frede says that taken out of context, this passage could be understood in various ways; but that considered in context, we can see that it ‘means that they accepted the fact that Hiero was to be their strategos, they recognized (in the legal sense) that Hiero was their strategos’ (‘The Skeptic’s Beliefs,’ 194). He then argues that, though this passage involves decisions rather than dogmata, it nonetheless allows us to see that the dogmata at issue in PH I 13 are beliefs that don’t involve taking to be true. I disputed Frede’s use of the ruler analogy in section 2. Frede also cites a gloss on eudokoumenos in the Lexeis rhêtorikai (Anecdota Graeca Bekkeri, v. I, 260): ho sunkatatithemenos kai mê antilegôn. He thinks this fits Sextus’s explanation of skeptical acquiescence quite well; for, he thinks, Sextus says that the skeptic both assents and doesn’t oppose or protest. Frede thinks that the second conjunct captures Sextus’s explanation of skeptical assent. As I’ve already said, I don’t think that failing to oppose or protest is sufficient for genuine belief; I go on to argue that it’s not all Sextus has in mind, in saying that skeptics have dogmata.

\(^4^5\) See n. 15. Notice that eikein is not used in I 13 or the surrounding passages; but see I 193 and 229–30. Interestingly, neither the Stoics nor the Academics say—as Sextus does—that assent issues in dogma. For the Stoics, see n. 15. The Academics say that assent issues in doxa; for they argue, if only ad hominem, that there is no such thing as katalêpsis. See Sextus M VII 156; Cicero, Acad. II 67; Plutarch, Adv. Col. 1122bff. For discussion, see Striker, ‘Sceptical Strategies,’ 103–4. Perhaps Sextus speaks as he does in order to distance himself from the details of Stoic and Academic views of doxa.

\(^4^6\) Were he to do so, would he understand assent in a novel, or merely in a non-Stoic, way? That is a matter of dispute. Certainly it has been argued that some Academics recognize a sort of assent (sunkatathesis) that doesn’t involve taking to be true. That, indeed, is a main point of the two papers by Frede that I’ve been discussing; and the same claim has been defended by others, e.g. by Striker, in ‘Sceptical Strategies.’ (Though Frede says there is a sort of assent that doesn’t involve taking to be true,
So far I’ve looked at three key words that Sextus uses: ‘dogma,’ ‘acquiescence,’ and ‘assent.’ None of them, either on its own or when they are taken together, allows us to decide whether skeptical dogmata are genuine beliefs. In order to decide whether Sextus means to say that skeptics have beliefs, we need to look at the logic of the passage as a whole.

5.

So let’s now turn to the details of the text. I begin with (B), where Sextus describes the cases in which skeptics do not assent, and so lack dogmata. I think it is generally (and correctly) assumed that assent and dogma in (B) involve taking to be true. So, if (B) prevents skeptics from having any dogmata in its sense, it prevents them from taking anything to be true. Correspondingly, skeptical dogmata would not be beliefs. If, however, (B) only prevents skeptics from having some subclass of dogmata (in the sense of taking to be true), then it leaves open the possibility that they take some claims to be true, though it does not endorse that possibility.

In (B), Sextus first says that skeptics do not assent to or, therefore, have dogmata about, any ‘unclear object of investigation in the sciences.’ To say that skeptics do not assent to any unclear object of investigation in the sciences seems to leave room for them to assent in other cases: for, one might think, not everything is an unclear object of investigation in the sciences. However, Sextus then explains why skeptics don’t assent to any unclear object of investigation in the sciences: because they don’t assent to anything unclear, period. This makes it less clear whether skeptics can have any dogmata (in the sense of taking to be true); it all depends on what range of things are unclear. If everything in the end counts as unclear, then skeptics cannot (consistently) have any dogmata in the sense of taking to be true, which is the sense at issue in I 13 (B). In this case, when Sextus says in I 13 (A) that skeptics have dogmata, he would presumably be using ‘dogma’ in some other sense of the term. If, on the other hand, not everything is unclear, then, when Sextus says in I 13 (A) that skeptics have dogmata, it would be natural to assume that he is using ‘dogma’ in the same sense in (A) and (B). In this case, his point would be that there are some dogmata skeptics have, and others that they lack, in some one sense of the term: they have dogmata about what’s clear but not about what’s unclear; that is, they take claims about what’s clear to be true, but they don’t take any claims about what’s unclear to be true.⁴⁷

We need to know, then, whether skeptics take anything to be clear. To answer this question, we need to know what it is for something to be clear. Sextus explains

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⁴⁷ Even if Sextus says that skeptics have some dogmata and lack others in the same sense of ‘dogma’ (taking to be true), he might well think there are some differences between skeptical and non-skeptical dogmata; it’s just that in this case, taking to be true wouldn’t differentiate them.
that for something to be clear (enarges, délön, prodélön) is for it to be grasped non-inferentially, simply on the basis of an appearance. In M VIII 316, he says that something is clear just in case it is ‘grasped involuntarily through a phantasia and pathos.’ In M VIII 322, he says that something is clear just in case it is ‘agreed by all and admits of no dispute.’ In PH I 13, and in I 19–20 and 22, he opposes being clear, on the one hand, and being a matter of investigation, on the other. One inquires only into what’s unclear; what’s clear is not a matter of investigation. What if anything does Sextus think is clear in this sense?

In I 13, Sextus says that skeptics ‘assent to the affections forced upon them by appearances.’ I take him to mean that skeptics assent to the fact—indeed, can’t help but assent to the fact—that they are appeared to in a given way. In I 19, he says that phantasai are not investigated; in I 22 he says that phantasai are ‘passive and unwilled affections and are not objects of investigation’ (azétêtos). As we’ve seen, something is clear just in case it (a) is grasped involuntarily through a phantasia and pathos, and (b) is not a matter of investigation. In the passages just mentioned, Sextus seems to say that phantasai satisfy (a) and (b); hence they are clear. The point, I take it, is that it is clear how one is appeared to, and so one doesn’t investigate that fact. Rather, one investigates whether the appearance is true. In terms of the example he gives in I 20: when it appears to me that honey sweetens, it’s clear to me that that is how I am appeared to; and so I grant that I’m appeared to in that way. What’s unclear is whether the appearance is true: that is, whether honey sweetens. Hence I don’t concede that honey sweetens; rather, this is something I investigate.

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48 See, for example, PH II 97, 99, M VIII 141, 144, M VIII 316. As Burnyeat remarks (‘Can,’ n. 9), the notion of clarity is a dogmatist’s notion. But even if Sextus disagrees with various dogmatists about what if anything is clear, he can agree with them about the meaning of the term: though skeptics suspend judgment quite widely, they allow themselves some measure of conceptual understanding (see e.g. PH II 10; M VIII 334a–336a).

49 enargê men ta ek phantasai aboulêtôs kai ek pathous lambanomena. I take kai to be exepexeget: Sextus is indicating that phantasai are pathê, i.e. passive; that, in turn, explains aboulêtôs. (Cf. Plutarch, Adv. Col. 1120e, which says that pathê have their own enargeia in themselves; and he makes it clear that the relevant pathê are phantasai.) Sextus gives various examples of things that are, or are thought by someone or other, to be clear. In M VIII 316, for example, he mentions (apparently in his own right) ‘it is day’ and ‘this is a man.’ I take him to mean that what’s clear is ‘it appears that it is day,’ and ‘it appears that this is a man’: as he explains in various places, he often uses ‘is’ to mean ‘appears’ (PH I 135, 198, 202; M XI 18–19).

50 See also M VII 393; PH II 11.

51 This might mean either that they cannot be inquired into, or that they are not, as a matter of fact, investigated: -tos endings are ambiguous as between a modal and a non-modal reading. Burnyeat favors the first reading (‘Can,’ 128) Barney favors the second (‘Appearances and Impressions,’ 304).

52 Cf. M VIII 368, where Sextus says that phainomena establish only the fact that they appear (tôn gar phainomenôn auto monon paristantôn hoti phainetai). As we’ve seen, I 19 says that phantasai are phainomena. The Sticks claim that phantasai reveal themselves and their causes; the Cyrenaics argue that phantasai reveal only themselves. Sextus agrees with a claim common to them both: viz. that phantasai reveal themselves. Perhaps Sextus thinks this is an uncontroversial claim; what’s disputed is whether phantasai reveal something other than themselves. Hence, he might think it isn’t dogmatic to assume that phantasai reveal themselves, that is, that it’s clear to one how one is appeared to. Whatever Sextus may think, the view that it’s clear to one how one is appeared to is in fact controversial. For the...
I suggest, then, that, according to Sextus, the class of to enarges is not empty: he thinks it’s clear how one is appeared to.\

Hence, so far as (B) goes, there is room for skeptics to have genuine beliefs: they can have beliefs about how they are appeared to, since that, at any rate, is clear. Moreover, (A) occupies this room. For, to repeat, it says that skeptics assent to the affections forced upon them by appearances. And, as I’ve said, I take this to mean that they assent to claims about how they are appeared to. I’ve in effect already given some of my reasons for favoring this view. For example, this interpretation fits very well with my reading of I 19–20 and, as we’ve seen, the latter passage aims to elucidate I 13. Moreover, I 13 reads very smoothly and naturally on this reading: and that is another reason to favor it. The overall structure of the passage is then as follows: (A) says that skeptics have dogmata about how they are appeared to; for that, at any rate, is clear. (B) tells us that skeptics lack dogmata only about what’s unclear.

It is, however, quite controversial to think that (A) says that skeptics assent to claims about how they are appeared to. I defend the view further in section 7. But if the view is correct, it is then reasonable to assume that (A) says that skeptics have genuine beliefs (about how they are appeared to). On this view, Sextus is not distinguishing two senses of dogma, taking to be true and something else. Rather, the general or broad sense (koinoteron) of ‘dogma’ that Sextus mentions in (A)—the sense he explains first in terms of eudokia and then in terms of assent—is belief as such, that is, taking to be true. Sextus explains that skeptics have some dogmata in this sense. (B) mentions, not a different sense of ‘dogma,’ but a specific range of propositions that skeptics do not assent to, that is, do not believe. Rather than distinguishing different senses of ‘dogma,’ (A) and (B) distinguish two ranges of propositions: those skeptics assent to, i.e. believe, i.e. take to be true; and those they refrain from assenting to, i.e. do not believe, i.e. do not take to be true (or false—they suspend judgment). Skeptics have beliefs about what’s clear, in particular, about how they are appeared to; elsewhere, they suspend judgment.

6.

Now, however, I should like to consider some objections to the view that skeptical dogmata are genuine beliefs, in the sense that they involve taking to be true.\

view that this is not clear, see, for example, J. Greco, Putting Skeptics in Their Place (Cambridge, 2000), ch. 4.\

By contrast, Burnyeat (in ‘Can’) and Barnes (in ‘The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist’) argue that in the end, Sextus doesn’t take anything to be clear. To say that Sextus thinks it’s clear to one how one is appeared to isn’t to say that that’s all that’s clear to one. I think those are the only cases he mentions in the passages I’m focusing on; I won’t ask here whether he mentions other sorts of cases elsewhere. Cf. Frede, ‘The Skeptic’s Beliefs,’ 197, point (3).

I defer until the next section further discussion of whether I 13 says that skeptical dogmata (whether or not they are beliefs) are about how one is appeared to.
First, one might argue that, on my interpretation, Sextus uses ‘dogma’ in quite a heterodox way, since in Hellenistic philosophy ‘dogma’ isn’t used for belief as such, but only for especially weighty beliefs, such as those at issue in (B). However, even if ‘dogma’ were not used in Hellenistic philosophy for belief as such, it was once so used, and so my interpretation at least explains Sextus’s claim that his use of ‘dogma’ is not entirely idiosyncratic. But the broader usage is not confined to an earlier period: it also occurs in at least two Hellenistic texts that, moreover, are parallel to our passage. The first is from [Galen], def. med. 14, 19.352–3K:

‘dogma’ is spoken of both idiós and koinôs. Koinôs, it is assent to the clarity of something; idiós, it is assent to <the unclarity> of something. Hence the logical hairesis is called dogmatic, more than <something else is so called?>.

[Galen] seems to use ‘dogma’ for belief as such. He then distinguishes two ranges of dogmata: about what’s clear, and about what’s unclear. Similarly, in PH I 13 Sextus says that skeptics don’t assent to anything unclear. But they do assent; and, as we’ve seen, he means that they assent to what’s clear. Moreover, just as [Galen] says that assent to what’s clear is koinôs, so Sextus says that the sense in which skeptics assent is koinoteron (than the sort of dogma at issue in Part B). That is, they both seem to mean, assent to what’s clear involves dogma in the general sense of ‘belief’ (taking to be true); one might therefore have genuine beliefs even if, like the skeptics, one doesn’t assent to what’s unclear.

Next consider a passage from Diogenes Laertius (DL 9.102–4). He notes that Pyrrhonists were accused of grasping various things (katalambanesthai) and of dogmatizing (dogmatizein), despite the fact that they allegedly said they didn’t do so. He says that their reply is that they do dogmatize, insofar as they claim to know only their pathê (mona de ta pathê gignôskomen, 103); it’s just that they do not dogmatize about whether, for example, the world is spherical. Like [Galen], Diogenes seems to use ‘dogma’ for belief as such. He then in effect describes Pyrrhonists as saying that they have some beliefs, though only about their pathê; they have no beliefs about anything else. This too fits my reading of I 13 quite well.

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55 On dogma in Hellenistic and earlier philosophy, see n. 37.

56 Barnes cites this passage in ‘The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist,’ n. 69; and he interprets it as I do. However, he denies that the passage is parallel to I 13, though he agrees that it is similar to the Diogenes passage that I go on to discuss. The passage is corrupt, and it is odd even once that is taken into account.

57 For, as I’ve said, and as I argue more fully below, I think the only beliefs that I 13 accords skeptics are beliefs about how one is appeared to. Diogenes goes beyond PH I 13 in at least one way: unlike him, it doesn’t say that skeptics know their pathê; it says only that they have dogmata about them. Diogenes comes closer to capturing what Sextus says in PH I 215, though even here the correspondence is not exact. In I 215, Sextus says that some people assimilate skeptics and Cyrenaics, on the ground that both say that only pathê are apprehended. He goes on to say that the skeptics differ from the Cyrenaics since, among other things, the Cyrenaics say that knowledge of external objects is impossible, whereas skeptics suspend judgment here. So unlike Diogenes, Sextus doesn’t say that skeptics claim that only pathê are knowable. But Sextus doesn’t deny that they claim that pathê are knowable; and the passage,
A second objection to my suggestion that skeptical *dogmata* are genuine beliefs is that Sextus describes skeptical assent as passive: he says that skeptics can’t help but assent in certain cases; assent, for them, is not a matter of the will. The Stoics, by contrast, describe assent as active: we are presented with a *phantasia*, and then decide whether to assent to it, reject it, or suspend judgment about it. Assent, in their view, is voluntary, and something we are properly held responsible for. As we’ve seen, the Stoics take assent to involve taking to be true. Doesn’t the fact that Sextus describes skeptical assent so differently from how the Stoics describe assent indicate that he doesn’t think it involves taking anything to be true?

However, as we saw above, the view that belief involves taking to be true only if it is active is highly controversial. Many believe, to the contrary, that belief is passive, even though it involves taking to be true: or, indeed, precisely because it involves taking to be true. So we shouldn’t be too quick to infer from the fact that Sextus says that skeptics can’t help but assent in certain cases, that he doesn’t mean that, in these cases, they do not have beliefs in our sense of the term. An alternative is that, unlike the Stoics (but like many others), he thinks that belief (taking to be true) can be passive. Moreover, when we remember that skeptics assent only to what’s clear, the view that skeptical assent, though passive, is nonetheless genuine belief, becomes more plausible: perhaps skeptics can’t help but assent to their *pathê* (as PH I 13 puts it) precisely because those *pathê* (or their contents) are so clear. Even the Stoics say that a cataleptic appearance ‘all but seizes us by the hair’ and ‘pulls us to assent’ (M VII 257).⁵⁸

Thirdly, one might think that Sextus’s example of skeptical assent tells against me. Sextus illustrates what he means in saying that skeptics have *dogmata* by saying that, when a skeptic is warmed, she won’t say ‘dokô I am not warmed’ (PH I 13). Barnes, focusing on the fact that Sextus puts the point negatively, takes this to mean that skeptical *dogmata* are not any sort of belief, but the absence of belief: when p (for a certain range of cases), the skeptic will not believe not-p.⁵⁹

However, although I 13 is phrased negatively, in a way that leaves Barnes’s interpretation open, the parallel passages in I 19 and 20 put the same point positively, in a way that is less congenial to his interpretation. For here Sextus says that when p (for a certain range of cases), skeptics grant (*didomen*) and

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⁵⁸ However, perhaps in saying that it *all but* seizes us by the hair, they mean that one doesn’t *have* to assent.

⁵⁹ Barnes, ‘The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist,’ 10.
concede (sunchôroumen) that p. And Sextus often says that skeptics say how they are appeared to; they report on, and make clear, their pathê. To be sure, one might argue that granting, conceding, saying, and reporting are not believing. But they are in some sense positive, in a way that is difficult to square with Barnes’s interpretation. Fourthly, Sextus sometimes says that skeptics suspend judgment about, and lack dogmata about, everything. Doesn’t this suggest that, contrary to my view, there are two senses of ‘dogma’: taking to be true and something else, with skeptics having dogmata only in the second sense? But when Sextus says that skeptics have no dogmata about anything, he means only that they have no dogmata about any unclear matter they’ve investigated. For example, I 12 says that skeptics don’t dogmatize (to mê dogmatizein). This is immediately followed by I 13, in which Sextus explains that skeptics do have dogmata; they lack dogmata only about what’s unclear. Elsewhere too he makes it clear that ‘by “everything,” he [the skeptic] means not whatever exists but those unclear matters investigated by the Dogmatists which he has considered.’ To say that skeptics don’t take any unclear matter that they’ve investigated to be true doesn’t mean that they don’t take anything at all to be true: they might take what’s clear to be true.

I think, then, that skeptical dogmata are beliefs. But what are they about? I argued briefly above that, whatever may be true elsewhere, the only beliefs that

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60 See e.g. PH I 4, 15, 187, 191, 193, 203.
61 In 'The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist,' sect. III, for example, Barnes suggests that skeptical reports (apangeliai) are Wittgensteinian avowals, not any kind of assertion. In n. 29 he says: ‘[l]ike the Pyrrhonists of PH, they [the Cyrenaics] assent only to sentences of the form “x appears F”…; unlike the Pyrrhonist, they apparently used such sentences to make statements and express beliefs.’ I’m arguing that, like the Cyrenaics, the Pyrrhonists also use such sentences to make statements and express beliefs; they don’t use the same language in a radically different way.
62 See e.g. PH I 10, 12, 31. I 198; cf. 197, 202, 208.
63 At least, they can do so if, as I argued above, they take something to be clear. Burnyeat would dispute my suggestion that skeptical dogmata are genuine beliefs on a different ground from any yet canvassed. I suggested that skeptics have beliefs about how they are appeared to. (I return to this suggestion in the next section.) But in M. F. Burnyeat, 'Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed,' Philosophical Review 91 (1982), 3–40, and in his ‘Can,’ Burnyeat argues that in ancient discussions, truth is restricted to what’s external, objective, and common. Hence, in his view, the ancients wouldn’t view claims about how one is appeared to as claims that could be true (or false); and hence the ancients wouldn’t claim to have beliefs here. I argue against this in Chapter 12.
64 What about Sextus’s claim that skeptics live adoxastôs? Barnes notes that Sextus uses ‘adoxastos’ sixteen times in PH, all but once in adverbial form. (Barnes, ‘The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist,’ n. 77. Most of what I say here about adoxastos is little more than a paraphrase of Barnes, though we in the end favor different views.) The word is rare outside PH; it doesn’t occur in M. (Three occurrences in other authors are worth noting: Plato, Phd. 84a; DL 7.162 (the wise man is adoxastos—i.e. he lacks all doxai in the technical Stoic sense); Aristocles apud Eusebius, PE 14.18.3. Barnes cites these references.) In PH,
Sextus ascribes to skeptics in our passages are beliefs about how they are appeared to. So, for example, a skeptic will assent to the claim that she feels warm or that it appears to her that honey sweetens; but she will not assent to the claim that it is the sun that warms her, or that honey is sweet. Though I defended this view briefly at some points above, a more detailed discussion is in order. I shall provide a negative defense, by responding to three objections raised by Frede.

First, we’ve seen that in I 13 Sextus says that skeptics have dogmata because, or in that, they ‘assent to the affections forced upon them by appearances.’ I take him to mean that when they have a given affection—when, for example, they feel warm—they assent to the claim that, and so believe that, they feel warm. Assenting to an affection, here, is believing that one has it. Frede, however, says that ‘assenting to an affection does not consist in assuming that it exists.’ Earlier he puts the same point more strongly: ‘assenting to such impressions’ [i.e. phantasias, appearances] cannot mean ‘assenting to the claim that one is affected in this way, that one has such impressions.’ Frede doesn’t spell out his reasons, but perhaps his point is that when the Stoics speak of assenting to a phantasia, they mean taking its content to be true; so if, by ‘assenting to a pathos,’ Sextus means thinking one has it, he uses familiar terminology in a highly unusual way.

Now, had Sextus said directly that skeptics assent to phantasias, it might well be natural to assume he meant that they take the contents of their appearances to be true. However, he does not say this directly. In I 13, for example, he says instead that skeptics assent to their pathê. Perhaps he doesn’t speak exactly as the Stoics do, precisely because he is making a different point. Moreover, the different way in which he speaks can, I think, naturally be understood in the way I’ve suggested. For Sextus’s language is reminiscent of the Cyrenaics’ claim that only pathê are or can be known. They don’t mean that only pathê are known to have contents that are true. They mean that the only things one can know are the pathê themselves; one can know only how one is affected. In I 13, Sextus retreats to a weaker claim,
that we have *dogmata* here.⁷⁰ Perhaps he speaks of assenting, not to *phantasiai*, but to *pathê*, in order to make it clear that he is thinking, not along Stoic lines, but along Cyrenaic ones. That this is so is suggested by his use of Cyrenaic terminology in I 13 and I 20.⁷¹ (I discuss this terminology below.) So Sextus does not use Stoic terminology in an unusual way. Rather, he uses somewhat different terminology, which is familiar from the Cyrenaics. Moreover, the point he uses it to make is simply a weaker version of a claim that is also familiar from the Cyrenaics, according us belief (though not, here, knowledge) about how we are appeared to.⁷²

Secondly, Frede argues that skeptical appearance-statements are to be read doxastically rather than non-doxastically. If, for example, it appears to a skeptic that honey sweetens, she believes that honey is sweet.⁷³ It would take us too far afield to enter into this debate here, so I shall just express my agreement with Burnyeat that (in the contexts of concern to us here), when Sextus says that it appears to a skeptic that honey sweetens, he doesn’t mean that she believes, even tentatively, that honey is sweet; he means that it non-doxastically appears to her that it is.⁷⁴

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⁷⁰ Though as we’ve seen (n. 57), PHI I 215 may go further and agree with the Cyrenaics that skeptics have *katalêpsis* of their *pathê*.

⁷¹ For example, he uses *thermainesthai*; and such locutions may have been invented by the Cyrenaics. (That is Burnyeat’s view: ‘the Cyrenaic doctrine...was the original home of this peculiar terminology’ (‘Can,’ 135; but note ‘probably’ at 134)). To be sure, *thermainesthai* is also an ordinary Greek word for being heated or warmed, in a purely physical sense. But I argue later that the Cyrenaics use such locutions in a way that fits our context quite well. And though *thermainesthai* is ordinary Greek, *glukazometha* *aisthetikôs* which Sextus uses in I 20, is not; yet he uses the latter phrase to explain the sort of case he has in mind in I 13. This strengthens my suggestion that in I 13 Sextus has the Cyrenaic usage in mind.

⁷² Another possibility is worth mentioning. In I 20, Sextus says that the skeptic concedes that it appears to him that honey sweetens. This suggests that the content of her appearance is: *it appears to me that honey sweetens*. And she takes *that* to be true; that is, she takes it to be true that it appears to her that honey sweetens. So perhaps Sextus does mean to say that, in assenting to a *pathos*, one takes its content to be true; but that’s because the content includes a claim about how one is appeared to. Here it’s helpful to recall that the Stoics say that *phantasiai* reveal both themselves and their causes (M VII 162–3). To say that *phantasiai* reveal themselves is, I think, to say that when one has a *phantasia*, one is aware that one does (at least, this will be so in the case of humans who have attained the age of reason). *Phantasai* are in this sense self-intimating (which is not to say that one is always explicitly and consciously thinking about them). It is sometimes difficult to tell from Sextus’s examples whether the content of a *phantasia* is, e.g. ‘that honey sweetens’ or ‘that it appears to me that honey sweetens.’ The self-intimating character of *phantasiai* would explain the difficulty here: for it suggests that, in a way, every *phantasia* has, as part of its content, the fact that one has it. Perhaps Sextus is trying to say that it is only this aspect of the content that skeptics take to be true.

⁷³ Frede adds that she doesn’t believe that it is *really* sweet. To say how things really are involves going behind the surface phenomena to the essences of things, to the nature of things, to true reality (“The Skeptic’s Beliefs,” 187; on Frede’s distinction between believing that something is so, and believing that it is really so, see n. 18). Frede supports his interpretation by, among other things, appealing to Sextus’s use of the phrase *hoson epi tô(i) logô(i)*. For an alternative interpretation of this phrase, on which it does not support Frede’s view, see J. *The hoson epi tô(i) logô(i) Formula in Sextus Empiricus,* Papers in Hellenistic Philosophy, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 244–58. (Originally published as ‘La formule *hoson epi tô(i) logô(i)* chez Sextus Empiricus,’ in A. J. Voelke (ed.), *Le scepticisme antique, Cahiers de la revue de théologie et de philosophie* (Genève/Lausanne/Neuchâtel, 1990), 107–21.)

⁷⁴ Burnyeat defends this view at length in ‘Can.’ However, on my view, although the appearance is non-doxastic, the skeptic has a genuine belief about how she is appeared to. So, for example, when it appears to a skeptic that honey sweetens, this doesn’t express a belief about how honey is; rather, it merely non-doxastically appears to her that honey is sweet. However, she believes that it appears to her
Thirdly, Frede argues that Sextus’s example in I 13 tells against my view. To repeat, Sextus says that when a skeptic is heated (or chilled), she will not say ‘dokô I am not heated (or; chilled).’ It’s disputed whether ‘thermainethai’ is used here to mean ‘to be heated’ (a purely physical process, as when the sun warms a stone), or ‘to feel hot’ (a sensation or subjective feeling). Frede first says that it’s not clear that the word can even have the second meaning. But later he says that ‘[p]erhaps nothing rules out this interpretation.’ Yet, he insists, even if nothing rules it out, it assumes a strange meaning for the word, and one the text doesn’t suggest.

However, as I mentioned above, Sextus’s terminology in I 13 and I 20 is Cyrenaic; and the Cyrenaics use it to indicate subjective states of being appeared to. That Sextus has their usage in mind is especially clear in I 20, where he speaks of being perceptually sweetened. Since I 19–20 claim to be making the same point as I 13, it seems reasonable to assume that the latter passage uses ‘thermainethai’ to indicate feeling warm, that is, for a subjective state. Moreover, we’ve seen that the relevant pathê are phantasai. Even if being heated, in a purely physical sense, is a pathos of some sort, it is not a phantasia; only feeling hot, or having an appearance as though of heat, would be.

Frede argues, however, that even if ‘thermainethai’ refers to a subjective state here, the sentence ‘dokô mê thermainethai’ (which he translates as ‘I do not think I am feeling any warmth’) raises problems for my interpretation. For, he thinks, on my interpretation, Sextus should say instead that ‘I do not think there is any warmth’ or ‘it seems to me that it is not warm.’ His reason is that ‘asserting to an affection does not consist in assuming that it exists.’ This is just his first objection all over again. Against it, I argued above that when Sextus speaks of assenting to an affection does not consist in assuming that it exists. We need to distinguish two questions: (a) are skeptical dogmata beliefs? and (b) are the skeptic’s phainetai-statements beliefs, or non-doxastic? Frede seems to think that since skeptical phainetai-statements are (in his view) beliefs, so too are skeptical dogmata. Burnyeat seems to think that since skeptical phainetai-statements are (in his view) non-doxastic, so too are skeptical dogmata. On my view, (a) and (b) receive different answers: skeptical dogmata are beliefs; but skeptical phainetai-statements are non-doxastic. They are what skeptical beliefs are about.

Frede, ‘The Skeptic’s Beliefs,’ 196, notes that Fabricius, in his revision of Stephanus’ translation, assumes the first meaning, whereas Bury and Hossenfelder assume the second meaning. Barnes, ‘The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist,’ n. 29, suggests that such locutions are verbal variants on phainetai moi: this is in line with the second meaning.

Frede, ‘The Skeptic’s Beliefs,’ 197. He is discussing not just the word thermainomenos, but the sentence in which it occurs.

Frede, ‘The Skeptic’s Beliefs,’ 197. He also objects that even if we assume this meaning, the passage doesn’t yield the desired interpretation. I consider this objection below. Despite saying that my interpretation assumes a strange meaning, he says that M I 147 ‘shows that the transition to this meaning [“I feel hot”] would be easy’ (Frede, ‘The Skeptic’s Beliefs,’ 197).


This of course leaves open the possibility that the pathos is also physical: subjective states need not be nonphysical. I discuss this further in Chapter 12.

In the debate between the Some Belief and the No Belief View, I’ve sided with the former: skeptics have beliefs—though, so far as I 13 goes, only about how they are appeared to. One might ask: is this of any philosophical interest? I think there are at least two points of philosophical interest. First, one of the most famous objections to ancient skepticism is the apraxia argument: that, if skeptics really lacked all beliefs, they couldn’t act. On the view I’ve defended, skeptics have a reply to that objection: they do have beliefs, at least about how they are appeared to. And at least one author has argued that having such beliefs is sufficient for action. Secondly, it’s been argued that it was not until Descartes that philosophers saw that there are or could be truths about subjective states. It’s also been argued that that, in turn, allowed Descartes to view the subjective as a realm for knowledge; and that that, in turn, allowed him to be the first to formulate external world skepticism. If the argument of this chapter is correct, however, Sextus also thinks there are truths and beliefs about the subjective. On this matter, Descartes is not so novel as he is sometimes taken to be. Hence our account of PH I 13 has implications, not just for our understanding of Sextus in particular, but for the history of skepticism in general.

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82 Thanks to Louis Loeb for pressing me on this point.
83 Margaret Wilson, Descartes (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 48. I explore Sextus’s and Descartes’ replies to the apraxia argument in Chapter 13. Frede also argues that skeptics reply to the apraxia argument by saying that they have, and rely on, their beliefs. But he attributes different beliefs to the skeptics from the ones I’ve attributed to them, and he understands ‘belief’ in a different sense.
85 For he thinks there are truths and beliefs about how we are appeared to, and how we are appeared to is subjective. As we saw in passing, PH I 215 may even accord skeptics knowledge here. Whether or not Sextus thinks we know our pathê, the Cyrenaics think we do.
86 I explore these issues further in Chapter 12.
87 Thanks to Charles Brittain and Terry Irwin for extremely helpful discussion and written comments. I have also benefited from discussion with Carl Ginet and Tamar Szabo Gendler.
Subjectivity, Ancient and Modern: The Cyrenaics, Sextus, and Descartes

1.

In ‘Idealism and Greek Philosophy,’ Myles Burnyeat asks two questions:¹

1. How did it come about that philosophy accepted the idea that truth can be obtained without going outside subjective experience?
2. When and why did philosophers first lay claim to knowledge of their own subjective states?

Burnyeat argues that ‘it is Descartes who holds the answers to [these two] questions.’² The ancients, he alleges, do not view the subjective as a realm about which there are truths. Correspondingly, neither do they view it as a realm about which there is or might be knowledge; for knowledge (both in fact and according to the ancients) implies truth.³ Nor, Burnyeat argues, do the ancients view the

¹ M. F. Burnyeat, ‘Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed,’ Philosophical Review 91 (1982), 3–40, at 32; emphases in the original. (He also asks a third question, which I shall not consider here: ‘When and why did one’s own body become for philosophy a part of the external world?’; emphasis in the original.) Notice that Burnyeat speaks interchangeably of subjective experiences and of subjective states. I take it that in speaking of subjective experiences, he means to be speaking of subjective states broadly conceived, including, for example, thinking. In asking whether the ancients think there are truths, beliefs, or knowledge about subjective states, I take it that Burnyeat means to ask whether there are truths, beliefs, or knowledge about their contents, in particular, about how one is appeared to: see n. 48. As I shall use the phrase ‘content of a subjective state,’ it includes judgments. Though it would sometimes be more accurate to speak of the contents of subjective states than of subjective states tout court, I shall for convenience sometimes follow Burnyeat and speak simply of subjective states, or of the subjective.

² Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 32. Elsewhere he says that ‘the first philosopher who picks out as something we know what are unambiguously subjective states…is Augustine’ (28). But he adds that ‘the Augustinian precedent does not amount to as much as one might expect’ (33). I shall not discuss Augustine here; I focus instead on comparisons with Descartes.

³ The view that knowledge implies truth is at least as early as Plato’s Meno (98); cf. Gorg. 454d. I assume that Burnyeat is relying on this view, since he says that it is ‘the addition of truth [recognized by Descartes, but not by the ancients, as being applicable to claims about subjective states] that opens up a new realm for substantial knowledge’ (Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 32; I do not know what, if anything, ‘substantial’ adds to ‘knowledge’).
subjective as a realm about which there are or could be beliefs. As he puts it in ‘Can the Skeptic Live His Skepticism?’.\(^4\)

belief is the accepting of something as true. There can be no question of belief about appearance, as opposed to real existence, if statements recording how things appear cannot be described as true or false, only statements making claims as to how they really are.

In Meditation II, by contrast, Descartes ‘discovers . . . the truth of statements describing the subjective states involved in the process of doubt itself’; ‘[s]ubjective truth has arrived to stay, constituting one’s own experience as an object for description like any other.’\(^5\) Since ‘the addition of truth . . . opens up a new realm for substantial knowledge,’\(^6\) Descartes can, and in fact does, ‘put subjective knowledge at the center of epistemology.’\(^7\)

In ‘The Objective Appearance of Pyrrhonism,’ Stephen Everson argues that ‘[t]his contrast between the Cartesian position, in which the subject is taken to have knowledge of his subjective mental states, and the ancient view, according to which he is not, is, I think, a false one. If there is a difference between the two conceptions of the subject’s access to his mind, this is not it.’\(^8\) In his view, some of the ancients claim to know their own affections (pathê). But, he argues, the ‘ancients did not recognize the existence of distinctively subjective states to have knowledge of.’\(^9\) Rather, the affections they discuss are, and are described by them as being, wholly and only objective. So Everson agrees with Burnyeat that the ancients do not think there are truths, beliefs, or knowledge about the subjective. His explanation is that they do not take anything to be subjective.

I shall defend a third view: that the Cyrenaics think that there are subjective states, and that there are truths, beliefs, and knowledge about them. I shall also

\(^4\) In M. F. Burnyeat (ed.), *The Skeptical Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 117–48, at 121–2. For the record, I agree with Burnyeat that belief involves accepting something as true, both in fact and according to the ancients (when they talk about doxa and dogma: even if dogma isn’t belief as such, it is a subclass of what we call belief). For a different view, see M. Frede, ‘The Sceptic’s Beliefs’ and ‘The Sceptic’s Two Kinds of Assent and the Question of the Possibility of Knowledge,’ chs. 10 and 11 of his *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). I discuss this issue further in Chapter 11.

\(^5\) Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 38–9. I assume that in speaking of ‘subjective truth,’ Burnyeat means truths about subjective states or their contents.

\(^6\) Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 38 n. 53.

\(^7\) Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 33. Presumably Burnyeat believes that Descartes also thinks there are beliefs about subjective states and their contents; but for obvious reasons he focuses on claims to knowledge. I assume that by ‘subjective knowledge,’ Burnyeat means knowledge of subjective states or their contents.


\(^9\) Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 141.
argue that Sextus is aware of their view, and accepts at least part of it.⁰ Defending these claims, and considering Burnyeat’s and Everson’s views, will occupy us through section 6. If I am right, then Descartes is not the first person to believe that truth and knowledge can be obtained without going outside the subjective realm.¹¹ Even if he is not novel on that score, however, his views about subjectivity could differ from ancient views about it in other ways. And in ‘Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space,’ John McDowell argues that they do.¹² I explore this issue in section 7.

2.

It will help, to begin with, to have a working account of subjectivity—though there is, to say the least, considerable controversy here. There is, however, rough agreement about examples: if there are subjective states, then being in pain, having a sensation, experiencing something, and being appeared to all count.¹³ Assuming that there are such states, what does their subjectivity consist in? Following Thomas Nagel, it’s often said that if S is a subjective state, there is something it is like to be in S; there is some characteristic phenomenological feel to subjective states.¹⁴ According to McDowell, two features that are essential to subjectivity are ‘representational bearing on the world and availability to introspection.’¹⁵ It’s also often

¹ Sextus is the main exponent of Pyrrhonian skepticism, which is one of the two main schools of ancient skepticism. My translations of his The Outlines of Pyrrhonism (= PH) generally follow those in J. Annas and J. Barnes, Sextus Empiricus: Outlines of Scepticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), though I have sometimes modified their translations, sometimes without comment. The Cyrenaics flourished in the fourth and third centuries BC. They are so called because their founder Aristippus (who was an associate of Socrates’) was from Cyrene, a Greek colony in N. Africa. They are sometimes called ‘skeptics’ (though not by Sextus, who takes them to be dogmatists: see PH I 3 with I 215). In a fuller chapter, I would also discuss the Stoics, since I think that they too are a counter-example to Burnyeat’s views. Here I have at least a partial ally in A. A. Long, who argues that Stoic phantasiai are, and are viewed by the Stoics as being, subjective. Though he doesn’t discuss the issue in these terms, he also seems to think that there are truths, beliefs, and knowledge about subjective states and their contents. See A. A. Long, ‘Hierocles on oikeiôsis and Self-Perception’ and ‘Representation and the Self in Stoicism,’ in his Stoic Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chs. 12 and 13, respectively.

¹¹ Nor is Augustine: see n. 2.


¹³ Eliminativists, however, deny that there are subjective states.

¹⁴ T. Nagel, ‘What Is It Like to Be a Bat?’, Philosophical Review 82 (1974), 127–36. This way of characterizing subjective states is accepted by, among others, M. Tye, Ten Problems of Consciousness (Cambridge: MA: MIT Press, 1995) at e.g. 3; cf. 38. William Lycan, however, objects that the locution, ‘what-it-is-like,’ is obscure (Consciousness (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), ch. 7). There are disputes about whether what-it-is-likeness applies to all, or only to some, mental states; and, if the latter, to which ones. There are also disputes about precisely how to characterize what-it-is-likeness.

¹⁵ J. McDowell, ‘Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space,’ in P. Pettit and J. McDowell (eds.), Subject, Thought and Context (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 137–68 155; cf. n. 31. It is disputed whether all subjective states have representational bearing on the world; there are also disputes about the connection between introspection and subjectivity.
said that one has some sort of privileged access to one’s subjective states. McDowell, for example, says that ‘nothing could be recognizable as a characterization of the domain of subjectivity if it did not accord a special status to the perspective of the subject’¹⁶ There is, however, considerable dispute about what privileged access consists in: is it, for example, infallibility, incorrigibility, or something else? There are different accounts of these notions in turn.¹⁷ There are also disputes about whether materialism or functionalism can accommodate subjectivity.¹⁸ Some of these issues will concern us below. For now, all I hope to have done is to have provided a rough indication of the sort of thing subjectivity is supposed to be: which is not to say that everyone agrees either that each of the features I’ve mentioned is necessary or that they are all jointly sufficient. Nonetheless, if someone discusses appropriate examples, such as being in pain or being appeared to, and describes them along the lines just mentioned, it is reasonable to assume, and I shall assume—unless the context suggests a reason for not doing so—that subjective states are being described under a subjective mode of presentation.

3.

Burnyeat’s view has been widely influential,¹⁹ and rightly so. For it is interesting and stimulating, and he discusses issues of fundamental and current importance: few issues are more discussed nowadays than subjectivity. Anyone interested in

¹⁶ McDoowell, ‘Singular Thought,’ 160.
¹⁷ Sydney Shoemaker, for example, argues that each of us has privileged access to our mental states; but he defends a weaker version of it than he thinks some Cartesians defend. See his ‘First-Person Access,’ in J. Tomberlin (ed.), Philosophical Perspectives 4 (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1990), 187–214; reprinted in his The First Person Perspective and Other Essays (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 50–73. In Naturalizing the Mind (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), by contrast, Fred Dretske says that ‘[i]t]hough each of us has direct information about our own experience … there is no privileged access. If you know where to look, you can get the same information I have about the character of my experiences’ (65). It’s not clear, however, whether Dretske and Shoemaker use ‘privileged access’ in the same way.
¹⁸ It’s disputed whether Nagel’s position ultimately allows subjectivity to be compatible with either materialism or functionalism. For the view that it does not allow this (Nagel’s seeming claims to the contrary notwithstanding), see Lycan, Consciousness, ch. 7. For the view that at least certain forms of physicalism or materialism can accommodate subjectivity, see Tye, Ten Problems, ch. 2. Shoemaker argues that the existence of qualia (subjective features of experience) is compatible with both materialism and functionalism. See, for example, S. Shoemaker, ‘Qualia and Consciousness,’ Mind 100 (1991), 507–24, reprinted in his The First Person Perspective and Other Essays, 121–40. This issue is complicated by the fact that materialism and functionalism are understood in different ways. Some versions are clearly not compatible with the existence of subjective states (e.g. eliminative materialism); but other versions (e.g. non-reductive or compositional materialism) are (in my view) compatible with it.
that issue has reason to wonder whether present concerns with it are parochial: is an interest in subjectivity new with Descartes? If not, does Descartes at least have a new conception of it? Burnyeat has a story—or stories—to tell on these matters, and it repays, or they repay, careful attention. I shall therefore begin by discussing Burnyeat in some detail. Doing so will also allow me to introduce the general issues I want to discuss; it will also set the stage for my alternative.

First, then, Burnyeat allows—as surely one should—that both Sextus and the Cyrenaics think that appearances (phantasiai; Burnyeat translates this as ‘impres-
sions’) and affections (pathê; Burnyeat translates this as ‘experiences’) exist.² In speaking of Sextus, for example, he says:²¹

When the skeptic assents, it is because he experiences two kinds of constraint. First, what he assents to are states with which we are forcibly affected in accordance with an impression (PH I 13). He can assent to an impression, or, as Sextus also puts it (PH II 10), he can assent to what is presented in accordance with an impression he is affected with in so far as it appears, because the impression itself, the way the thing appears, is a passive affection not willed by the person who experiences it and as such is not open to enquiry or dispute (PH I 22); in other words, it is merely what is happening to him now. But second, besides having the impression forced upon us, we are also constrained in these cases to assent. The skeptic yields to things which move us affectively and lead us by compulsion to assent. (PH I 193)

² I prefer ‘appearance’ to ‘impression’ as a translation of ‘phantasia,’ since it preserves the connection with phainesthai, to appear. (‘Appearance’ is sometimes used to translate phainomenon. I follow Annas and Barnes in translating it as ‘what is apparent.’) I translate pathos as ‘affection’ rather than as ‘experience’ (Burnyeat) or ‘feeling’ (Annas and Barnes). For whenever something undergoes something, it is affected in some way; but not every way of being affected is an experience, as that notion would normally be understood. When a stone is warmed by the sun, for example, it is affected; but we would not say that it has experienced or felt anything. Experiences and feelings are normally thought to be subjective; though pathê can be subjective, they need not be. I take pathê, in the contexts we shall be discussing, to be states rather than objects. I take appearances (phantasiai) to be states of being appeared to (rather than mental objects); as such, they are a subclass of pathê. Burnyeat—in my view rightly, though the claim takes argument that I do not have the space to provide here—takes Sextan appearances and affections to be the same as Cyrenaic affections; see, for example, Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 134–5. (The Cyrenaics tend to use ‘pathos’ rather than ‘phantasia.’) But Plutarch, Adv. Col. 1120c, rightly takes Cyrenaic pathê to be phantasiai. (I take kai to be epexegetical.) Cf. M VII 192: phantazetai.) Though Burnyeat thinks that Sextan appearances and affections are the same as Cyrenaic affections, we shall see that he thinks Sextus and the Cyrenaics accord us different sorts of epistemic access to them.

²¹ Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 129–30 (I have omitted the transliterated Greek that Burnyeat supplies). Cf. 133, where I think (but am not sure) that Burnyeat’s view is that the skeptic’s assent to his impressions (phantasiai, appearances) is ‘the assertion of the existence of a certain impression or experience.’ That Burnyeat thinks the Cyrenaics take pathê to exist is clear from, for example, Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 27. I discuss Burnyeat’s account of the Cyrenaics below.
We concede, says Sextus (PH I 20), that honey appears sweet because we are sweetened perceptually (glukazometha aisthetikós), which I take to mean: we have a perceptual experience featuring the character of sweetness. The skeptic’s assent is simply the acknowledging of what is happening to him, and the compulsion to assent, to acknowledge what is happening to him, is equally simple. It is not that there is resistance to be overcome, but that there can be no dispute about what the impression is; it is azêtētos, not open to inquiry. The impression is just the way something appears to one, and assent to it is just acknowledging that this is indeed how the thing appears to one at the moment.

Skeptics have perceptual experiences and are appeared to in various ways. These are things that happen to them, ways in which they are affected, and to which they cannot help but assent. Appearances and affections exist, then. But are they subjective? Burnyeat certainly describes them as though he thinks they are. For example, he translates pathos as ‘experience,’ and speaks of perceptual experiences and of how one is appeared to. As we’ve seen, experiences and states of being appeared to would normally be thought to be subjective. Moreover, Burnyeat characterizes them in ways that suggest that he takes them to be subjective. He says, for example, that Sextus’s point:

is one familiar in modern philosophy, that how a thing appears or seems is authoritatively answered by each individual. When Sextus says that a man’s impression is azêtētos, not subject to enquiry (PH I 22), the claim is that his report that this is how it appears to him cannot be challenged and he cannot properly be required to give reason, evidence or proof for it.

In addition to saying that we have first-person authority about how we are appeared to, Burnyeat also says that ‘[i]ncorrigibility was there before [Descartes] in Hellenistic philosophy, in the shape of Sextus’s description [in PH I 22] of appearance-statements as azêtētos, immune to question or inquiry.’ As we’ve seen, it’s generally thought that we have first-person authority, and are incorrigible, about our subjective states. To be sure, first-person authority and incorrigibility can be understood in different ways; and however they are understood, they might not

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²² Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 130.
²³ Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 128. azêtētos can mean ‘cannot be investigated’ or ‘as a matter of fact is not investigated’: -tos endings are ambiguous as between a modal and a non-modal reading. As Burnyeat’s translation make clear, he takes it the former way. Contrast R. Barney, ‘Appearances and Impressions,’ Phronesis 37 (1992), 283–313, at 303ff.
²⁴ Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 39 n. 53.
be sufficient for subjectivity. Be that as it may, if someone claims that we have first-person authority, and are incorrigible, about our experiences and about how we are appeared to, it is natural to think that subjectivity is at issue. And that is what Burnyeat intends is suggested by the following passage:\(^{25}\)

The skeptic finds himself assenting to a host of propositions of the form ‘Such and such appears to me now thus and so,’ but he never finds reason to advance to the truth claim ‘It is as it appears.’ There is thus a large class of statements which, as Sextus puts it (\textit{PH} I 22), are immune from enquiry (\textit{azêtëtos}). They are immune from enquiry, not open to dispute, because they make no claim as to objective fact. They simply record the skeptic’s own present experience, the way he is affected (in Greek, his \textit{pathos}), leaving it open whether external things really are as they appear to him to be.

Here Burnyeat explains why Sextus takes us to have first-person authority, and to be incorrigible, about our experiences (\textit{pathê}), and why he thinks that claims about them are not matters of inquiry or investigation: the reason is that these states are not objective. If someone says that experiences exist, that we are incorrigible and have first-person authority about them, and that they are not objective, the natural inference is that he thinks they are subjective. So at least sometimes, Burnyeat seems to take appearances and affections to be subjective. Nor is this just his description, imposed from the outside, as it were. He seems to be explaining how Sextus conceives of the situation. For he thinks that Sextus takes us to be incorrigible, and to have first-person authority, in such cases. In the passage just quoted, he is giving Sextus’s reason for saying that appearance-statements are immune from inquiry.\(^{26}\) Now as we saw in section 1, Burnyeat also argues that the ancients do not take claims about the subjective to be true; correspondingly, neither do they think there are beliefs or knowledge here. Putting all of this together, we may say that, according to Burnyeat:

\begin{enumerate}
\item Appearances and affections are subjective, both in fact and according to the ancients; but the ancients do not think there are truths, beliefs, or knowledge about them.
\end{enumerate}


\(^{26}\) In the passage just quoted, Burnyeat seems to say not just that Sextus does not take such states to be objective (a claim that would be compatible with Sextus’s having no concept of objectivity), but, more positively and strongly, that Sextus’s view is that such states are not objective. If Burnyeat does not mean to say this, he has not given a reason, as he purports to do, for Sextus’s thinking that such statements are not open to inquiry.
Elsewhere, however, Burnyeat seems to suggest a different view. He says, for example, that:²⁷

An earlier group of skeptics, the Cyrenaic school, did hold that we know our own experience (pathos) and nothing else. They put it in these terms: I know how I am being affected, but not what causes me to be thus affected. I can say, for example, 'I am being burned' or 'I am being cut,' but not that it is fire that is burning or iron that is cutting me. If these examples are mystifying to a modern ear, it is not just for lack of the information that cutting and cauterizing were two main operations of ancient surgery. What one wants to ask is whether they mean the physical event of cauterizing or the way it feels. But to that question no answer is forthcoming.

And in ‘Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?’ he says:²⁸

Do they mean, when they talk of undergoing something, the physical event or the way it feels? To that question there is no clear answer . . . It is the same with Sextus.

Here Burnyeat says that the Cyrenaics think we know our affections or experiences (pathê); so presumably he also thinks they allow truth and belief here.²⁹ It’s just that there is no answer to the question whether such states are subjective. This gives us:³⁰

B. Some of the ancients think there are truths, beliefs, and knowledge about appearances and affections; but there is no answer to the question whether affections and appearances are subjective.

²⁷ Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 27; emphasis added. Burnyeat’s examples are from Aristocles, apud Eusebius, Preparation for the Gospel, XIV 19.2–3. Notice that Burnyeat continues to translate pathos as ‘experience,’ even though he is arguing that there is no answer to the question whether pathê are subjective. Yet it would normally be thought easy to answer the question whether experiences are subjective: they are paradigm examples of subjective states (even though, as we’ve seen, there is controversy about what subjectivity consists in).

²⁸ Burnyeat, 'Can,' 135; emphasis in the original. Recall that Burnyeat rightly takes Sextan appearances and affections to be the same states as Cyrenaic affections; see n. 20.

²⁹ As we’ve seen (n. 3), Burnyeat seems to assume (rightly) that knowledge, both in fact and according to the ancients, implies truth. I assume he would agree that if the Cyrenaics allow knowledge of pathê, they also allow beliefs about them. Plutarch explicitly says that the Cyrenaics allow belief (doxa) about affections (Adv. Col. 1120E–F, quoted below in section 5).

³⁰ Burnyeat says both that there is no answer, and that there is no clear answer, to the question whether appearances and affections are subjective. In saying that there is no clear answer, he doesn’t seem to mean merely that it is difficult to decide the issue. He seems to mean that it’s irreducibly ambiguous or unclear in the nature of the case whether appearances and affections are subjective; the issue cannot be resolved. Hence, in (B), I use ‘no answer’ rather than ‘no clear answer.’ Though Burnyeat thinks the Cyrenaics claim that we know our affections, he does not think Sextus agrees; hence ‘some of the ancients.’ (Everson, by contrast, says that both Sextus and the Cyrenaics claim knowledge, or apprehension (katalêpsis), of their affections; see S. Everson, ‘The Objective Appearance of Pyrrhonism,’ in S. Everson (ed.), Companions to Ancient Thought 2: Psychology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 120–47 141.) Though he thinks Sextus and the Cyrenaics disagree about our epistemic access to our affections and appearances, he thinks they are the same states (see n. 20) and that in both cases, there is no answer to the question whether they are subjective.
(A) and (B) agree that the ancients do not view the subjective as a realm about which there are truths, beliefs, or knowledge. But they explain this differently. According to (A), the reason is that, although they think there are subjective states, they do not view the subjective as a realm about which there are truths, beliefs, or knowledge. According to (B), the reason is that, although at least some of the ancients think there are truths, beliefs, and knowledge about appearances and affections, there is no answer to the question whether such states are subjective. There is, then, an ambiguity in saying that the ancients do not view the subjective as a realm about which there are truths, beliefs, or knowledge. (A) and (B) resolve the ambiguity in different ways.³¹ Indeed, they resolve it in conflicting ways: (A) provides an answer to a question that (B) says is unanswerable.

Let us stick with (B) for a moment. Why does Burnyeat say there is no answer to the question whether affections and appearances are subjective? His reason seems to be contained in the following passage: ‘my own view is that to insist that Sextus’s illustrative pathos must be either a subjective feeling or an objective happening is to impose a Cartesian choice which is foreign to his way of thinking.’³² He makes the same claim about the Cyrenaics: ‘it looks to be anachronistic to think we must be able to “split” the Cyrenaic notion of experience into separate (mental) and physical (objective) components.’³³ I can think of two interpretations of these and other similar remarks. One interpretation is:

C. The ancients lack the concepts of subjectivity and objectivity; they don’t view anything as being either subjective or objective.

As we’ve seen, however, Burnyeat thinks the ancients talk about experiences and how one is appeared to; he also thinks Sextus says that we are incorrigible and have first-person authority about such states, and that they aren’t objective. I’m not sure what else is needed for someone to have concepts of subjectivity and objectivity. One or another ancient concept of them might differ from one or another modern concept of them; and the ancients might not have articulated the concepts as clearly and precisely as various modern philosophers do. But the evidence adduced in favor of (A) suggests that, for all that, it is not anachronistic to import concepts of subjectivity and objectivity into ancient discussions.

On a second interpretation, what’s anachronistic is thinking we can split an affection into separate mental (or subjective) and physical (or objective)

³¹ (A) seems more prominent when Burnyeat discusses Sextus; (B) seems more prominent when he discusses the Cyrenaics. Yet as we’ve seen (n 20), he rightly says that Sextan appearances are the same states as Cyrenaic affections.
³² Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 134. Cf. 135, where he says that we cannot “split” the affection (pathos) into separate mental (subjective) and physical (objective) components. The moral to draw is not that the Pyrrhonist allows himself some beliefs about what is the case, but that scepticism is not yet associated with a Cartesian conception of the self.
components. We would not be able to do that if the ancients took affections to be both subjective and objective. And sometimes that seems to be Burnyeat’s view.³⁴ This gives us:

D. Affections and appearances are, both in fact and according to the ancients, both subjective and objective, both mental and physical.

(D), however, so far from explaining (B), conflicts with it.³⁵ For (B) says there is no answer to the question whether affections and appearances are subjective. But (D) provides an answer: like (A), it says they are subjective. It’s just that they are objective too.³⁶

I’ve argued so far that there is an ambiguity, captured by (A) and (B), about what Burnyeat means in saying that the ancients do not view the subjective as a realm about which there are truths, beliefs, or knowledge. The ambiguity centers on whether appearances and affections are, or are not, subjective, either in fact or according to the ancients. I’m inclined to think that (A) is Burnyeat’s considered, or main, view.³⁷ It at any rate seems to be one of his views, and so it is worth considering it further. It can be understood in different ways. For example, it might mean:

E. The ancients do not think there are truths, beliefs, or knowledge about subjective states, in the attenuated sense that they do not, as an empirical matter of fact, use ‘true,’ ‘belief,’ or ‘knowledge’ of subjective states; they use these terms only of what is objective.

³⁴ In discussing the Cyrenaics, for example, he says: ‘which of these, the yellowing of the eyes or the looking yellow, is the primary reference of the perceptual report ‘I am yellowed’? Once again, there is no clear answer’ (Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 28; emphasis added). This suggests that being yellowed involves both the yellowing of the eyes and things looking yellow; what’s unclear is just which is primary. If being yellowed involves both the yellowing of the eyes and the looking yellow, then it is both objective and subjective.

³⁵ It also conflicts with (C). For (C) says that the ancients lack concepts of subjectivity and objectivity, whereas (D) says that they take appearances and affections to be both subjective and objective—in which case they have concepts of subjectivity and objectivity.

³⁶ I shall not ask whether affections are both subjective and objective, both mental and physical. For my concern is simply whether they are, and are conceived by the ancients as being, subjective. If (D) is true, they are subjective and are so conceived by the ancients.

³⁷ This is largely because I think the evidence adduced above on behalf of ascribing (A) to Burnyeat is quite compelling, whereas the case for (B) and (C) seems weaker. (D) agrees with (A) that the ancients think there are subjective states, and it seems to me more likely that Burnyeat intends (D) than (C); if that is so, then that is also support for (A) over (B).) Everson, ‘The Objective Appearance of Pyrrhonism,’ 141, also seems to think that Burnyeat intends (A). So too does Barney, ‘Appearances and Impressions,’ 302–5. For the purpose of understanding Burnyeat, it’s important to decide which view or views he holds. My own alternative, however, counts against all of (A)–(C)—and against (E)–(G), which I go on to discuss.
Some passages suggest (E). Burnyeat says, for example, that ‘earlier skeptics did not call [claims about subjective states] true or false.’\(^3\)\(^8\) But even if he intends (E), I do not think it is all he means. For he also says that ‘an ancient skeptic would hardly have recognized [truths about subjective states] as truths at all.’\(^3\)\(^9\) This suggests he means more than that the ancients do not explicitly use ‘true’ here, though they would be happy to do so; it suggests that their (alleged) failure to do so goes deeper.\(^4\)\(^0\) Or again, we’ve seen that Burnyeat says that ‘there can be no question of belief about appearance, as opposed to real existence, if statements recording how things appear cannot be described as true or false, only statements making claims as to how they really are.’\(^3\)\(^1\) The use of the modal term (‘cannot’) suggests that the ancients have a view of truth according to which appearance-statements cannot be true or false. The point is not just one about how the ancients happen to talk (in the surviving texts); it is a deeper point about their view of the nature of truth. So perhaps Burnyeat means:

F. The ancients do not think there are truths, beliefs, or knowledge about the subjective, because they have a special concept of truth, such that by definition it applies only to what is objective.

Hegel has such a concept of truth.\(^4\)\(^2\) And sometimes Burnyeat seems to have it in mind. He says, for example, that in the ancient contexts ‘true’ ‘means ‘true of a real objective world.’\(^4\)\(^3\) Moreover, he cites Hegel as anticipating him on this point.\(^4\)\(^4\) But I’m not sure whether Burnyeat intends (F).\(^4\)\(^5\) For one thing, his account of Protagoras (which I discuss below) counts against ascribing it to him. For another, he thinks the ancients are right to assume that belief involves taking to be true. In saying this, he doesn’t seem to mean that they rightly think one can believe p only

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\(^3\)\(^8\) Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 38; emphasis added. Notice that here Burnyeat speaks only about truth and falsity; he doesn’t mention belief or knowledge. As we saw above, he says that the Cyrenaics claim to know their experiences; and he thinks knowledge, both in fact and according to the ancients implies truth. But when he discusses the Cyrenaics, he seems to move away from (A) to (B).

\(^3\)\(^9\) Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 38; emphasis in the original.

\(^4\)\(^0\) The passage just cited mentions only ancient skeptics, but Burnyeat does not think their view here is idiosyncratic.

\(^4\)\(^1\) Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 121–2; emphasis added. This remark seems to go better with (A) than with (B). For it suggests that the ancients distinguish appearances from ‘real existents,’ by which Burnyeat means ‘objective existence.’ Alternatively, perhaps he means that, for the ancients, only what is objective exists. But then, since Burnyeat opposes real existence and appearance, he would be committed to saying the ancients don’t think there are appearances. Yet, as we’ve seen, he thinks they take appearances to exist.


\(^4\)\(^3\) Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 121, emphasis added; cf. his ‘Idealism,’ 25.

\(^4\)\(^4\) Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 38 n. 51.

\(^4\)\(^5\) Whether or not Burnyeat believes (F), V. Tsouna, The Epistemology of the Cyrenaic School (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), does so. She writes that the Cyrenaics ‘redefined the concept of truth so as to include the awareness of internal states’ (60; emphasis added); that is, apart from the Cyrenaics, the ancients define truth so that by definition there can be no truths about one’s subjective states.
if it is about what is external, objective, common, and so on.\textsuperscript{46} Nor does he seem to think that Descartes, in attempting to refute skepticism, introduces a new concept of truth when he says that there are truths about subjective states. Rather, Burnyeat seems to think that Descartes sees that ‘true,’ in both the ancient and his own sense of the term, has a wider extension than the ancients realized. So perhaps Burnyeat means:

G. The ancients do not think there are truths, beliefs, or knowledge about the subjective in the sense that, though their concept of truth is in principle applicable to the subjective, it did not occur to them to apply it to the subjective; they unreflectively restrict truth, and so belief and knowledge, to what is objective.

(G), however, seems too weak to capture his claims (cited above) that, according to the ancients, ‘statements recording how things appear cannot be described as true or false’ and that ‘true’ \textit{means} true of a real objective world.’ Burnyeat seems, then, to intend something stronger than (G), but not as strong as (F).

4.

We’ve seen that one of Burnyeat’s views seems to be that, though the ancients think there are subjective states, they do not think there are truths about them. Here it is natural to object: If it appears to me that I am in pain, surely it is true that I am appeared to this way? How could anyone think otherwise? Burnyeat is aware of this objection. His reply is that it is anachronistic: ‘it would be a mistake—though…a mistake that comes naturally to a post-Cartesian philosopher—to object that the sceptic has left himself some truth after all, namely, all those truths about his experience which he records in statements of the form “It appears to me thus and so.” \textsuperscript{47}’ In Burnyeat’s view, this would be a mistake because, again, it fails to see that the ancients restrict truth to what is objective, common, and independent of and external to ourselves. Since statements about how one is appeared

\textsuperscript{46} See esp. Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 137.

\textsuperscript{47} Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 26; cf. ‘Can,’ n. 8, which explicitly uses ‘anachronism.’ Burnyeat’s view is anticipated by C. Stough, in her Greek Skepticism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 142f; and endorsed by McDowell, ‘Singular Thought,’ esp. sect. 5. Cf. Mates, The Skeptic Way, sect. 9. Burnyeat’s view may seem to be anticipated by Hegel. And, to be sure, the two views sound superficially similar. Hegel says, for example, that the skeptic’s appearances ‘had only the significance of a subjective certainty and conviction, and not the value of an absolute truth’ (G. W. F. Hegel, Lectures on the History of Philosophy, vol. II, 343; ed. and trans. E. S. Haldane and F. H. Simson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968)). And he goes on to say that ancient skepticism ‘was really far from holding things of immediate certainty to be true; thus it actually stands in contrast to modern Scepticism, in which it is believed that what is in our immediate consciousness, or indeed, all that is sensuous, is a truth’ (347). As we’ve seen, however, Hegel has in mind a special concept of truth, such that by definition there cannot be truths about subjective states; but that doesn’t seem to be Burnyeat’s view. For an interesting discussion of Hegel on ancient skepticism, see M. F. Forster, Hegel and Skepticism, pt. I.
to are not about what is objective or common, or independent of or external to ourselves, the ancients do not think there are truths about them. Correspondingly, neither do they think there are beliefs or knowledge about them. This suggests the following argument:⁴⁸

1. p is true or false only if it is about a real, common, objective, independent, external world.⁴⁹
2. Appearances are subjective.⁵⁰
3. Therefore appearances are not part of a real, common, objective, independent, external world.
4. Therefore there are no true or false statements about how one is appeared to.⁵¹
5. One can believe p only if p is true or false.⁵²
6. Therefore, no one can have beliefs about how one is appeared to.
7. One can know p only if p is true.⁵³
8. Therefore no one can know how one is appeared to.

⁴⁸ At the Toronto conference, Burnyeat said he did not intend this argument. And, as we’ve seen, not all of its premises are consistent with everything he seems to suggest. However, as I’ve been in the course of explaining, the argument is suggested by some things he says; I also cite relevant passages as footnotes to various steps.

Though Burnyeat doesn’t put it this way, I assume he means only that the ancients don’t think there are any truths (or, therefore, beliefs or knowledge) about the contents of subjective states, in particular, about how one is appeared to. (By the content of a subjective state, I mean, for example, that I am appeared to redly, where the that-clause specifies the content.) If this is right, then he leaves open the possibility that the ancients think there are some truths about subjective states—e.g. that they exist or are subjective. If, however, Burnyeat intends or is committed to the stronger claim that the ancients do not think there are any truths about subjective states at all, then (4) would need to be replaced with:

(4a) There are no truths or falsehoods about appearances.

Given (4a), (2) can’t be true or false, since it is a claim about appearances. In that case, the argument isn’t valid, since one of its premises isn’t truth-evaluable. (Perhaps some arguments can be valid even if not all their premises are truth-evaluable; but this one would not be valid if (2) were not truth-evaluable.) If, on the other hand, (2) is true, then there are some truths about what’s subjective, in which case (4a) is false. In any case, in the text I shall focus on (4), and ignore (4a).

In thinking about these issues, I have benefited from discussion with Keith McPartland, Fred Neuhouser, and Zoltan Szabo.

⁴⁹ ‘“Truth” in these contexts means truth as to real existence, something’s being true of an independent reality’ (Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 25, emphasis added; cf. 26); ‘there can be no question of belief about appearance, as opposed to real existence, if statements recording how things appear cannot be described as true or false, only statements making claims as to how they really are’ (Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 121–2; emphasis added).

⁵⁰ I argued in the previous section that this seems to be Burnyeat’s view, at least some of the time.

⁵¹ See the last passage cited in n. 49.

⁵² ‘belief is the accepting of something as true. There can be no question of belief about appearance, as opposed to real existence, if statements recording how things appear cannot be described as true or false, only statements making claims as to how they really are’ (Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 121–2). Perhaps, rather than (5), the point is that one can’t believe p if one doesn’t take p to be true; since the ancients don’t think there are truths about appearances, neither do they think there are beliefs here. For our purposes, it doesn’t matter which way the point is put.

⁵³ ‘The addition of truth is what opens up a new realm for substantial knowledge’ (Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 39 n. 53). Or perhaps the point is that one wouldn’t claim to know p unless one took p to be true; cf. previous note.
(1) is a crucial premise of this argument. Burnyeat ascribes it not only to ancient skeptics but also to ‘the ancients’ quite generally. As he puts it:\textsuperscript{54}

When the skeptic doubts that anything is true (\textit{PH} II 88ff., \textit{M} VIII 17ff.), he has exclusively in view claims as to real existence. Statements which merely record how things appear are not in question—they are not called true or false—only statements which say that things are thus and so in reality. In the controversy between the skeptic and the dogmatist over whether any truth exists at all, the issue is whether any proposition or class of propositions can be accepted as true of a real objective world as distinct from mere appearance. For ‘true’ in these discussions means ‘true of a real objective world’; ‘the true,’ if there is such a thing, is what conforms with the real, an association traditional to the word \textit{alethes} since the earliest period of Greek philosophy. (cf. \textit{M} XI 221)

Or again:\textsuperscript{55}

Protagoras’ book was called \textit{Truth} precisely because it offered an account of the conditions under which things really are as they appear to be. The Greek use of the predicates ‘true’ and ‘false’ embodies the assumption of realism on which I have been insisting all along.

As these passages make clear, Burnyeat thinks the ancients assume (1) because they unquestioningly assume realism. Now, there are many versions of realism. And certainly Burnyeat sometimes suggests that all the ancients assume a sort of realism according to which \( p \) can be true only on the conditions specified in (1). However, the reasons Burnyeat gives for thinking the ancients assume this version of realism do not show that they do so. He says, for example, that for Hellenistic philosophers ‘[t]he world is as it is independently of us.’\textsuperscript{56} This doesn’t imply that there are truths only about how things are independently of us; it says only that some things exist independently of us.

Or again, one of Burnyeat’s main concerns is to argue that the ancients assume realism in a sense that precludes their being idealists.\textsuperscript{57} (1) may be sufficient to secure this result, but it isn’t necessary. Nor need one be an idealist, or even be aware of idealism, in order to think that there are truths about subjective states: one might unreflectively assume that there are truths about both subjective states and external reality.

\textsuperscript{54} Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 121. In addition to the passages I go on to cite, see also his ‘Idealism,’ 33: ‘What I have ascribed to antiquity is an unquestioned, unquestioning assumption of realism.’

\textsuperscript{55} Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 26.

\textsuperscript{56} Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 22.

\textsuperscript{57} Burnyeat explains idealism as follows: ‘Idealism, whether we mean by that Berkeley’s own doctrine that \textit{esse est percipi} or a more vaguely conceived thesis to the effect that everything is in some substantial sense mental or spiritual’ (3). Cf. 8: ‘idealism is the monism which claims that ultimately all there is is mind and the contents of mind.’
Burnyeat also has other arguments on behalf of (1). He says, for example:  

Surely, one wants to say, a statement of this form ['It appears to me thus and so'] is true if and only if things do appear as the statement says they appear. But as I have already noted, in the skeptic’s book to say that an appearance, or the statement expressing it, is true is to say that external things really are as they (are said to) appear to be.

Well, suppose my appearance that \( p \) is true if and only if external things really are as \( p \) represents them as being. That doesn’t show that there are no truths about how I’m appeared to. We need to distinguish (a) the conditions for an appearance’s being true, in the sense of correctly capturing how (external) things are, from (b) the conditions for its being true that I’m appeared to in a given way. It can be true that I’m appeared to thus and so, even if the appearance itself is not true (that is, even if it does not capture how (external) things are). It is true that I am appeared to as though confronted by an elephant, just in case I am appeared to that way. Whether the appearance itself is true is quite another matter: that depends on whether I’m confronted by an elephant.

Burnyeat also argues that the ancients, rather than being concerned with external world skepticism, focus on ‘the problem of understanding how thought can be of nothing or what is not.’ This suggests he thinks the ancients assume (1’):

\[(1') \ p \text{ can be true or false only if it is about something that exists.} \]

But (1’) does not imply (1). At least, this is so if (as Burnyeat thinks the ancients believe) not everything that exists is common, objective, and so on. Nor would assuming (1’) preclude one from thinking there are truths about subjective states. At least, it doesn’t do so if (as Burnyeat at times thinks the ancients believe) there are subjective states.

Nor can Burnyeat consistently intend (1). For he thinks that Protagoras believes there are truths; but he also argues that Protagoras denies that there is anything

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59 If there can be appearances about appearances, then some appearances can be true without correctly capturing how external things really are. For the sake of simplicity, we can leave this to one side for now; but see n. 65.
60 Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 19. Burnyeat also notes (16) that Gorgias argues that nothing exists: again, the concern is with existence as such, not with an independent, objective, external reality in particular.
61 I’m not convinced that all of the ancients accept even (1’). Some of them, to be sure, think that \( p \) is true if and only if \( p \). (See, for example, Plato, \textit{Crat.} 385b7–8; \textit{Sophist} 263b4–5; Aristotle, \textit{Categories} 14b11–33; \textit{Met.} 1011b26–29.) But ‘\( p \)’ need not be about an object that exists (which is what Burnyeat seems to think (1’) requires). ‘There are no unicorns,’ for example, is true just in case there are no unicorns.
common, objective, or independent. As he puts it, for Protagoras 'it is as true to say that the perceiving subject is dependent on there being something for it to perceive as it is to say that the thing perceived is dependent on a subject perceiving it. The ontological dependence goes both ways.' Or again, he says that, according to Protagoras, 'each of us lives in his own private reality.' I'm not sure precisely how Burnyeat understands reality here; but he clearly doesn't take it to involve being independent, objective, and common.

So I'm not persuaded that any of the ancients assume (1). Even if they do not do so, however, some of them might be committed to (4), (6), and (8) for other reasons. Even if none of them is committed to any of these views, it wouldn't follow that any of them think there are truths, beliefs, or knowledge about the subjective: perhaps they aren't committed one way or the other. Perhaps they aren't even committed to the existence of subjective states.

Whatever Burnyeat's considered view is, in 'The Objective Appearance of Pyrrhonism' Stephen Everson argues that affections and appearances are not, and are not conceived by the ancients as being, subjective; rather, they are, and are conceived by the ancients as being, wholly and only objective. So in place of (2), he favors:

2. Appearances and affections are, both in fact and according to the ancients, wholly and only objective; they are not, either in fact or according to the ancients, subjective.

Correspondingly, he also rejects (3), (4), (6), and (8).
5.

We have now canvassed a variety of positions; it is time to adjudicate among them. I begin with the Cyrenaics. It will help to have a key passage before us:

The Cyrenaics say, then, that affections are the criteria, and that only they are apprehensible (katalambanesthai) and infallible (adiapseusta); none of the things producing affections is apprehensible or infallible. For, they say, it is possible to assert infallibly (adiapseustôs) and truly (alêthôs) and certainly (bebaiôs) and incorrigibly (anexelenktôs) that we are whitened (leukainometha) or sweetened (glukazometha), but it is impossible to affirm that what causes the affection (pathos) in us is white or sweet.

For it is plausible (eikos) that one may be disposed whitely (leukantikôs diatethênai) by something not white, or be sweetened by something not sweet. For just as the one who suffers from vertigo or jaundice is moved by everything yellowly, and the one who suffers from ophthalmia is reddened, and the one who presses down his eye is moved as if by two things, and the madman sees a doubled Thebes and imagines the sun double, and in all these cases it is true that people are affected in some particular way (to men hoti tode ti paschousin) (e.g. they are yellowed or reddened or doubled), but it is considered (nenomistai) false that what moves them is yellow or red or double, likewise it is very reasonable (eulogôtaton) for us to assume that one can apprehend nothing but one’s own affections.

Hence (hothen) we must posit either the affections or the things productive of affections as things that are apparent (phainomena). And if we say that the affections are things that are apparent, we must say that all the things that are apparent are true and apprehensible. But if we call the things productive of the affections things that are apparent, we must say that all the things that are apparent are false and inapprehensible. For the affection that occurs in us reveals to us nothing more than itself. Hence (enthen) too, if one must speak the truth, only the affection is apparent (phainomenon) to us, and the external object which is productive of the affection, though it perhaps (tacha) exists, is not apparent to us. (Sextus, M VII 191–4)

In the first paragraph of this passage, Sextus seems to attribute to the Cyrenaics the view that there are truths about, and apprehension—that is, knowledge—of, affections. However, matters are not so clear. First, in including ‘and truly’

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67 Katalêpsis as such is not coextensive with the most exalted form of knowledge, for which epistêmê is generally reserved (though it is arguable that epistêmê is a kind of katalêpsis). But even if it is not coextensive with the most exalted form of knowledge, it goes beyond mere true belief in ways that suggest that it is a sort of knowledge, as knowledge is generally understood nowadays. Even if katalêpsis can, in some contexts, fall short of knowledge (a point about which there is controversy), it seems to be
(kai alêthôs), I have followed Mutschmann’s Teubner edition of Sextus, as does Giannantoni.\(^{68}\) They, in turn, rely on manuscripts N, L, and E. However, Bury, in his Loeb edition, omits the phrase, as does Mannebach.\(^{69}\) They follow manuscripts A, B, V, and R. So it is not entirely clear that Sextus explicitly says that the Cyrenaics think there are truths about affections.

However, given the relations among these different manuscripts, I think it is reasonable to include kai alêthôs. For the original archetype G divides into two traditions: N, and all the rest (x in Mutschmann). L and E in turn stem from a single tradition (y, in Mutschmann), whereas A, B, V, and R all stem from a different tradition (sigma, in Mutschmann). If we assume that the original archetype lacked kai alêthôs, we have to assume that N, on the one hand, and L and E, on the other, independently inserted it. It is more plausible to assume that N, L, and E all follow G, and that kai alêthôs dropped out of the tradition from which A, B, V, and R stem—and it is worth noting that A, B, V, and R are the inferior manuscripts.\(^{70}\)

Moreover, in 193 Sextus says: ‘it is true (alêthes) that people are affected in some particular way (e.g. they are yellowed or reddened or doubled).’ Here all the manuscripts have alêthes. Similarly, in 194 Sextus says that if pathê are phainomena (as he thinks they are on the Cyrenaic view), then they are all alêthê—that is, each of us has the truth about our own pathê. All the manuscripts have alêthê here. So we are not dependent on 191 for the explicit claim that there are truths about pathê; that claim is repeated in 193 and in 194, where there is no doubt about the text.\(^{71}\)

a sort of knowledge in the present context. First, katalêpsis is standardly defined as being truth entailing (or is at any rate always assumed to be truth entailing), so we may take it for granted that it is so viewed here, whether or not we include kai alêthôs. Secondly, it is explicitly said to be infallible, certain, and incorrigible. (Bekker deletes bebaiôs, but all the manuscripts have it.) If katalêpsis is truth entailing, infallible, certain, and incorrigible, it counts as a sort of knowledge, as most people conceive of knowledge. (This point would be clear even if we delete bebaiôs.)


\(^{70}\) For the relations among, and reliability of, the manuscripts, I have relied on Mutschmann’s introduction. I have not inspected any manuscripts myself.

\(^{71}\) Nor is the point in 193 and 194 merely that it is true that one has a given pathos (which might be taken to be an objective fact, even if pathê themselves are subjective). In 193, for example, Sextus says that it is true that each of us is affected in a particular way, and he gives the examples of being yellowed, reddened, and doubled. This goes beyond saying that it is true that there are pathê; it imports a reference to how one is affected, to the content of the pathos. See n. 48.

It’s worth noting that in 191, Sextus says that for the Cyrenaics, pathê are the criterion: and he seems to mean that they are the criterion of truth, not merely of action (cf. Cicero, Acad. II 20–1). This too, I think, indicates that they think there are truths about pathê. Cf. Tsouna, The Epistemology of the Cyrenaic School, 33ff; and J. Brunschwig, ‘La théorie cyrénaique de la connaissance et le problème de ses rapports avec Socrate,’ in J.-B. Gourinat (ed.), Socrate et les socratiques (Paris: Vrin, 2001), 457–77, at 462–3. To be sure, to call something a criterion of truth need not imply that there are truths about it. However, given the Cyrenaics’ overall views, if they take pathê to be the criterion of truth, it is reasonable to assume that they mean that there are truths about pathê. For a criterion of truth reveals something’s truth, whether its own or something else’s. The Cyrenaics think that pathê reveal only themselves; pathê are somehow self-revealing (M VII 194; Plutarch, Adv. Col. 1120E–F, discussed below). Hence the only truths they can reveal are about themselves.
Even if we omit kai alêthôs and ignore 193 and 194, it seems clear that Sextus thinks the Cyrenaics hold that there are truths about pathê. For katalêpsis is truth-entailing.\(^2\)

This, however, leads to a second problem: though Sextus says that the Cyrenaics think we can apprehend only our own pathê, it is unlikely that they initially expressed their view by using katalambanô or any of its cognates.\(^3\) Be that as it may, it is nonetheless clear that they think we apprehend (know) our own pathê. For all the ancient sources ascribe that view to them. Since several of these sources are independent of one another, it seems reasonable to assume that they correctly describe the Cyrenaic view, however the Cyrenaics themselves initially expressed it. So whether or not we include kai alêthôs, and however the Cyrenaics initially expressed their view, it seems clear that they held both that there are truths about pathê and that each of us knows our own pathê.\(^4\)

This by itself, however, does not show that the Cyrenaics think there are truths or knowledge about subjective states. We can conclude that that is their view only if the pathê they talk about are, and are taken by the Cyrenaics to be, subjective. Certainly not all pathê are subjective. To have a pathos is simply to undergo something or to be affected in some way. When a stone is warmed by the sun, for example, it has a pathos: it undergoes something, it is affected in some way.\(^5\)

We need to know, then, whether the pathê about which the Cyrenaics say there are truths and knowledge are subjective, either in fact or according to the Cyrenaics. In our passage, examples of pathê include being sweetened, yellowed, and doubled.\(^6\)

How should we understand these examples? Everson suggests the following interpretation:\(^7\)

\(^2\) See n. 67. The Cyrenaics also think there are beliefs about pathê; see, for example, Plutarch, Adv. Col. 1120F (doxa). But I restrict my attention here to apprehension (knowledge) and truth, since Sextus does so in the passage on which I am focusing.

\(^3\) This is because Cicero, Acad. II (= Luc.) 144–5, tells us that katalêpsis was first used by Zeno, a Stoic. The word itself antedates Zeno; so presumably Cicero means that he was the first to use it for apprehension in an epistemological sense. Even if the Cyrenaics didn’t initially use katalambanô or any of its cognates in a relevant sense, later Cyrenaics may well have done so. Tsouna remarks that if they did not do so, ‘it is difficult to explain thoroughly the frequency with which [these terms] occur in the evidence’ (The Epistemology of the Cyrenaic School, 32 n. 2). She suggests that they may have initially used aisthanesthai, gignôskein, or gnôrizein (32); cf. Mannebach, 116.

\(^4\) Even if all our sources are wrong to ascribe this view to the Cyrenaics, it was clearly ascribed to them in antiquity. It follows that the view that there is knowledge of, and that there are truths about, pathê was articulated in antiquity, even if it was articulated only as a universally shared misinterpretation of the Cyrenaics.

\(^5\) See n. 20.

\(^6\) These locutions are sometimes thought to have been invented by the Cyrenaics: see Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 27 (‘devised’; cf. Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 134–5); J. Barnes, ‘The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist,’ Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society NS 28 (1982), 1–29, in n. 29 (‘neologisms’). But in Aristotle on Perception (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 113, S. Everson suggests that they may instead be due to Aristotle (cf. his ‘The Objective Appearance of Pyrrhonism,’ 131–2). However, the chronology here is unclear. It is possible, though by no means certain, that the terminology was used by Aristippus the Elder. If it was used by him, then it antedates Aristotle and may well be due to the Cyrenaics.

\(^7\) Everson, ‘The Objective Appearance of Pyrrhonism,’ 130–1. He is actually discussing Aristotle, but he says that the Cyrenaics accept ‘Aristotle’s account of what happens to us when we perceive’ (131).
when I perceive something white, for instance, my eye-jelly (korê) becomes white. In perceiving a white object, my eye precisely undergoes a whitening. This change is of precisely the same sort as that undergone by any inanimate object which is capable of changing colour. What distinguishes it as a perceptual change is that the subject is aware of the change.

According to Everson, being whitened is wholly and only physical. Even if he is right about that, he has not clearly eliminated subjectivity altogether; for in addition to speaking of being whitened, he also mentions our awareness of it. And, one might think, the state of being aware of something is subjective, even if what one is aware of is not.⁷⁸

But should we grant that, when the Cyrenaics speak of being whitened and so on, they mean to describe states that are wholly and only material and not at all subjective? Let us grant that being whitened is a physical state.⁷⁹ As we’ve seen, some philosophers think that materialism is incompatible with subjectivity. Such a philosopher might argue that, if the Cyrenaics are materialists, they can’t in fact accommodate subjectivity. At points this seems to be Everson’s view.⁸⁰ However,

As he notes (130 n. 23), his interpretation of Aristotle is controversial. On an alternative that I prefer, Aristotle’s view is that to receive the form of whiteness in perception is to be in a subjective mental state that represents some portion of the world as being white. For this interpretation, see T. H. Irwin, Aristotle’s First Principles (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), ch. 14; and his ‘Aristotle’s Philosophy of Mind,’ in S. Everson (ed.), Cambridge Companions to Ancient Thought 2: Psychology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 56–83. For criticism of a literalist interpretation of Aristotle, such as is held by Everson, see also J. Barnes, ‘Aristotle’s Concept of Mind,’ Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 72 (1971–2), 101–10; and by J. Lear, Aristotle: The Desire to Understand (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 101–16, esp. 106–16.

Interestingly, Burnyeat’s view of Aristotle on perception has changed. In ‘Idealism,’ he says that ‘it is unclear, and is still a matter of exegetical dispute, how literally (physically) Aristotle means to say that some part of me becomes yellow when I perceive yellow’ (44). But in M. F. Burnyeat, ‘Is an Aristotelian Philosophy of Mind Still Credible? (A Draft),’ in M. Nussbaum and R. Rorty (eds.), Essays on Aristotle’s De Anima (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 15–26, he says that for Aristotle ‘the organ’s becoming like the object is not its literally and physiologically becoming hard or warm but a noticing or becoming aware of hardness or warmth’ (21). He also argues that this noticing or becoming aware is wholly immaterial. Burnyeat’s new view is criticized by Everson, in Aristotle on Perception; see also M. Nussbaum and H. Putnam, ‘Changing Aristotle’s Mind,’ in Nussbaum and Rorty, Essays on Aristotle’s De Anima, 27–56; R. Sorabji, ‘Intentionality and Physiological Processes: Aristotle’s Theory of Sense Perception,’ in Nussbaum and Rorty, Essays on Aristotle’s De Anima, 195–226, pt II. Though I reject a literalist interpretation, I do not think Aristotle takes noticing or being aware of something to be wholly immaterial. Receiving the form of whiteness is in some sense material, even if it does not involve becoming physically white. (I use ‘material’ and ‘physical’ more or less interchangeably.) It would be interesting to know whether Burnyeat has changed his view of the Cyrenaics, in the light of his new view of Aristotle.

⁷⁸ Everson may disagree: ‘the fact of awareness [is not] sufficient to import subjectivity’ (The Objective Appearance of Pyrrhonism, 142). His reason, however, is that ‘we are often directly aware of states which are certainly capable of perfectly objective description.’ This says that being aware of x isn’t sufficient for x’s being subjective. My point, however, is that the awareness itself is subjective.

⁷⁹ Which is not to say that it is the physical state of being made white. In the contexts of concern to us here, it is whatever physical state one is in when one sees, or seems to see white, a state that need not itself be literally white (which is not to say that everyone who sees, or seems to see, white is in some single sort of physical state; a range of physical states may be involved).

as we’ve also seen, the view that materialism precludes subjectivity is, to say the least, highly controversial. It has been argued—to my mind plausibly—that materialism can accommodate subjectivity.¹ And, of course, even if the Cyrenaics are materialists, and even if materialism in fact precludes subjectivity, it would take further argument to show that the Cyrenaics think materialism precludes subjectivity. One shouldn’t infer from the fact (if it is a fact) that they are materialists, that they don’t think there are subjective states. Perhaps they—rightly or wrongly—believe that materialism is compatible with subjectivity.

Here it may be helpful to follow Christopher Peacocke in distinguishing the level of sense from the level of reference.² To say that the Cyrenaics are materialists is to say that they don’t admit subjectivity at the level of reference: they don’t think there are any distinctively mental or subjective objects. That, however, is compatible with their admitting subjectivity at the level of sense: they could believe that in order fully to understand certain states, one must use subjective terms, even if the states being described are material. Everson, however, argues that:³

[o]n the ancient view…there is subjectivity at the level neither of reference nor of sense. In being aware of a perceptual pathos, the subject is directly aware of his state as objectively described. When the Cyrenaic claims that something appears white to him, what he is aware of is precisely that he has been whitened. The object of his awareness is white, where ‘white’ here has the same sense as it does when used in the sentence ‘The snow is white.’ What he is aware of is not a state of affairs which is dependent upon his being aware of it—even under the description under which he is aware of it.

That is, not only do the Cyrenaics claim to be aware of what are in fact material states; they also claim to be aware of them only as described in material terms. What they are aware of is that their eye-jelly has turned white; and that is the description or mode of presentation under which they are aware of it.⁴ Burnyeat argues, more moderately, that the Cyrenaic terminology makes it impossible to decide ‘whether they are referring to being made physically white or to the experience of seeing, or of seeming to see, something white.’⁵

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¹ See the references in n. 18.
³ Everson, ‘The Objective Appearance of Pyrrhonism,’ 144. Once again one wants to ask: even if what one is aware of isn’t subjective, isn’t the awareness itself subjective?
⁴ Having argued this, however, Everson goes on to say: ‘I would not want to argue that all the relevant talk of mental states—such as anger or pain—could avoid the subjectivist’s argument in this way…In these cases, the communion of sense and reference would be lost’ (‘The Objective Appearance of Pyrrhonism,’ 145 n. 55). So it seems that Everson does not think the ancients entirely eliminate subjectivity after all.
⁵ Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 135. This passage seems to express (B), discussed in section 3.
Now even if their terminology doesn’t decide the issue on its own, the Cyrenaics might say other things that do decide the issue or, at least, that make one answer more plausible than another. And my own view is that it is more plausible to think they are describing, and take themselves to be describing, subjective states than states that are wholly and only physical; even if the states they describe are physical, they are describing them under a subjective mode of presentation as, for example, the experience of seeing, or of seeming to see, white. They admit subjectivity at the level of sense, whether or not they admit it at the level of reference.

For one thing, even if we were to concede that talk of being whitened is ambiguous as between being made physically white, on the one hand, and seeing or seeming to see white, on the other, not all of their examples seem thus ambiguous. In M VII 192–3 (cited above), for example, in addition to speaking of being yellowed and reddened, Sextus also says that ‘the one who presses down his eye is moved as if by two things, and the madman sees a doubled Thebes and imagines the sun double.’ These people, he says, are ‘doubled.’ It’s one thing to say that when one sees, or seems to see, something yellow, one’s eye-jelly becomes yellow. It’s quite another thing to say that when one seems to see a doubled Thebes or imagines two suns, one’s eye-jelly is doubled. In these latter two cases, it’s more reasonable to suppose that the Cyrenaics are describing the subjective experiences of seeming to see two Thebes and of imagining two suns, than the physical event of one’s eye-jelly being doubled.

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86 Sextus here paraphrases Euripides, Bacchae, 918/9. Two differences are worth noting. First, where Sextus says that the madman sees two Thebes, Euripides has Pentheus say ‘I seem (dokô) to see two Thebes.’ (Presumably Sextus has in mind the phenomenological use of ‘see,’ whereas Euripides has in mind the success use.) Secondly, Sextus but not Euripides uses phantazetai.

Gary Matthews asked me whether there are any passages in which an ancient philosopher says, as Descartes does, that even in a dream one can know how one is appeared to; he thought that would be clear evidence for the claim that they think one can know one’s subjective states. The present passage comes close to making the relevant point, since the Cyrenaics assume that even madmen have katalêpsis of their pathê (and for what it’s worth, it’s arguable that Descartes links the madness hypothesis and the dream argument very closely): not that I think one needs to make that point for it to be clear that one thinks one has knowledge of one’s subjective states.

87 Which, again, is not to deny that these subjective states are also physical. Tsouna also argues that these examples are of subjective states. See V. Tsouna, ‘The Cyrenaic Theory of Knowledge,’ Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy 10 (1992), 161–92, at 170; and her The Epistemology of the Cyrenaic School. 24. (On 24–5, she notes that the Cyrenaics also use adverbial phrases like ‘being disposed whitely’ (at M VII 192); she takes this as further evidence that pathê are subjective, saying that ‘we could say of a piece of iron turning red in the fire that “it is reddened”, but we would not describe a surface painted red as “being disposed redly.”’. The same point is made by Brunswchig, in ‘La théorie cyrénaique,’ 461. We do, however, say that sugar e.g. is disposed to dissolve in water; so the mere use of such adverbial phrases doesn’t seem to me to support the view that pathê are subjective, though for other reasons I favor the view that they are.) Unfortunately, neither Burnyeat nor Everson considers these examples. Sorabji, ‘Intentionality,’ 209, suggests that in Aristotle only small-scale sizes are received, but that hardly solves the problem. The claim that shape and size are an objection to a literalist reading was made already by Galen, On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato VII 7.4–15 (cited by Sorabji, ‘Intentionality’).
Moreover, consider their account of our epistemic access to pathê. In M VII 191 (cited above), they say that we can ‘assert infallibly and truly and certainly and incorrigibly that we are whitened or sweetened.’⁸⁸ And Plutarch tells us that:

They say we are sweetened and bitten and chilled and warmed and illuminated and darkened, each of these pathê having within itself its own evidence, which is intrinsic to it and irreversible. But whether honey is sweet…is contested by many witnesses…So, when belief (doxa) restricts itself to affections, it is infallible (anhamartênô), but when it oversteps them and meddles with judgments and assertions about external objects, it often both disturbs itself…

(Adv. Col. 1120E–F)

Sextus and Plutarch do not elaborate on the crucial terms used here. But it is reasonable to think they mean that we are incorrigible in that we cannot be corrected; that we cannot be corrected because we are infallible; and that we are infallible in that we are guaranteed to have the truth. We are guaranteed to have the truth, because each affection has ‘within itself its own evidence’ (Adv. Col. 1129E); each reveals ‘nothing more than itself’ (M VII 194). The idea is that our pathê are so clear to us that we can’t help but describe them correctly; hence we are infallible and so incorrigible about them.⁸⁹

If the Cyrenaics view the affections at issue here as subjective, then their description of our epistemic access to them is not surprising. For even if the view that we are incorrigible and infallible about our subjective states is not ultimately correct, it is at least intuitively plausible. It would, however, be bizarre to claim that we are infallible, are guaranteed to have the truth, about the physical condition of our eye-jelly, under that description: especially when we remember

Are Aristocles’s examples—being burned and cut—also meant to be of subjective states (the feeling of being burned or cut)? As we’ve seen, Burnyeat says ‘to that question no answer is forthcoming’ (‘Idealism,’ 27). Even if one agrees with Burnyeat about Aristocles’s examples—though I myself do not—it doesn’t follow that there is no answer to the question whether being doubled when one sees, or seems to see, two things is subjective. My argument doesn’t require all Cyrenaic pathê to be subjective; all I need is that some of them are. In fact, however, I think that all the examples are meant to be of subjective states. For one thing, the Cyrenaics don’t mention any differences among the various examples; since some of them are—or so I think—clearly subjective, it seems reasonable to infer that all of them are. In the text, I also give further reasons for supposing this.

⁸⁸ At least, they say this if we follow Mutschmann’s text. But the points I go on to make do not require us to follow Mutschmann rather than Bury.

⁸⁹ Note that the incorrigibility and infallibility at issue here (unlike the sort of incorrigibility and first-person authority that Burnyeat takes Sextus to advert to) involve truth. Though Plutarch doesn’t explicitly use ‘truth,’ he says that beliefs about affections are infallible, whereas beliefs about external things are not; the clear suggestion is that beliefs about the former, but not about the latter, are guaranteed to be true. (I suppose one could say that something is infallible because it is neither right nor wrong. But enargeia suggests that the infallibility at issue here involves being truth entailing. The explicit mention of belief also suggests that truth is at issue, since, again, belief, both in fact and according to the ancients, involves taking to be true. The idea is that what I believe, that is, what I take to be true, about my pathê is guaranteed to be true.)
that, as Sorabji puts it, the korê is not the pupil, but an organ deep within. Sorabji says that ‘[i]t would not have been obvious, with the instruments then available, that the eye-jelly did not go coloured, or the inside of the ear noisy.’ By the same token, it would not have been obvious that the eye-jelly did go colored, or the inside of the ear noisy. Moreover, the Cyrenaics seem to think that everyone has privileged access to their pathê. But not everyone has even heard of eye-jelly; hence that can’t be the description under which everyone is aware of their pathê.

The claim that the Cyrenaics mean to be describing subjective states under a subjective mode of presentation gains support from the fact that they describe affections in terms of the marks of subjectivity mentioned in section 2. They give the right sorts of examples, such as imagining that there are two suns. At least some of their examples—such as imagining that there are two suns—have representational content. The Cyrenaics also think that we can know our pathê through introspection, and that each of us has privileged access to our own pathê, indeed, that we are incorrigible and infallible about them.

One might argue that satisfying these marks is not sufficient for subjectivity. However, it’s important to see that adding further criteria is controversial.

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90 Sorabji, ‘Intentionality,’ 209. Burnyeat and Tsouna speak not of the eye-jelly but of the eye. But if the Cyrenaics mean to claim that each of us is infallible about the physical condition of our eye, then the claim is even more obviously false, and would have been known to be false. As the case of blind people makes clear, it’s not at all plausible to claim first person authority about the color of one’s eyes. At least the color of one’s eye-jelly isn’t observable by others.


92 The Cyrenaics seem to ground incorrigibility not only on infallibility but also on privacy: ‘For all people in common call something “white” and “sweet,” although they do not have anything white or sweet in common. For each apprehends his peculiar affection, but as to whether this affection arises from a white object in him and his neighbor, he cannot say without receiving his neighbor’s affection, nor can his neighbor say without receiving his. Since no common affection comes to be for us, it is rash to say that what appears to me of this sort also appears to the one standing beside of this sort. For perhaps I am so put together as to be whitened by the agency of what strikes me from outside, while the other person has his perception so constituted as to be conditioned differently. So what appears to us is not at all common’ (M VII 196–7).

As Everson says, ‘[a]t first sight, it would seem difficult to read this as anything other than an argument for the privacy, and hence subjectivity, of experience’ (‘The Objective Appearance of Pyrrhonism,’ 130). However, he rejects this view in favor of the view that the Cyrenaics mean only that it is unclear whether anyone else’s eye-jelly turns white in the same conditions in which mine does so (130–2, 143). But, again, the passage assumes that each of us knows what our own affections are like. As I’ve said, it would be bizarre to say that each of us knows the condition of our eye-jelly (or of our eyes), as described in physical terms. It’s more reasonable to think that the Cyrenaics are adverting to the privacy of subjective experience: I know what it is like for me to see, or to seem to see, something white; but I cannot know what it is like for you to see, or to seem to see, something white. Not every sort of privacy and privileged access implies subjectivity. But in the present context, the alternative is that the Cyrenaics think we have privileged access of a very strong sort to the condition of our eye-jelly (or of our eyes), as described in physical terms. If we can avoid attributing this bizarre view to the Cyrenaics, we should do so; on the account I am suggesting, we can do so. For a recent discussion of M VII 196–7, see V. Tsouna, ‘Remarks About Other Minds in Greek Philosophy,’ Phronesis 43 (1998), 245–63.

93 On my view, being whitened and so on are also examples of the right sort; being whitened, for example, is seeing, or seeming to see, white. But as we’ve seen, it’s disputed whether that is the right account of the example. So not all the Cyrenaics’ examples are uncontroversially of the right sort, even if they are in fact of the right sort.
If Cyrenaic pathê do not satisfy these further criteria, we should not conclude that the Cyrenaics do not view pathê as subjective; we should conclude that they do not accept these further criteria. Even if we want to say that they in that case have the wrong account of subjectivity, it doesn’t follow that they are not talking about subjective states and aiming to describe them under a subjective mode of presentation. It’s one thing to argue about whether the Cyrenaics’ account of the subjectivity of pathê is correct. But that question must be sharply separated from the question whether the Cyrenaics take pathê to be subjective, whether they are describing pathê under a subjective mode of presentation. I’ve been arguing that they do so.

On my view, then, the Cyrenaics think that there are subjective states, and that there are truths, beliefs, and knowledge about them.⁹⁴ Hence, to return to the claims considered in section 3, (A), (B), and (C) are false: for the Cyrenaics take affections to be subjective, and think there are truths, beliefs, and knowledge about them. If we retain kai alêthôs in M VII 191, as I’ve argued we should, then the Cyrenaics are also a counterexample to (E). Whether or not we retain kai alêthôs, the Cyrenaics are a counterexample to (F) and (G). Turning to the argument considered in section 4, the Cyrenaics reject (1), (4), (6), and (8).⁹⁵

6.

What, however, about Sextus? Here we need to distinguish two questions: (a) is he aware of the view that there are truths, beliefs, and knowledge about the subjective; and (b) does he accept it? There is a good reason to answer ‘yes’ to (a). For Sextus is our main source for the Cyrenaics. We looked above at his account of them in

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⁹⁴ Not just that they exist, but about their contents; see n. 48. They believe it’s true that, and that I know that (for example) I am reddened or doubled, where this specifies how I am appeared to, the content of a subjective state. Tsouna, The Epistemology of the Cyrenaic School, agrees that Cyrenaic pathê are subjective, and that the Cyrenaics think there are truths and knowledge about them. But unlike me, she thinks that in doing so they redefined the then current definition of ‘truth’; see n. 45. She also thinks the Cyrenaics are unique among the ancients in admitting truths about (the contents of) subjective states; in the next section, I argue against that view. There are also further differences between us which, however, I do not have the space to explore here.

That Cyrenaic pathê are subjective is assumed by B. Inwood and L. P. Gerson, in their Hellenistic Philosophy (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997, 2nd. ed.), in their translation of PHI 215, which reads, in part, as follows: ‘Some say that the Cyrenaic approach is the same as scepticism, since that approach says that only our [subjective] states are grasped.’ J. Brunschwig, ‘Cyrenaic Epistemology,’ in K. Algra et al. (eds.), Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy ((Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), ch. 7 pt. III, also takes Cyrenaic pathê to be subjective.

⁹⁵ But they believe (2); hence we should reject Everson’s (2’). Notice that my view does not count only against saying that the ancients believe that there are no truths, beliefs, or knowledge about the subjective. It also counts against saying that they do not believe that there are any truths, beliefs, or knowledge about subjective states. (These two claims differ, since one can fail to believe p without believing not-p.) For on my view, they hold the positive and explicit belief that there are truths, beliefs, and knowledge about the contents of subjective states.
M VII 190–9; it was my main evidence for the claim that the Cyrenaics think there are truths, beliefs, and knowledge about the subjective. Hence, if Sextus does not think there are truths, beliefs, or knowledge about the subjective, the reason is not likely to be that the view just didn’t occur to him; his account of the Cyrenaics indicates that he is well aware of the view.⁹⁶

What about (b)? First we should ask whether, like Cyrenaic affections, Sextan appearances and affections are subjective. Here I shall be brief. I agree with Burnyeat and Everson that Sextus and the Cyrenaics are talking about the same states (even if they accord us different sorts of epistemic access to them).⁹⁷ Hence, since Cyrenaic affections are subjective, so too are Sextan affections and appearances. That they are subjective can also be argued independently of the Cyrenaics. For Sextus both gives the right sorts of examples and characterizes them appropriately. At M VIII 475, for example, he says that it would be rash to try to upset someone else’s affection (pathos) by argument, explaining that ‘just as no one can by argument convince the joyful person that he is not joyful, or the man in pain that he is not in pain, so no one can convince the one who is convinced that he is not convinced.’ Feeling pain and joy are paradigm examples of subjective states. And what Sextus says about them is reminiscent of his claim in PH I 22, that appearance-statements are azêtêtos, which, as we’ve seen, Burnyeat—in my view rightly—explains in term of incorrigibility and first-person authority.⁹⁸ So I’m happy to accept what seems to be one of Burnyeat’s views, that Sextan appearances and affections are, and are described by Sextus as being, subjective.

At least, they count as subjective on the rough account provided in section 2. Perhaps they are not subjective on a more demanding account of subjectivity. But then we should be clear that what is at issue is the correct account of subjectivity. Be that as it may, on a rough and intuitive account of it, Sextan appearances and affections are subjective, and are so described by Sextus.

⁹⁶ This counts against (G) (see section 3). Cf. Forster, Hegel and Skepticism, 16–17; cf. 19. Burnyeat says that ‘there is evidence in Galen that if the question [‘At least I know how things appear to me, but do I know more than that?’] was raised—and it is not clear that it was often raised—then at least the more radical Pyrrhonists (rustic Pyrrhonists, Galen calls them) would actually deny that they had certain knowledge of appearances’ (Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 27). If, as this seems to say, the question of whether there is knowledge of appearances was sometimes raised, then the issue was not foreign to the ancients. And if, as Burnyeat seems to say, some Pyrrhonists explicitly denied that they knew their appearances, then they explicitly considered whether there was such knowledge.

⁹⁷ For Burnyeat, see n. 20. For Everson, see ‘The Objective Appearance of Pyrrhonism,’ 137. Everson, of course, thinks that both Sextan appearances and Cyrenaic affections are wholly objective.

⁹⁸ For a different view, see Barney, ‘Appearances and Impressions,’ 304–5. Her main argument is that it would be dogmatic of Sextus (and so inconsistent with his skepticism) to differentiate between a subjective inner realm and an objective outer realm. She allows, however, that Sextus accepts bios; and it seems to me to be a part of bios to think that being in pain—in contrast to, say, being a rock—is subjective in some sense. Sextus can think this without having a theory of subjectivity or objectivity. Nor need we say that he believes that such states are subjective; it might non-doxastically appear to him that they are. Cf. PH I 4: the whole of PH records how things appear to Sextus to be at the time.
There is also evidence that Sextus agrees with the Cyrenaics that there are truths, beliefs, and knowledge about the subjective. In *PH* I 215, for example, he says:

Some say that the Cyrenaic way is the same as scepticism, since it too (*kai*) says that we only apprehend (*katalambanesthai*) affections (*pathê*). But it differs from scepticism since it says that the aim is pleasure and a smooth motion of the flesh, while we say that it is tranquillity, which is contrary to the aim they propose... Further, we suspend judgment, so far as the argument goes (*hoson epi tô(i) logô(i)*), about external objects (*ta ektos hupokeimena*), while the Cyrenaics assert that they have an inapprehensible nature.

Some people think that Cyrenaics and skeptics (i.e. Pyrrhonists) have the same views, since both claim that only affections are apprehended. Sextus objects that Cyrenaics are not genuine skeptics. For they claim that external objects ‘have an inapprehensible nature,’ whereas skeptics suspend judgment about external objects ‘so far as the argument goes.’ That is, unlike the Cyrenaics, Pyrrhonists do not claim that apprehension of external objects is impossible. One might expect Sextus to add that, unlike the Cyrenaics, Pyrrhonists do not claim to apprehend—know—their affections either. But he does *not* say this. It is tempting to think he does not do so because he *agrees* with the Cyrenaics that only affections are apprehended (i.e. known). And if he thinks they are apprehended or known, he presumably thinks there are truths about them since, again, apprehension, knowledge, implies truth. He also in this case presumably thinks there are beliefs about them, a claim I defend on independent grounds below.) And Diogenes Laertius, for one, explicitly ascribes this view to the Pyrrhonists. Of course, arguments *ex silentio* are not decisive; but Sextus’s silence here is suggestive. So perhaps the subjective escapes the Pyrrhonian net, just as it escapes the Cyrenaic and Cartesian nets.

However, there is also evidence against this view. For example, Sextus often claims that skeptics lack *dogmata* (beliefs) and live *adoxastôs* (without opinions). If, as is often supposed, he means that skeptics claim to have no beliefs whatsoever, then they do not claim to have beliefs about how they are appeared to; *a fortiori,*

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101 *kai* in 215 might support this suggestion.
102 DL IX 103: *mona de ta pathê ginôskomen.*
neither would they claim knowledge here. However, it’s disputed whether Sextus says that skeptics disavow all beliefs. On the interpretation I favor, he does not say this. Consider, for example, PH I 13:

When we say that sceptics do not have beliefs (dogmata), we do not use ‘belief’ in the sense in which some say, quite generally, that belief is acquiescing (eudokein) in something; for sceptics assent to the affections forced upon them by appearances. For example, they would not say, when heated or chilled, ‘I think I am not heated (or: chilled).’ Rather, we say that they do not have beliefs in the sense in which some say that belief is assent to some unclear object of investigation in the sciences; for Pyrrhonists do not assent to anything unclear.

Skeptics lack dogmata about everything (they take to be) unclear. But they have some dogmata; for they assent to the affections forced upon them by appearances. I take this to mean that they have beliefs about how they are affected, in particular about how they are appeared to. On this view, even if sceptics do not claim to know how they are appeared to, they at least claim to have beliefs about this. If they take themselves to have beliefs about how they are appeared to, then they also think that claims about them are truth-evaluable, in which case they do not restrict truth to what is objective, external, and so on.

Suppose, however, that, contrary to my view, Pyrrhonists claim to have no beliefs whatsoever, not even about how they are appeared to. That would not show that it does not seem to them that there are truths or beliefs about how one is appeared to. For even if Pyrrhonists claim not to have such beliefs, Sextus, as we’ve seen, thinks the Cyrenaics have them. In general, non-skeptics have lots of beliefs that skeptics themselves eschew. Part of the project of skepticism is precisely to rid people of their (troubling) beliefs. We should not infer from the fact that

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103 One might argue that one can have knowledge even if one lacks belief: on some views, knowledge and belief are mutually exclusive. But it would be implausible in the extreme to argue that ancient skeptics claim to know, but not to have beliefs about, the contents of their mental states.

104 The interpretation of I 13 is much disputed. I defend my interpretation, and contrast it with others, in Chapter 11.

105 Sextus’s examples—being heated and chilled (thermainomenos and psuchomenos)—recall the Cyrenaics’ terminology (being doubled, and so on). Just as there is dispute about whether the Cyrenaics have in mind states that are wholly and only objective (as Everson believes) or states that are subjective (as I believe), so there are disputes about whether Sextus’s example is just being heated in a purely physical sense or feeling warm (a subjective state which, of course, might be identical to or constituted by a physical one). In Chapter 11, I argue that he has in mind a subjective state. Contrast Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 134; and Frede, ‘The Sceptic’s Beliefs,’ 196–7.

106 I assume that belief (both in fact and according to the ancients) involves taking to be true. See n. 4.

107 There is evidently a potential problem in claiming to have no beliefs. But I shall not discuss that issue here.
Pyrrhonists claim to lack beliefs in a given domain either that non-Pyrrhonists lack them, or that Pyrrhonists take non-Pyrrhonists to lack them.¹⁰⁸

Moreover, even if (contrary to my view) Pyrrhonists claim to lack beliefs about how they are appeared to, it would not, I think, be because they (even unconsciously or unreflectively) restrict truth to what is common, objective, external, and so on. There is a more plausible alternative: that they suspend judgment about the subjective for the same reasons that they suspend judgment elsewhere: for example, because of problems posed by the Aenesideman and Agrippan Modes. This line of argument does not assume that truth is restricted to what is external, objective, and so on. Claims about how one is appeared to, no less than claims about the external world, might be viewed as truth-evaluable. It’s just that, on the view under consideration, skeptics suspend judgment about both sorts of claims. There need not be any asymmetry, not even an unconscious or unreflective one.

To summarize: my own view is that Sextus says that even skeptics have beliefs about how they are appeared to; hence he also thinks there are truths about how one is appeared to. He may also think there is knowledge here, though I am not sure about that. But even if, contrary to my view, he disclaims both knowledge and belief here, the reason would have nothing to do with an alleged restriction of truth to what is objective, common, and external. Rather, the reason would be that his skepticism is quite general, applying to the subjective no less than to the objective. And even if skeptics suspend judgment here, it does not follow that all the ancients do so: non-skeptics claim to have knowledge and belief, and so assume truth, in many cases where skeptics do not do so. And, as we’ve seen, the Cyrenaics claim that there are truths, beliefs, and knowledge about the subjective; and Sextus is well aware of their view.

7.

The view that there are truths, beliefs, and knowledge about the subjective is, then, familiar from Sextus and the Cyrenaics; it does not originate with Descartes.¹⁰⁹ Nonetheless, Descartes’s views about subjectivity could be quite different from ancient views of it. And in ‘Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space,’ John McDowell says that:¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Moreover, even if Pyrrhonists claim that no one actually knows how one is appeared to, they might leave open the possibility that one could have knowledge here; to deny that knowledge is possible here would be negative dogmatism of a sort Pyrrhonists eschew (PH I 1–3). One might argue that this possibility never occurred to them; but that seems unlikely, given Sextus’s account of the Cyrenaics.

¹⁰⁹ Nor does it originate with Augustine: see n. 2.

¹¹⁰ Pg. 149. McDowell agrees with Burnyeat that ancient skeptics restrict truth ‘to how things are . . . in the world about us, so that how things seem to us is not envisaged as something there might be truth about . . . whereas Descartes extends the range of truth and knowability to the appearances on the basis of which we naively think we know about the ordinary world’ (148). But he argues that ‘the newly
Simply accommodating subjectivity within the scope of truth and knowability seems, in any case, too innocent to account for the view of philosophy’s problems that Descartes initiates. We need something more contentious: a picture of subjectivity as a region of reality whose layout is transparent—accessible through and through.

Or again:\(^{11}\)

We arrive at the fully Cartesian picture with the idea that there are no facts about the inner realm besides what is infallibly accessible to the newly recognized capacity to acquire knowledge...[S]ubjectivity is confined to a tract of reality whose layout would be exactly as it is however things stood outside it.

Let us call this the Fully Cartesian Conception of Subjectivity (FCCS). It may be characterized as follows: S is a Fully Cartesian Subjective state if (a) it is transparent, in the sense that it is ‘infallibly’ ‘knowable through and through by introspection’;\(^{112}\) and if (b) it is ‘autonomous’\(^{113}\) in the sense that is ‘self-standing, with everything within it arranged as it is independently of external circumstances.’\(^{114}\)

Even if the ancients accept, or are at least aware of, the view that there are truths, beliefs, and knowledge about the subjective, it doesn’t follow that any of them are aware of the FCCS, or take anything to be subjective in that sense. So if Descartes endorses or articulates the FCCS,\(^{115}\) perhaps ancient and Cartesian radical character of Cartesian scepticism’ (148) requires Descartes to do more than that. I shall not explore possible connections between subjectivity and skepticism in this chapter (though I do so in Chapter 14). But if I’m right to say (as I shall) that Descartes never describes subjectivity as McDowell claims he does, then either that sort of subjectivity is not needed for the sort of skepticism Descartes considers, or else Descartes never entertains the sort of skepticism McDowell associates with him.\(^{116}\)

\(^{11}\) McDowell, ‘Singular Thought,’ 150–1.

\(^{112}\) For ‘infallibly knowable,’ see e.g. McDowell, ‘Singular Thought,’ 150. For the second part of the quotation, see p. 155.

\(^{113}\) ‘Autonomous’ occurs on, for example, McDowell, ‘Singular Thought,’ 154 and 155.

\(^{114}\) McDowell, ‘Singular Thought,’ 152. Cf. pg. 151: ‘a self-contained...realm, in which things are as they independently of external reality (if any).’

\(^{115}\) Descartes could at some stage assume the FCCS without endorsing it. For example, the skeptical arguments in Meditation I rely on various assumptions Descartes goes on to reject, so one might argue that Descartes assumes the FCCS for the purpose of articulating skeptical arguments, even though he does not in the end endorse it in his own right. McDowell seems to think that the FCCS underlies Meditation I since, as we’ve seen, he thinks Cartesian skepticism relies on it. (An alternative is that by ‘Cartesian skepticism,’ McDowell means, not the position Descartes finds himself in in the end of Meditation I, but the position he finds himself in early in Meditation II, once he has achieved certainty about some of his subjective states. The difference between these two alternatives does not affect my ultimate conclusion.) (By ‘Cartesian skepticism,’ I mean the sort of skepticism Descartes considers in, for example, Meditation I: Descartes of course is not a skeptic.) McDowell also seems to think that Descartes accepts the FCCS in the end, though he does not cite any passages from Descartes. I shall sometimes ask whether Descartes relies on, has, or adverts to, the FCCS, where these locutions are meant to include both his accepting it in his own right, and also his assuming it in a given context whether or not he in the end accepts it.
views of subjectivity differ,¹¹⁶ if in a different way from that suggested by Burnyeat. I shall now argue, however, that Descartes does not advert to the FCCS.

In order to assess whether Descartes adverts to the FCCS, we need to know (among other things) exactly what McDowell means by ‘transparency.’ I shall consider three interpretations; and I shall argue that Descartes is not committed to transparency of any of these three sorts.

The first possibility is that McDowell takes transparency to be the view that one can infallibly know, through introspection, literally every fact about one’s subjective states. McDowell encourages this interpretation when he says that ‘the whole truth about the subjective realm is infallibly knowable to introspection.’¹¹⁷ However, if causal facts about one’s subjective states are facts about one’s subjective states, then Descartes does not accept transparency in this sense. To be sure, he eventually argues that only God could cause his idea of God, and that bodies cause his sensory ideas of bodies—though the arguments for these claims do not seem to me to rely entirely on introspection.¹¹⁸ Be that as it may, Descartes certainly doesn’t think we can know through introspection—or in any other way, for that matter—what the precise cause of each of our token ideas is. He doesn’t think that, on every occasion on which I seem to see a horse, I can know exactly what is causing me to do so. Nor does Descartes assume this sort of transparency in Meditation I. On the contrary, in Meditation I he claims not to know what the causes of his ideas are.

Here, then, is a second interpretation of what McDowell has in mind: that the intrinsic nature of one’s subjective states is transparent.¹¹⁹ If, as seems reasonable, the intrinsic nature of one’s subjective states includes their essence, then, on this view, one can know, through introspection alone, whether one’s subjective states are material or immaterial. Hence McDowell writes that, on the FCCS, ‘immaterialism seems unavoidable.’¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ I say ‘perhaps,’ because we would need to know not only that Descartes has the FCCS, but also that the ancients lack it. I shall not ask here whether the ancients lack it; but I do not need to do so if I am right to say that Descartes lacks it. If their views about subjectivity differ, the difference does not consist in the fact that Descartes has, but the ancients lack, the FCCS.

¹¹⁷ McDowell, ‘Singular Thought,’ 152; emphasis added. Cf. 154: ‘The idea of introspection becomes the idea of an inner vision, scanning a region of reality which is wholly available to its gaze’ (emphasis added).

¹¹⁸ For example, his argument for the claim that bodies cause his sensory ideas of bodies includes the premise that God is no deceiver. Though Descartes may claim to know this a priori, he doesn’t know it through introspection. Or so it seems to me: but both ‘a priori’ and ‘introspection’ are used in many different ways. (In speaking of sensory ideas of bodies, I don’t mean to include cases of merely seeming to see: Descartes of course doesn’t think that, on every occasion on which he seems to see a corporeal object, his idea is caused by a corporeal object.)

¹¹⁹ See, for example, McDowell, ‘Singular Thought,’ 151: ‘the inner realm, whose intrinsic nature should be knowable through and through’ (emphasis added). Compare this with a related interpretation of transparency that M. Wilson considers in her Descartes (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978): (3), at 154, though her version considers whether the intrinsic nature of subjective states is known, whereas McDowell focuses on knowability.

¹²⁰ McDowell, ‘Singular Thought,’ 154. McDowell adds, however, that the sorts of epistemological considerations that, in his view, lead Descartes to endorse immaterialism ‘simply bypass the standard objection to Descartes’s argument for the Real Distinction’ (154 n. 30).
I do not think Descartes ever assumes transparency when it is understood in this second way either. To be sure, at the beginning of Meditation II he takes it to be epistemically possible that he is immaterial. But he does not assume there that he is immaterial. It is true that in Meditation II, having decided (on the basis of introspection, let us agree) that he is a thinking thing, he says that he is ‘not that structure of limbs which is called a human body,’ nor is he ‘even some thin vapour which permeates the limbs—a wind, fire, air, breath, or whatever I depict in the imagination; for these are things which I have supposed to be nothing’ (AT VII 27/CSM II 18). Taken out of context, this might seem to say that introspection alone has revealed to him that he is immaterial. But he goes on to say:¹²¹

Let this supposition stand; for all that I am still something. And yet, may it not perhaps be the case that these very things which I am supposing to be nothing, because they are unknown to me, are in reality identical with the ’I’ of which I am aware? I do not know. (AT VII 27/CSM II 18)

So at this stage, Descartes claims not to know whether he is immaterial. Yet if he accepted transparency as we are currently understanding it, he could at this point claim to know that he is immaterial. But he does not claim to have established immaterialism until Meditation VI. And the argument by which he does so relies on more than introspection; for example, it appeals to the existence of something outside himself, namely God (AT VII 78/CSM II 54).¹²²

But perhaps in speaking of the intrinsic nature of subjective states, McDowell does not mean to include their being material or immaterial.¹²³ Here, then, is a third interpretation of what he has in mind: that one can infallibly know the contents of one’s subjective states through and through, and by introspection alone. That this is what he intends is perhaps suggested by the fact that he identifies ‘the infallibly knowable fact’ with ‘its seeming to one that things are

¹²¹ See also his reply to Gassendi, at AT VII 215/CSM II 276, where he reiterates that, in Meditation II, he did not mean to assert that he is incorporeal.

¹²² It is true, however, that Descartes says that, were he not looking for knowledge out of the ordinary, he could have concluded in Meditation II that he is immaterial (AT VII 226/CSM II 159). (Even so, I don’t think the argument, insofar as there is one for that claim in Meditation II, requires transparency in the sense currently being discussed.) And one might argue that Descartes thinks we can know through introspection that God exists. Again, however (see n. 118), it seems better to say that he claims to know this a priori than that he claims to know it through introspection. Interestingly, in a letter to Mersenne (AT III 273/CSM III 165–6), he says that transparency (of some sort) ‘follows from the fact that the soul is distinct from the body and that its essence is to think’: hence presumably transparency (of that sort) doesn’t ground his argument for the real distinction, and is not being assumed as early as Meditation I or II, where the claim that mind and body are really distinct has not yet been defended. (The letter, though, speaks of distinctness, not of the real distinction; I do not know whether this is significant.)

¹²³ But why, then, does he say that on the FCCS ‘immaterialism seems unavoidable’ (154)?
thus and so.”¹²⁴ From now on, by ‘transparency as McDowell understands it,’ I will mean transparency in this third sense.

First we should note that we have reason to hope that Descartes does not accept transparency in this sense. For if he does, he is inconsistent.¹²⁵ For example, this sort of transparency conflicts with Descartes’s views about innate ideas.¹²⁶ For he says that ‘when we say that an idea is innate in us, we do not mean that it is always there before us. This would mean that no idea was innate. We simply mean that we have within ourselves the faculty of summoning up the idea’ (AT VII 189/CSM II 132. Notice that the passage says that no idea is always before our mind, not just that innate ideas aren’t.)

McDowell might reply that Descartes thinks we can become aware of our innate ideas. And, after all, McDowell says that, for Descartes, the subjective realm is knowable through and through by introspection, not that it is known through and through. However, McDowell seems to think that, according to Descartes, all our subjective states are readily knowable through introspection. But Descartes does not think that all our innate ideas are readily knowable. He says, for example, that one could fail to perceive one’s idea of God even after a ‘thousandth reading’ of the Meditations; and he thinks many people are slow at geometry.¹²⁷ Descartes also says that we have some ideas we can’t ever fully

¹²⁴ McDowell, ‘Singular Thought,’ 151. On what I mean by the ‘content of a subjective state,’ see n. 1. As I noted above (in n. 1 and n. 48), Burnyeat also seems to be asking whether there are truths, beliefs, and knowledge about the contents of one’s subjective states—that is, about how one is appeared to, how things seem to one to be (where ‘things’ carries no existential import).

¹²⁵ For the view that Descartes is inconsistent on the issue of transparency, see, for example, Wilson, Descartes, 150–65; and E. M. Curley, Descartes Against the Skeptics (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), ch. 7, pt. I. For the view that he is not inconsistent here, and is never committed to as strong a version of transparency as he is sometimes taken to be committed to, see R. McRae, ‘Descartes’ Definition of Thought,’ in R. Butler (ed.), Cartesian Studies (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972), 55–70; and D. Radner, ‘Thought and Consciousness in Descartes,’ Journal of the History of Philosophy 26 (1988), 439–52. It is worth noting that, though Wilson and Curley think Descartes is inconsistent about transparency, they do not suggest that he is ever committed to transparency in as strong a sense as McDowell takes him to be committed. The weaker the sort of transparency to which Descartes is committed, the less glaring the inconsistency (if there is one). Hence, even if he is inconsistent, we have reason to hope he is never committed to transparency as McDowell understands it. For a recent challenge to the view that Descartes is committed to a strong form of transparency, see J. Cottingham, Philosophy and the Good Life (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 119–26.

¹²⁶ McRae, ‘Descartes’ Definition of Thought,’ 67ff. (cf. his ‘Innate Ideas,’ also in Butler, Cartesian Studies, 32–54), argues that once we properly understand Descartes’s account of thought, we can see that there is no inconsistency; this is because he takes Descartes to have a considerably weaker notion of transparency than McDowell takes him to have. Wilson, by contrast, argues that ‘in the end the doctrine of epistemological transparency cannot be reconciled with other central features of Descartes’s philosophy, including the conception of “confused perception,” and his treatment of innate ideas’ (150–1). She thinks this at least in part because she ascribes to Descartes a stronger notion of transparency than McRae does—though a weaker one than McDowell ascribes to him.

¹²⁷ For the remark about God, see AT III 430/CSM III 194; cf. AT VIII B 166–7/CSM III 222–3, which also discusses geometry (and interestingly compares his own views with Plato’s in the Meno). The point about God and geometry is also made by Wilson, Descartes, 158. Cynthia MacDonald has objected to me that this shows only that people don’t have complete knowledge of the correct concept of e.g. God; for all that, Descartes might think that we have, or can have, complete knowledge of the concepts we actually have. Perhaps my concept of God just isn’t the correct one. Relatedly, James van...
understand—not by introspection or in any other way. He denies, for example, that we can ever completely understand the ideas of infinity or of God.¹²

Moreover, Descartes thinks we can have a clear and distinct idea without being aware that the idea is clear and distinct; we can also think an idea is clear and distinct when it is not.¹² I’m not sure how to classify the properties of clarity and distinctness. If they are relational properties, then it would probably be generally agreed that Descartes doesn’t take transparency to cover them. But if they are intrinsic features of ideas, or are somehow built into their contents, then Descartes can’t consistently accept transparency, even if it is restricted to the intrinsic properties of our subjective states or their contents.¹³

It’s also worth remarking that Descartes says that we can’t be ‘quite certain’ (plane certus) about anything unless we know that God—something outside ourselves—exists and is no deceiver (AT VII 36/CSM II 25). If we take him at his word, then he thinks that we can’t be quite certain about any of our ideas through introspection alone; this places a limit on the sort of transparency claim he can consistently make.¹³¹

So if Descartes accepts transparency as McDowell understands it, he is inconsistent. Of course, perhaps he is inconsistent. Be that as it may, I do not think he is

Cleve has objected that, if ideas are conceived of platonistically, then ignorance of them is not eo ipso ignorance of mental content. However, Descartes thinks the idea of God is in him; indeed, it is ‘the truest and most clear and distinct of all [his] ideas’ (AT VII 46/CSM II 32). He seems to assume that he in some sense has the correct concept; it’s just that its nature isn’t completely clear to him. That he assumes this is also suggested by his view that the idea of God is innate and God-given. God didn’t implant in us an imperfect concept of himself; he gave us the correct concept which, however, we can’t fully understand. However, Descartes uses ‘idea’ in more than one way; and they are not clearly parts of mental contents on every way of conceiving of them.

¹² In his terminology, we cannot have adequate knowledge of the idea of God. Some relevant passages: AT VII 140/CSM II 100; AT VII 113/CSM II 81; AT VII 152/CSM II 108; AT VII 209–10/CSM II 273; AT VII 220ff/CSM II 155ff. It’s especially interesting that Descartes says this, given that he also takes the idea of God to be the clearest and most distinct of all his ideas (see previous note).

¹³ See e.g. AT VII 461–2/CSM II 310, where Descartes distinguishes what is clearly and distinctly perceived from what merely seems to be clearly and distinctly perceived; only the former, he thinks, is guaranteed to be true.

¹³¹ One might argue that Descartes means only that we can’t know that we have complete knowledge of the contents of our ideas unless we know that God exists and is no deceiver; the knowledge is, at it were, second order. But even this, I think, raises difficulties for McDowell. One might also argue that ‘anything’ isn’t to be taken quite literally. Wilson, for example, argues that Descartes assumes that cogitatio-judgments ‘are impervious to the Deceiver Hypothesis’ (Descartes, 143; cf. 59–60; see also the last sentence of her n. 85). Even if she is right, it wouldn’t show, nor does Wilson thinks it shows, that Descartes is thereby committed to the sort of transparency currently under discussion.
ever committed to transparency as McDowell understands it; if he is inconsistent, the difficulties lie elsewhere. To be sure, he accepts transparency in some sense. Consider, for example, his definition of thought in the Second Replies: ‘I use this term to include everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately aware of it’ (AT VII 160/CSM II 112). Similarly, in Principles I 9 (AT VIII-1, 7–8), he says that ‘By the term “thought,” I understand everything which we are aware of as happening in us, insofar as we have awareness of it’ (AT VIII-1 7/CSM I 195). But neither of these remarks implies that we know, or can know, the complete contents of our thoughts. To say that I am immediately aware of every thought I have may imply that I can discriminate each of my thoughts from one another; but that does not require me to know, or to be capable of knowing, the complete contents of all my thoughts.¹³²

Not only do Descartes’s definitions of thought not commit him to transparency as McDowell understands it, but neither, so far as I can tell, do any of his arguments rely on that notion. To defend that claim properly, one would have to investigate every candidate argument in detail: which I do not have the space to do here. But to take one quite important passage, consider Descartes’s claim, in Meditation II, that he cannot falsely believe that he seems to see light.¹³³ This says that some of his beliefs about some of his mental states can’t be false. But that does

¹³² It’s worth noting that Descartes sometimes explains thought more weakly than he does in the passages just cited. In the First Replies, for example, he says that he affirms (‘with certainty that there can be nothing within me of which I am not in some way) aware’ (AT VII 107/CSM II 77; emphasis added; pro certo affirmare nihil in me, cuius nullum modo sum conscius, esse posse). The French version says that he will take it to be certain that there ‘can be nothing in me of which I do not have some knowledge’ (AT IX 85; emphasis added; tenir pour certain que rien ne peut être en moi, dont je n’ai quelque connaissance). These latter two remarks plainly do not commit Descartes to the view that one can know the complete contents of one’s subjective states. The following passage should also be noted:

‘As to the fact that there can be nothing in the mind, insofar as it is a thinking thing, of which it is not aware, this seems to me to be self-evident. For there is nothing that we can understand to be in the mind, regarded in this way, that is not a thought or dependent on a thought. If it were not a thought or dependent on a thought it would not belong to the mind qua thinking thing; and we cannot have any thought of which we are not aware at the very moment when it is in us. In view of this I do not doubt that the mind begins to think as soon as it is implanted in the body of an infant, and that it is immediately aware of its thoughts, even though it does not remember this afterwards because the impressions of those thoughts do not remain in the memory’ (Fourth Replies; AT VII 246/CSM II 171–2).

This might seem to express transparency as McDowell understands it. However, like the passages just discussed in the text, it too can be understood as saying no more than that we are aware of all our thoughts, in the sense that we must be able to fasten on to a distinguishing mark of each of them. That does not require us to be aware, or to be able to be aware, of the complete contents of any of our thoughts. If, as I think, the passage need not be read as expressing transparency in McDowell’s sense, then it should not be so read, since so reading it leads to conflict with what Descartes says elsewhere. Even if we take the passage to express transparency as McDowell understands it—though, as I say, I do not think it should be so read—we should not rely on it as evidence of Descartes’s considered view, given that he doesn’t elsewhere advert to or rely on transparency in McDowell’s sense.

¹³³ Radner, ‘Thought and Consciousness,’ 450, thinks the passage makes only a weaker claim; if she is right, that is grist for my mill.
not commit him to the view that the complete contents of all of his mental states are infallibly knowable.¹³⁴

I have considered three accounts of what McDowell means by transparency: that one can readily know, through introspection alone, (a) literally everything there is to know about one’s subjective states, including relational facts about them; or (b) their intrinsic nature, including such facts as whether they are material or immaterial; or (c) their complete contents. I have also argued that Descartes is not committed to transparency understood in any of these ways.

Even if, contrary to my view, Descartes is committed to transparency as McDowell understands it, he is not thereby committed to the FCCS; for the FCCS also involves autonomy. I shall now argue that Descartes is not committed to autonomy. If he is not committed to autonomy, he is not committed to the FCCS.

McDowell explains autonomy as follows: the ‘intrinsic nature [of subjective states] can be described independently of the environment.’¹³⁵ The idea is that the contents of my subjective states would be the same no matter what things are like in the external world. The nature of the contents is in this sense independent of the environment: hence autonomous.

In Meditation I, Descartes seems to view autonomy as an epistemic possibility. For he takes himself to have various ideas, and he thinks it is epistemically possible that he have these very ideas whether he is ‘alone in the world’ (AT VII 42/CSM II 29) or whether they are caused by, say, God or an evil demon. At this stage of his meditations, in other words, he takes it to be epistemically possible that the causes of his ideas don’t affect their content; we can hold the content fixed and vary the cause. What the external world is like, or even whether there is one, doesn’t affect the content of one’s ideas: so far as Descartes then knows or believes.

However, McDowell seems to think that Descartes not only takes autonomy to be epistemically possible in the context of Meditation I, but also in the end takes it to be actual. Descartes may think that autonomy holds for many of our ideas. For in Meditation III he says that ‘[a]s to my ideas of corporeal things, I can see nothing in them which is so great <or excellent> as to make it seem impossible that it originated in myself’ (AT VII 43/CSM II 29). He also argues that his ideas of colors and sounds ‘do not require me to posit a source distinct from myself’ (AT VII 44/CSM II 30). But he goes on to argue that he can have the idea of God, with its particular content, only if God exists and gives him the idea. Hence, he thinks that the content of at least one of his ideas is dependent on the existence of

¹³⁴ For interpretations of Descartes’s Meditation II statements on which he is not committed to as strong a form of transparency as McDowell takes him to be committed to, see Curley, Descartes Against the Skeptics; and Janet Broughton, Descartes’s Method of Doubt (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 2002). I am indebted to both discussions (and to Broughton for allowing me to read a manuscript of her book in advance of publication).

¹³⁵ McDowell, ‘Singular Thought,’ 152–3.
something outside himself. Moreover, the idea of God is just one of Descartes’s ideas of something that has a true and immutable nature; and his views about all such ideas, not just his views about the idea of God, count against ascribing autonomy to him. In Meditation V, for example, he says that ideas of things that have true and immutable natures are not dependent on him and could not have been invented by him (AT VII 64/CSM II 45). One reason he gives is that they have implications he did not foresee; indeed, they have these implications even if he never thinks of the ideas at all. This seems to leave open the possibility that the implications of such ideas are world-involving: in which case he is not committed to autonomy. Indeed, he goes further than that, and argues that all such ideas are necessarily due to God: in which case he rejects autonomy.¹³ If he rejects autonomy, he rejects the FCCS.

Even if Descartes does not rely on the FCCS,¹³⁷ he might have a different view of subjectivity from the ancients. I have not ruled out that possibility here. But if the argument of this chapter is correct, there is one way in which Descartes’s views about subjectivity are not as different from ancient views of it as they are sometimes taken to be. For contrary to what is sometimes said, the ancients are well aware of the view that there are truths, beliefs, and knowledge about the subjective (and at least the Cyrenaics endorse the view); and Descartes does not articulate the FCCS.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ So far as I can see, this is Descartes’s consistent position. I see no evidence that he is committed to autonomy. It has been objected to me that he accepts autonomy if God is left out of the picture. But leaving God out of Descartes’s picture so seriously distorts it, that I do not think this is a profitable way of looking at the issue. One might also argue that the ideas at issue here are not parts of mental content. But Descartes speaks of them as being in him; and see n. 127.

¹³⁷ I’ve argued that he doesn’t rely on it in the sense that he not only rejects it in the end but also doesn’t assume it even dialectically in, for example, laying out skeptical arguments.

¹³⁸ Predecessors of this chapter, or of parts of it, were read at MIT; Stanford University; the University of Michigan; Corpus Christi College, Oxford; the Pacific APA; the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand; the University of Toronto; and at a conference held in Delphi, Greece, sponsored by the European Cultural Centre at Delphi. I thank the audiences on these occasions for extremely helpful comments, especially Alan Kim (my official commentator at Toronto) and Myles Burnyeat (my unofficial commentator). I’m also grateful to Charles Brittain, Jacques Brunschwig, Gary Gurtler, Benj Hellie, Terry Irwin, Fred Neuhouser, Sydney Shoemaker, Jason Stanley, Nicholas Sturgeon, Zoltan Szabo, William Wians, and the members of various classes given at Cornell over the last few years, for helpful discussion and/or written comments.
13
Descartes and Ancient Skepticism:
Reheated Cabbage?

1.
Lately, several commentators have argued that there are significant differences between ancient and modern (by which is usually meant Cartesian and post-Cartesian) skepticism. For example, it has been argued that ancient skeptics disavow belief, whereas the moderns disavow only knowledge.¹ It has also been argued that the scope of ancient skepticism is considerably less radical than that of modern skepticism: unlike the moderns, the ancients do not question whether they have bodies or whether there is an external world housed with the sorts of objects we generally take there to be. They do not suspend judgment as to whether, for example, honey exists, but only as to whether it is sweet.² (I shall call this


Not all modern commentators think that Descartes’s skepticism is more radical than ancient skepticism. For the opposing view, see L. Robin, Pyrrhon et le scepticisme grec (Paris: Presses
‘property skepticism.’) One explanation that has been given for the allegedly modest scope of ancient skepticism is its practical concern: ancient skepticism is a way of life, one that is supposed to secure the skeptic’s happiness. But, according to Myles Burnyeat, ‘[s]uch being his primary concern, he cannot doubt in a completely general way his ability to act in the world.’ Modern skepticism, by contrast, is said to be ‘a strictly methodological affair,’ with the result that, unlike ancient skeptics, modern ones can act in the face of radical skepticism.

Descartes is often thought to be the first to articulate the allegedly new and modern version of skepticism. It is therefore an interesting fact that, although several commentators have spent some time asking how modern skepticism in general, and Descartes’s skepticism in particular, compares with ancient skepticism, there has been relatively little discussion of Descartes’s own view of the matter. My main aim in this chapter is to fill this gap. As we shall see, Descartes’s assessment differs from the contemporary one.

As is well known, there are two main kinds of ancient skepticism, Academic and Pyrrhonian. In this chapter, I shall focus on Pyrrhonian skepticism, for which our main source is Sextus Empiricus. Since Book I of his Outlines of Pyrrhonism is the main place where he describes the nature of Pyrrhonian skepticism in detail, I shall focus on it.
Before proceeding, it is important to bear in mind that Descartes is not a skeptic.⁷ On the contrary, he thinks he is the first to have offered a satisfactory reply to skepticism. He criticizes Bourdin (the author of the Seventh Set of Objections to the Meditations) for concentrating on the skeptical arguments Descartes hadretailed in Meditation I, to the neglect of his subsequent rebuttal of them. Descartes asks: ‘And who, may I ask, has ever been so presumptuous, or such a shameless slanderer, as to censure Hippocrates or Galen for describing the causes which generally give rise to diseases, and then to infer that their doctrines contain nothing more than a method of falling ill?’ (AT VII 547/CSM II 387).⁸ And Descartes thinks he has the cure. In the Seventh Set of Replies, for example, he speaks of ‘the arguments by means of which I became the first philosopher ever to overturn the doubt of the sceptics’ (AT VII 550/CSM II 376). Bourdin mistakenly views Descartes as a patient, suffering the disease of skepticism; Descartes replies that he is the doctor with the first sure cure. Though Descartes is not a skeptic, I shall nonetheless speak of his skepticism,
meaning thereby the skeptical arguments described in, for example, Meditation I. I shall also speak of his skeptical phase, meaning thereby the stage he presents himself as being in in, for example, Meditation I.

2.

In considering Descartes’s account of ancient skepticism, we face a difficulty: Descartes never discusses ancient skepticism in any detail; his remarks are brief and scattered. Nor does he tell us what he read or when he read it—while he was at La Flèche, for example, or only later on. It is sometimes assumed that he had not read Sextus. But the reasons given for this view do not seem to me to be persuasive. It is true that he never mentions Sextus by name. But his failure to do so does not show that he had not read him: Descartes does not cite anyone very often; and he likes to present himself as someone who does not spend too much time reading. Sextus was certainly available, in both Greek and Latin. Moreover, Descartes claims to have read many works by the Academics and Skeptics, that is, presumably, Pyrrhonists. ‘Though he unfortunately does not name the works, it is difficult to believe that Sextus’s were not among them: it is not as though a lot of other books by Pyrrhonists were available.'

9 For example, in ‘Scepticism and Animal Rationality,’ Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie 79 (1997), 27–57, L. Floridi says that Descartes ‘probably never read the Outlines’ (52). One of his reasons is Descartes’s failure to mention Chrysippus’s rational dog (for which, see PHI I 69), despite the fact that he discusses animal rationality in detail. I myself do not think this is good evidence for the view that Descartes had never read Sextus. (Floridi also claims that Descartes does not explicitly or, he thinks, even implicitly, refer to any specific passage in Sextus.) Popkin, The History of Scepticism, by contrast, remarks that ‘when and how Descartes came into contact with sceptical views is hard to tell. But he seems to have been well aware not only of the Pyrrhonian classics, but also of the sceptical current of his time’ (173; presumably the Pyrrhonian classics include Sextus).

10 By contrast, he mentions Cicero (a main source for Academic skepticism)—but only once, and in a context that has nothing to do with skepticism (AT III 274/CSM III 166). When Mersenne claims to find one of Descartes’s remarks obscure, Descartes replies: ‘it does not seem obscure to me; you could find a thousand places in Cicero which are more so.’ Descartes mentions Montaigne and Charron in one letter but, again, the context does not concern skepticism (AT IV 573–5/CSM III 302–3). He also mentions Galen, but not in connection with skepticism. He does not mention either Plutarch or Diogenes, to take just two further examples.

11 See, for example, Discourse on the Method Pt. I, AT VI 4 ff./CSM I 112ff. Here Descartes admits to having read many works of the ancients, including philosophical ones (unfortunately, he does not say which ones); but he cautions against spending too much time reading the ancients, at least. See also the beginning of the Search for Truth, AT X 495/CSM II 400: ‘A good man is not required to have read every book or diligently mastered everything taught in the Schools. It would, indeed, be a kind of defect in his education if he had spent too much time on book-learning.’

12 Henri Estienne published a Latin edition of the Outlines in 1562; Hervet published a Latin edition of all of Sextus in 1569. The Greek text was published by Chouet in 1621.

13 AT VII 130/CSM II 94, cited and discussed below. Notice that Descartes (like Sextus) distinguishes Academics from (I assume) Pyrrhonists. Unfortunately, he does not tell us how he distinguishes them; but AT VII 130 suggests that (despite the fact that he uses ‘Skeptics’ as a name for the Pyrrhonists) he views them both as skeptics.

14 Other works about Pyrrhonists—for example Diogenes Laertius’s Life of Pyrrho—as well as more contemporary discussions, were available. But other works by Pyrrhonists were not available.
But whether or not Descartes read Sextus for himself, it is reasonable to assume that he was familiar with his views, if only at second hand. For example, it seems clear that he read Montaigne and Charron, both of whom discuss Sextus. And he was in regular communication with people who had read and written about Sextus, such as, for example, Mersenne.

But whatever the source of his knowledge of, or beliefs about, ancient skepticism, he at any rate sometimes discusses it. Sometimes he explicitly mentions the Pyrrhonists. There are also other passages in which he discusses ancient skepticism, though without saying what sort he has in mind. Still other remarks are about skepticism more generally, but in a way that includes ancient skepticism. So we can attempt to see what he thinks about ancient skepticism, even though we cannot know for sure what sources his account is based on.

3.

The view that Descartes’s skepticism is new goes back to his own day. In *Gemina Disputatio Metaphysica de Deo* (1647), for example, Jacques de Rives may have Descartes in mind in speaking of ‘some innovators who deny that we can have any firm trust in the senses, and who contend that philosophers can deny that there is a God and doubt his existence, while at the same time they admit that actual conceptions of God, forms, and ideas of him are naturally implanted in the human mind.’

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15 As we have seen (n. 10), he mentions both of them, though not in connection with skepticism. Montaigne’s influence on Descartes has often been noted (though, in my view, the extent to which Descartes relies on Montaigne in particular is sometimes overstated). See, for example, E. Gilson’s commentary on the *Discourse* (*René Descartes. Discours de la méthode* (Paris: Vrin, 1925; 4th ed., 1967)) (Gilson also mentions the influence of Charron); L. Brunschvicg, *Descartes et Pascal, lecteurs de Montaigne* (New York: Brentano, 1944); Curley, *Descartes against the Skeptics*. G. Rodis-Lewis notes that Descartes seems to have been given a copy of Charron’s *Traité de la Sagesse* in 1619, and she notes various similarities between Charron and Descartes. See her *Descartes: His Life and Thought*, trans. J. Todd (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998; originally published in French in 1995). See also M. Adam, ‘René Descartes et Pierre Charron,’ *Revue Philosophique* 4 (1992), 467–83.

16 See especially his *La verité des sciences contre les Sceptiques ou Pyrrhoniens* (Paris, 1625). See also p. Gassendi’s *Exercitaciones paradoxicae adversus Aristoteleos* (Grenoble, 1624), *Disquisitio Metaphysica* (Amsterdam, 1644), and *Syntagma Philosophicum* (Lyons, 1658). To be sure, the latter two works were published even after the *Meditations*, as indeed was Book II of the *Exercitaciones*, which is the most relevant part of that work. However, there is some evidence that Book II circulated in manuscript; Gassendi and Mersenne were good friends; and Merseenne kept Descartes informed of the latest relevant work, as several letters attest. So Descartes may have had access to Book II, either directly or through Merseenne’s account of it. Descartes may also have been familiar with La Mothe le Vayer’s *Dialogues d’Orasius Tubero* (1630). It is true that in two letters to Merseenne written in 1630 (AT I 144–5/CSM III 22; AT I 148–9/CSM III 24), he claims not to have read a ‘meschant livre’ (sometimes thought to be La Mothe le Vayer’s); but he also says that Merseenne had described its contents to him.

17 AT X 512/CSM II 408, AT X 520–1/CSM II 413, AT II 38–9/CSM III 99.

18 Cited by Descartes in his *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, AT VIIIIB 365/CSM I 308. Descartes admits that he discussed the controversial views in Meditation I. But, he says, he did not believe them but, on the contrary, went on to refute them. This passage, along with some related material, is interestingly discussed by Margaret Wilson, in her *Descartes* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 42–9.
However, there have also been dissenters. In the Third Set of Objections to Descartes’s *Meditations*, for example, Hobbes says that he acknowledges the correctness of Meditation I. But, he adds: ‘since Plato and other ancient philosophers discussed this uncertainty in the objects of the senses, and since the difficulty of distinguishing the waking state from dreams is commonly pointed out, I am sorry that the author, who is so outstanding in the field of original speculations, should be publishing this ancient material’ (AT VII 171/CSM II 121). Descartes replies that ‘[t]he arguments for doubting, which the philosopher here accepts as valid, are ones I was presenting as merely plausible. I was not trying to sell them as novelties . . . I sought no praise for reviewing them; but I do not think I could have omitted them, any more than a medical writer can leave out the description of a disease when he wants to explain how it can be cured’ (AT VII 171–2/CSM II 121).

Elsewhere too, Descartes is anxious to insist that his skeptical arguments are not new. In replying to the Second Set of Objections, for example, he says:

19 In mentioning Plato, Hobbes presumably has in mind the version of the dreaming argument presented in the *Theaetetus* (157e–158e). Plato argues (on Protagoras’ behalf, not in his own right) that ‘all the features of the two states correspond exactly, like counterparts’ (158c; trans. McDowell); he infers that we have no grounds for rejecting dream experiences as non-veridical. The precise interpretation of Descartes’s dreaming argument is disputed. Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 35–6, thinks it differs from Plato’s in being more ‘radical’ and ‘general.’ Annas and Barnes, *Modes*, 85–6, by contrast, assimilate Descartes’s and Plato’s versions (and distinguish both from Sextus’s, for which see *PH I* 104). For a comparison of Descartes’s dreaming argument with Sextus’s and Cicero’s (in *Academica* II 88), see Williams, ‘Descartes and the Metaphysics of Doubt,’ 127–9; he argues that Descartes poses ‘a question that never occurs to the classic skeptics’ (128; but see his n. 16).

20 The exchange between Hobbes and Descartes mentions only the senses and the dreaming argument. Even if Descartes denies that his skeptical arguments here are novel, he might think that other skeptical arguments he describes are novel; for one possibility, see n. 23. However, the passages I go on to discuss suggest that he does not take his disclaimer of novelty to be restricted to the senses and the dreaming argument. It has been argued that, whatever Descartes thinks of the matter, even his use of the dreaming argument is novel: see previous note.

Descartes’s claim that his skeptical arguments are merely plausible provides another interesting comparison with Sextus. At the end of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus explains why skeptics ‘deliberately propound arguments of feeble plausibility’ (III 280–1): just as different patients require different remedies, so skeptics use whatever arguments will persuade the interlocutor to hand. Similarly, Descartes uses arguments that appear plausible to his readers—people filled with preconceived opinions. Though both Sextus and Descartes distance themselves from their skeptical arguments, they do so for different reasons. As a skeptic, Sextus is not committed to any arguments he gives. Descartes, on the other hand, is not a skeptic; and he goes on to refute, *in propria persona*, many of the skeptical arguments retailed in *Meditation I*.

21 When Descartes claims that his skeptical arguments are not new, I take him to mean two things: first, that it is not new to invoke (for example) some sort of dreaming argument, or some sort of deceiving god hypothesis; and, secondly, that the doubts he raises are no more radical than those previously considered by earlier philosophers. This, however, is compatible with his believing that his particular version of the dreaming argument, or of the deceiving god hypothesis, and so on, contain their own distinctive twists. So, for example, Cicero (*Academica* II 47) considers a deceiving god hypothesis; Descartes’s version does not simply repeat Cicero’s. Perhaps Descartes, instead of saying that his skeptical arguments are not new, should have said that, even if he follows a new route to skepticism, the destination (that is, the sort of skepticism his arguments issue in) is not new. Thanks to Lesley Brown for discussion of this point.

22 Descartes alludes to a passage in Juvenal (*Satire* 7, line 154): ‘occidit miseris crambe repetita magistros’ (‘repeated cabbage kills wretched teachers’)—that is, the same old lessons are the death of the
nothing contributes more to acquiring a firm knowledge of things than first accustoming ourselves to doubt *all* things, especially corporeal things; so, even though I had long ago seen many books on that subject by the Academics and Sceptics, and though it was not without distaste that I reheated this cabbage, still, I could not avoid devoting one whole Meditation to it.

(AT VII 130/CSM II 94; emphasis added)

And in *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, he mentions the views that ‘God is to be denied, or that he can deceive us, or that *everything* should be doubted, or that we should entirely withdraw our confidence in the senses, or that we should not distinguish between being asleep and being awake’ (AT VIIIIB 366–7/CSM I 309; emphasis added). He goes on to say that he discussed such matters in Meditation I. But, he hastens to add, ‘I was not the first to discover such doubts: the sceptics have long been harping on this theme’ (AT VIIIIB 366–7/CSM I 309). So unlike many recent commentators, and unlike Jacques de Rives, Descartes himself denies that his skepticism is more radical than ancient skepticism.²³

poor teachers. The allusion is missed both in CSM’s blander translation (‘reheat and serve this precooked material’) and in the authorized French translation (‘une viande si commune’). Where I have ‘distaste,’ CSM use ‘reluctance,’ which is perhaps a bit mild for Descartes’s *sine fastidio*. The allusion to Juvenal is (independently) noted by Burnyeat, in his Introduction to *The Skeptical Tradition*, 8 n. 3.

²³ Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 36–7, thinks that in the *Conversation with Burman* (AT V 147/CSM III 333), Descartes claims that countenancing ‘the possibility of an all-powerful, deceiving deity’ involves a more radical skepticism than any that had been previously countenanced: in which case Descartes does not always take ‘his’ skepticism to be merely reheated cabbage. Here is the passage in question: ‘The author [Descartes] is here making us as doubtful as he can and casting us into as many doubts as possible. This is why he raises not only the customary difficulties of the sceptics but every difficulty that can possibly be raised; the aim is in this way to demolish completely every single doubt. And this is the purpose behind the introduction of the demon, which some might criticize as a superfluous addition.’

I think the point is as follows. In Meditation I, prior to introducing the demon, Descartes considered a dilemmatic argument according to which, whether or not God exists, we might always be deceived. So, prior to introducing the demon, he has already countenanced a perfectly general doubt (or so it seems). From this point of view, the introduction of the demon seems superfluous. Burman records Descartes as saying that he was trying to raise every reason for doubt that he could think of. The suggestion seems to be, not that the demon introduces a more radical doubt than that already countenanced earlier in Meditation I, but that it is a new way of raising the same level of doubt. One might then wish to say that the earlier dilemmatic argument raises a more radical doubt than any previously countenanced; but the passage does not address that question. In *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* (AT VIIIIB 366–7/CSM I 309), however, Descartes says that it is not new to countenance the views that God can deceive us and that *everything* can be doubted; these are among the views ‘the sceptics have long been harping on.’ (There is dispute about whether the evil demon just is God considered as a deceiver. If it is, then, since Descartes says that countenancing the view that God can deceive us is not new, he presumably thinks that countenancing an evil demon is not new either.) That suggests that, rightly or wrongly, Descartes does not think that the hypothesis that God could always deceive us raises a newly radical doubt.

It is worth remarking that it is not clear how reliable the *Conversation with Burman* is as a guide to what Descartes actually said: it was written up by Burman, after a conversation with Descartes. Pascal attributes the evil demon hypothesis to Montaigne; see his *Entretien de Pascal avec Saci sur Epictète et Montaigne,* in L. Brunschvicg, P. Boutroux, and F. Gazier (eds.), *Oeuvres de Blaise Pascal* (Grands Ecrivains de la France), Tome IV (Paris: Hachette, 1914), 43. However, this essay is not reliable on the question of Descartes’s novelty or lack of it: throughout, Pascal attributes to Montaigne views to
One might think that settles the matter: surely Descartes is right? After all, he is generally anxious to advertise his originality. Yet, as we have seen, in this case he goes out of his way to insist, sometimes with some vehemence, that his skeptical arguments are not novel. But this is far from decisive. First, Descartes could have failed to see that he is novel. Secondly, his disavowal might be disingenuous. For the accusation of innovation was part of a charge of heresy, and Descartes was, of course, anxious to avoid that charge. So we should not just take his word for it: we need to look at the texts and draw our own conclusions. But whether or not Descartes’s own assessment is correct, it is important to be clear that it differs from a familiar current one, according to which ancient skepticism is considerably more limited in its scope than modern skepticism is.

To say that Descartes denies that his own skepticism is more radical than ancient skepticism is not to say precisely what he takes the scope of his own, or of ancient, skepticism to be. However, the passages cited above show that he thinks that ancient skeptics go considerably beyond property skepticism; indeed, as we have seen, he suggests that they doubt all things. If we take this quite literally, then Descartes takes ancient skepticism to go considerably beyond even external world skepticism.

As for the scope of Descartes’s own skepticism, it is clear that it too goes beyond property skepticism: in Meditation I, for example, he doubts whether he has a body and whether there is an external world. The fact that he doubts these things, coupled with his denial that his skepticism is more radical than ancient skepticism, reinforces my suggestion that he thinks that ancient skeptics also doubt these things. My suggestion is also reinforced by Descartes’s claim that ‘[n]o sceptic nowadays (hodierni) has any doubt in practice about whether he has a head, or whether two and three make five, and so on’ (AT VII 547; CSM II 375; emphasis added). The implication is that ancient skeptics did doubt these things.
I turn now to a second of the alleged differences between ancient and modern skepticism that I mentioned at the outset: that ancient skeptics disavow belief, whereas modern skeptics disavow only knowledge.

It is clear that ancient skeptics disavow not just knowledge but also belief. The central dispute here is not about that, but between the No Belief and the Some Belief View: do ancient skeptics disavow all, or only some beliefs?² This dispute is related to the scope of their skepticism. If, for example, they disavow all beliefs, then presumably their skepticism is quite radical.²⁹

To adjudicate between the No Belief and the Some Belief Views would take us too far afield here. But a few brief remarks are in order. In favor of the No Belief View is the fact that skeptics claim to have no beliefs (mê dogmatizein; PH I 13), and to live without opinions (adoxastôs; PH I 24). However, in PH I 13, Sextus explains what he means in saying that skeptics do not have beliefs:³⁰

When we say that skeptics do not hold beliefs, we do not use ‘belief’ in the sense in which some say, quite generally, that belief is acquiescing in something; for skeptics assent to the affections (pathê) forced upon them by appearances (phantasia). For example, they would not say, when heated or chilled, ‘I do not think I am not heated (or: chilled).’ Rather, we say that they do not hold beliefs in the sense in which some say that belief is assent to some unclear object of investigation in the sciences; for Pyrrhonists do not assent to anything unclear.

²⁸ What I call the No Belief View is sometimes called rustic or drunken skepticism; what I call the Some Belief View is sometimes called urbane or sober skepticism. It is important to distinguish two questions: (a) do ancient skeptics claim to have no beliefs?; and (b) do ancient skeptics actually have any beliefs? My main focus here is (a).

²⁹ Surprisingly, however, some commentators seem to think that (a) Sextus is (at least typically) no more than a property skeptic, yet (b) he disavows all beliefs. This combination of views is not obviously consistent. I return to this point in section 8; see also n. 38.

³⁰ Here and elsewhere, I base my translations of the Outlines on J. Annas and J. Barnes, Sextus Empiricus: Outlines of Scepticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); however, I sometimes alter their translations without comment.
In a related passage (PH I 19–20) that refers back to PH I 13, Sextus says:

As we said before, we do not overturn anything which leads us, without our willing it, to assent in accordance with a passive appearance (kata phantasian pathêtikên)—and these things are precisely what is apparent (ta phainomena). When we investigate whether existing things are such as they appear, we grant that they appear... For example, it appears to us that honey sweetens (we concede this inasmuch as we are sweetened in a perceptual way).

The interpretation of these passages is quite controversial.³¹ But on the interpretation I favor, Sextus claims that, although skeptics lack beliefs about anything unclear,³² they do have some beliefs. In particular, they have beliefs about how they are appeared to: when it appears to them that honey sweetens, for example, they believe that it appears to them that honey sweetens. However, they suspend judgment as to whether the appearance is true; they do not believe (or disbelieve) that honey is sweet (PH I 19).

On this interpretation, the appearances that skeptics have beliefs about are non-doxastic.³³ A classic example of a non-doxastic appearance is an oar’s appearing bent in water to someone who does not believe that it is bent.³⁴ But non-doxastic appearances are not restricted to perceptual illusions, or even to the perceptual sphere. An argument can appear sound to me without my being inclined to believe that it is sound. Perhaps Jones, who has propounded it, is well known to present arguments that look sound but contain subtle flaws. His arguments have the appearance of soundness; but, given my information about Jones, I may not be at all inclined to believe that his argument is sound. Whether or not one agrees with me that there are in fact non-doxastic non-sensory appearances, Sextus seems to think there are. Hence he speaks not only of things appearing to sense but also of their appearing to reason.³⁵

³¹ I defend the interpretation sketched here in Chapter 11. For two quite different interpretations, see the articles by Frede and Burnyeat cited in n. 28.
³² Sextus first says that skeptics lack beliefs about anything unclear in the sciences. But his reason for this is that they lack beliefs about anything unclear tout court. He does not say here what if anything outside the sciences is unclear. I take it that in PH I 13 Sextus tells us that he is from now on going to use dogmata to mean: dogmata about what is unclear. Hence, when he says elsewhere that skeptics lack dogmata, he intends us to understand that he means, not that they lack all dogmata, but only that they lack dogmata about anything unclear.
³³ Or, as they are sometimes called, ‘non-epistemic’ (Frede, ‘The Skeptic’s Beliefs,’ 187; Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 136) or ‘phenomenological’ (Annas and Barnes, Modes, 23–4). I prefer ‘non-doxastic’ to ‘non-epistemic,’ since appearances of this sort are not supposed to be beliefs (doxai) any more than they are supposed to be knowledge (epistêmê). I prefer ‘non-doxastic’ to ‘phenomenological,’ since the latter might suggest that the relevant appearances can only be sensory. As I use the phrase, to say that an appearance is non-doxastic is not to say that its content is non-conceptual.
³⁵ See for example PH II 10, M VII 25, M VIII 141. These passages are cited by Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 127; and he too argues that the appearances relevant in this context are non-doxastic, and (in Sextus’s view)
In any case, the crucial question for present purposes is not whether ancient skeptics claim to have some, or no, beliefs, but whether they disavow only knowledge or also belief. And the answer to that question is clear: they disavow not only knowledge but also belief. That they do so is surely to their credit. For, as Burnyeat remarks,

[s]ceptical arguments are used to raise questions about the adequacy of the grounds on which we ordinarily claim to know about the external world, about other minds, and so on, but in truth there are few interesting problems got at by this means which are not problems for reasonable belief as well as for knowledge . . . Further, in the normal case, that which we think we should not believe we do not believe.³⁶

Descartes also seems to think that ancient skeptics disavow not just knowledge but also belief. Indeed, he seems to think that any skeptic by definition eschews all beliefs. He says, for example:

You cannot have a sceptic saying ‘Let the evil demon deceive me as much as he can,’ because anyone who says this is by that token not a sceptic, since he does not doubt everything. Certainly I have never denied that the sceptics themselves, so long as they clearly perceive some truth, spontaneously assent to it. It is only in name, and perhaps also in intention and resolve, that they adhere to their heresy of doubting everything.

(Letter to Hyperaspistes, August 1641; AT III 433–4/CSM III 196–7)

Skeptics by definition, then, doubt everything; and earlier we saw that Descartes explicitly says that ancient skeptics in particular doubt everything. He also says that someone who doubts, or is distrustful (diffidit), neither affirms nor denies (AT VII 476/CSM II 320). So, if ancient skeptics doubt everything, they neither affirm nor deny anything. If they neither affirm nor deny anything, they have no beliefs.³⁷ Descartes therefore attributes the No Belief View to ancient skeptics. This, of course, fits very well with his view that the scope of their skepticism is quite broad.³⁸ I think Descartes goes too far here; for, as I have argued, I think

not restricted to the sensory realm. Unlike me, however, Burnyeat is skeptical as to whether there are in fact any non-sensory non-doxastic appearances; see ‘Can,’ 140.

³⁶ Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 118–19.

³⁷ At least, they intend and resolve to have no beliefs. But Descartes says that, if one clearly perceives something, one cannot help but have some beliefs. I am not sure whether he thinks skeptics clearly perceive anything. If he thinks that skeptics claim and aim to have no beliefs, but cannot (or, at least, did not) succeed in having no beliefs, then he anticipates a central argument of Burnyeat’s in ‘Can.’

³⁸ Hence Descartes does not combine the dubiously consistent (a) and (b) mentioned above in n. 29: though he takes ancient skeptics to disavow all beliefs, he does not think their skepticism is restricted to property skepticism.
ancient skeptics allow themselves beliefs about how they are appeared to. But he is right to say that their skepticism challenges not just knowledge but also belief.

What, however, about Descartes’s own skeptical arguments? Are they intended to challenge only knowledge, or also belief?³⁹ Harry Frankfurt, for one, seems to think that Descartes challenges only knowledge. He says, for example, that Descartes’s ‘resolution to overthrow all his opinions . . . demands no more of him than a recognition that the slate of his proposed theory is clean because he does not yet know any proposition to have a legitimate place in the system of knowledge he wishes to construct.’⁴⁰ In the Seventh Set of Objections, by contrast, Bourdin takes Descartes to be rejecting his beliefs. Hence he says, for example, that doubting p involves taking p to be false; and he asks whether, in doubting p, Descartes believes (credere) not-p (see, for example, AT VII 456/CSM II 305–6)—in which case he no longer believes p.

Though Bourdin is wrong to suggest that, in doubting p, Descartes believes not-p,⁴¹ I think he is right to say that Descartes is not just doubting whether he knows various things; he is suspending judgment, suspending belief. He says, after all, that he aims to withhold assent from all ‘opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false’ (AT VII 18/CSM II 12). When one views a claim as patently false, one does not merely question whether one knows it; one does not believe it. At least, this is so on the reasonable assumption that to believe p is to believe that p is true.⁴² Even if one rejects that assumption, it does not seem reasonable to say that one can (consciously) believe p when one (consciously) believes that it is patently false. To be sure, Descartes was not assuming that all of his original beliefs were patently false; as he says in reply to Bourdin, he meant that we should pay no more attention to them than if they were quite false (AT VII 461/CSM II 309). But that still suggests that he is suspending judgment, not merely questioning whether he has knowledge.

Or again, at the beginning of Meditation II, Descartes says that ‘anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false’ (AT VII 24/CSM II 16). If Descartes sets aside various claims, then, at that time, he does not take them to be true; and, if he does not take them to be true, he

³⁹ Here I am not asking about the scope of Descartes’s skepticism, but only whether, however broad or narrow it is, it challenges only knowledge or also belief. Moreover, at the moment I am only asking about his views in the context of the search for truth. I discuss what he says about matters of action later.

⁴⁰ H. Frankfurt, Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), 17; emphasis added. (Wilson, Descartes, 42–9, also cites Frankfurt in this connection.) Consider also the following passage from Frankfurt: ‘Descartes does not propose to make himself into a tabula rasa, and the skepticism to which he commits himself is innocuously thin and undisturbing. Indeed it is inappropriate to describe it as skepticism at all’ (16). But these are not exhaustive alternatives, and I do not think either is correct. Ridding oneself of all beliefs does not make one into a tabula rasa: non-doxastic appearances might be written on one’s tabula. Nor, as I go on to say, is Descartes’s skepticism undisturbing.

⁴¹ And in fact, Bourdin seems well aware that, in doubting p, Descartes is not really committed to believing not-p; see, e.g., AT VII 458–9/CSM II 307–8.

⁴² This assumption is, however, questioned by Striker, ‘Sceptical Strategies,’ 113–14, and by Frede, ‘The Skeptic’s Two Kinds of Assent,’ 206–8. I explore Frede’s arguments in Chapter 11.
does not believe them. Moreover, we saw above that Descartes thinks that doubting, or being distrustful, involves neither affirming nor denying. So presumably when he entertains various doubts in Meditation I, he neither affirms nor denies, in which case he does not, at the time, have the corresponding beliefs.

Further, Descartes eventually rejects many of his pre-reflective beliefs. For example, as Margaret Wilson notes, 'by the end of the Meditations the “testimony of the senses” is to be regarded as “uncertain and even as false.”' If Descartes’s sceptical arguments undermine some of his former beliefs, then they presumably challenge not just knowledge but also belief.

Later I will consider an objection to my claim that Descartes disclaims belief. But for now, note that if my interpretation is correct, then Descartes thinks there is yet another point of similarity between ancient skepticism and his own: both challenge not only knowledge but also belief.

5.

I now turn to the third of the alleged differences between ancient and modern skepticism that I mentioned at the outset: that ancient skepticism has a practical concern, whereas modern skepticism is purely methodological. I shall approach this issue by focusing on one of the most famous criticisms of ancient skepticism: the apraxia or inactivity argument, which alleges that skepticism (of some stripe) is incompatible with (some sort of) action. This is also the criticism that

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43 This point is appreciated by Bernard Williams, who writes that Descartes’s ‘Method is deployed in the course of an intellectual project, which has the feature that if doubt can possibly be applied to a class of beliefs, then that class of beliefs must, at least temporarily, be laid aside’ ('Descartes’s Use of Scepticism,' 339). See also A. Kenny, Descartes: A Study of His Philosophy (New York: Random House, 1968), 22–3. However, Kenny goes on to say that ‘because the doubt finds no expression whatever in action, it is something less than a genuine suspension of belief’ (23). I discuss this point below.

44 See AT VII 476/CSM II 320, cited above. The CSM translation makes my interpretation sound more secure than it is. Throughout CSM II 318–22, it speaks of a renunciation of belief; but, unfortunately, ‘belief’ is an intrusion. The French is also unhelpful in places. In section P, for example, it has ‘nos connaissances passées’ (cf. X), which might suggest knowledge rather than belief; but nothing in the Latin explicitly corresponds to ‘connaissances.’ At S, however, it has ‘anciennes maximes,’ which is better; T has ‘proposition.’

In support of the claim that, at this point in the Meditations, Descartes does not just question whether he knows, but (at least in the context of the search for truth) aims to suspend judgment, see also AT VII 59–60/CSM 41.

45 Wilson, Descartes, 46.

46 There are different versions of the apraxia argument. Striker, for example, claims that there are two versions: that if nothing can be known, one could never decide what to do; and that if one suspends judgment completely, one cannot act at all. The first version challenges skeptics who disavow knowledge; the second challenges skeptics who disavow belief. (See Striker, ‘Sceptical Strategies,’ 100.) For my part, I think belief is sufficient for having ‘some idea of what it will be best to do’ (100), so I am not sure about Striker’s distinction. Nonetheless, she is surely right to claim that there are different versions of the apraxia argument. In addition to alleging that one or another cognitive attitude (knowledge, belief, or something else again) is necessary for action, there are also disputes about what action amounts to in these contexts: rational intentional action, for example, or something less than that.
Descartes most often makes about ancient skepticism. In the *Search for Truth*, for example, he says:

we have frequently refuted the views of the Pyrrhonists and the fruits which they themselves have derived from their philosophical method have been so meagre that they have been wandering about aimlessly all their lives. Unable to free themselves from the doubts which they themselves introduced into philosophy, they have put their efforts exclusively into learning to doubt.

(AT X 520/CSM II 413)

And in his letter to the French translator (Abbé Picot) of his *Principles of Philosophy*, he says that there was a dispute among Plato’s and Aristotle’s disciples:

about whether everything should be called into doubt or whether there were some things which were certain—a dispute which led both sides into extravagant errors. Some of those who were in doubt extended it even to the actions of life, so that they neglected to employ common prudence in their behavior.

(AT IXB 6/CSM I 182)

Descartes is not the first to have leveled this charge: it was a familiar one in antiquity. In his *Life of Pyrrho* (IX 62) Diogenes Laertius puts it as follows:

So although he thinks ancient skeptics are vulnerable to the *apraxia* argument, he allows that they did do something: they put effort into learning to doubt. Perhaps he would say that such a person is only an aspiring skeptic who has not yet reached his goal. In saying that they wandered about aimlessly, however, he seems to suggest that they do not act, in the sense of pursuing goals. Earlier in the *Search for Truth* (AT X 512/CSM II 408), Epistemon worries that entertaining ‘general doubts’ will lead to ‘the ignorance of Socrates or the uncertainty of the Pyrrhonists.’ Eudoxus replies that ‘it would be dangerous for someone who does not know a ford to venture across it without a guide, and many have lost their lives in doing so. But you have nothing to fear if you follow me.’ Part of Descartes’s point is that, unlike the Pyrrhonists, he has a way out of skepticism. (For this point, see also the letter to Reneri for Pollot, AT II 38–9/CSM III 99.) But perhaps he is also adverting to the *apraxia* argument: since ancient skeptics do not look where they are going, their lives are in danger.

The passage cited in the text is ascribed to Epistemon, who does not generally represent Descartes’s own views; however, I take it that he believes the view being expressed, which is more or less reiterated in the next passage I cite. That view is of course entirely compatible with his thinking that reflection on skeptical arguments can, in other hands than those of the Pyrrhonists, yield fruit: he thinks his own use of skeptical arguments does so. Thanks to Jean-Marie Beyssade on this point.

Descartes says that some skeptics are vulnerable to the *apraxia* argument; he does not say which ones he has in mind. However, the passage just cited from *The Search for Truth* shows that he thinks the Pyrrhonists are vulnerable to it.

The argument goes back at least as far as Aristotle: see *Met*. 1008b11–12; 1010b1ff.

Sextus also records a version of the argument, saying that the skeptic is allegedly reduced to inactivity because since the whole of life is bound up with choices and avoidances, the person who neither
[Pyrrho declared] similarly about everything that nothing was in truth, but that humans acted in every case by convention and habit; for everything is no more this than that. He was consistent with this in his life, not turning out of his way for anything and not guarding against anything, but taking on everything—wagons, maybe, and precipices and dogs, and in general, not trusting to his senses in anything. But he was kept safe by his acquaintances who, as Antigonus of Caryustus says, used to follow him around.

Descartes and Antigonus believe, then, that ancient skeptics acted heedlessly, and that they did so because they extended their doubts ‘even to the actions of life.’ By contrast, Descartes claims that the way in which he countenances skepticism in (for example) Meditation I does not cause him to act heedlessly. In the Replies to the Fifth Set of Objections to the *Meditations*, for example, he says:

> when it is a question of organizing our lives, it would, of course, be foolish not to trust the senses, and the sceptics who neglected human affairs to the point where friends had to stop them falling off precipices deserved to be laughed at. Hence I pointed out in one passage that no sane person ever seriously doubts such things. (AT VII 350–1/CSM II 243)

And several times elsewhere Descartes insists that he restricts his skepticism to the search for truth; he does not extend it to action.

> Nor does Descartes think that the skeptics of his day extend their doubts to ‘the actions of life’:

> No sceptic nowadays (hodierni) has any doubt in practice about whether he has a head, or whether two and three make five, and so on. What the sceptics say is that chooses nor avoids anything [as the skeptic is alleged not to do] in effect renounces life and stays fixed like some vegetable’ (*M XI* 163 = *Against the Ethicists*). Sextus’s *M XI* version and Diogenes’s version of the argument are interestingly different. For example, in Sextus’s *M XI* version, the skeptic ‘stays fixed like some vegetable.’ (Vegetables do, however, change in some ways: for example, they grow.) In Diogenes’s version, by contrast, the skeptic can move: for example, he walks around. But he does not look where he is going, since he does not trust his senses. The skeptic is more inactive on Sextus’s *M XI* version than on Diogenes’s; hence a satisfactory reply to Sextus’s *M XI* version might not be a satisfactory reply to Diogenes’s.

51 The reference is to the Synopsis to the *Meditations*, AT VII 16/CSM II 11. Cf. AT III 422; Prin. I 1–3. Just before the passage cited in the text, however, Descartes says that ‘[w]hen I said that the entire testimony of the senses should be regarded as uncertain and even as false, I was quite serious; indeed this point is so necessary for an understanding of my *Meditations* that if anyone is unwilling or unable to accept it, he will be incapable of producing any objection that deserves a reply’ (AT VII 350/CSM II 243). So although one should trust the senses in matters of action, one should not do so in the context of the search for truth. I discuss this further below.

Descartes’s version of the *apraxia* argument is more like Diogenes’s than like the version Sextus records in *M XI*: skeptics walk around; they are not rooted in place. See previous note.

52 See, for example, Discourse Pt. III; AT VII 149/CSM II 106, AT VII 248/CSM II 172, AT VII 350–1/CSM II 243, AT VII 460/CSM II 308f, AT VII 475/CSM II 320. Cf. also Prin. I 3 (AT VIIA 5).
they merely treat such claims as if (\textit{tanquam}) they are true, because they appear (\textit{apparent}) to be so; but they do not believe (\textit{credere}) they are certain, because no rational arguments require them (\textit{impelluntur}) to do so.

(Replies to the Seventh Set of Objections; AT VII 549/CSM II 375; emphasis added)

Here, then, Descartes does see a genuine difference between ancient skepticism, on the one hand, and his own skepticism and the skepticism of his day, on the other: he claims that he and the skeptics of his day \textit{insula}te their skepticism from action, whereas ancient skeptics do not do so; and he thinks that that is why the former, but not the latter, can act prudently.\footnote{The term ‘insulation’ is due to Burnyeat; see especially ‘The Sceptic in His Place and Time’ where, however, he argues that neither Descartes nor the ancients insulate. I think (but am not sure) that Burnyeat and I use ‘insulation’ differently. I am using it to mean that the search for truth is kept sharply separate from matters of action, so that one can act even when, in the context of the search for truth, one suspends judgment as to whether one’s pre-reflective beliefs are true. Annas and Barnes, \textit{Modes}, 8, also seem to use ‘insulation’ in this way, and they too claim that Descartes insulates in this sense. (Later, however, I shall note some differences between my view, on the one hand, and Annas and Barnes’s, on the other.) In another sense, however, Descartes does not insulate: for it is precisely because he calls various beliefs into question that he thinks he needs to construct a provisional code of conduct. (I discuss this code below.) He would not need to do so if he did not think that doubt in some sense affects ordinary life. This is one reason Burnyeat claims that Descartes does not insulate. I discuss this further below.}

But what exactly does this insulation consist in? Let us look first at what Descartes says about the skeptics of his day: they do not believe it is certain that they (for example) have heads, though they treat such claims as true because they appear to be so; later he says that they embrace appearances (\textit{apparentia omnia amplectuntur}, AT VII 549). This can, I think, be read in two quite different ways.

First, Descartes might mean that the skeptics of his day disclaim knowledge (certainty) but not belief. On this view, appearances are beliefs, and embracing appearances is taking one’s beliefs to be true. If this is what Descartes means, then he thinks that the skeptics of his day differ from ancient skeptics insofar as (at least in matters of action) they disavow only knowledge and not also belief.

On a second interpretation, Descartes means that the skeptics of his day disclaim both knowledge and belief: they rely on what \textit{appears} to be true, but they do not assert that the appearances \textit{are} true. They act as though they believe that they have heads, and so on; but they do not in fact believe that they do. On this interpretation, appearances are not tentative beliefs, but non-doxastic.

I am inclined to favor the second interpretation. For Descartes does not say that the skeptics of his day believe that these claims \textit{are} true; he says that they treat them \textit{as if} (\textit{tanquam}) they are true, which is weaker. One can treat a claim as true—act for some purpose or other as though it is true—without believing that it is true. Here it is helpful to introduce a distinction between what Robert Stalnaker
calls *acceptance* and *belief*.⁵⁴ According to Stalnaker, if one believes p, one takes it to be true; if one accepts p, one treats it as true, without necessarily thinking that it is true. Acceptance is a broader propositional attitude than belief; it includes not only belief but also entertaining a proposition, and adopting a hypothesis for the sake of argument or in order to test it. One can accept, but not believe, a proposition as the result of a methodological decision. Stalnaker also suggests that one can non-problematically ‘accept something in one context, while rejecting it or suspending judgment in another,’ but that ‘something is wrong if I have separate incompatible beliefs for different circumstances.’ Now certainly something is wrong if I, at one and the same time, have beliefs with incompatible contents. But, one might think, that is quite a different matter from believing p in one context, and not believing it in another context.⁵⁵ However, I agree with Michael Bratman that:⁵⁶

Reasonable belief is, in an important way, context independent: at any one time a reasonable agent normally either believes something (to degree n) or does not believe it (to that degree). She does not at the same time believe that p relative to one context but not relative to another.

So even if there is no contradiction in A’s believing p in one context and not believing it in another context, there is a sort of irrationality in A’s doing so. By contrast, there is no irrationality in accepting p in one context but not in another.

Using Stalnaker’s terminology, we can say that, according to Descartes, when it is a matter of action the skeptics of his day accept their non-doxastic appearances without taking them to be true (or false)—that is, without assenting to their content. Though they do not believe (or disbelieve) that it is raining, it (let us suppose) non-doxastically appears to them to be raining. They accept this appearance, and that (in combination with their desires) causes them to take an umbrella.⁵⁷ As we have seen, however, Descartes claims that ancient skeptics are vulnerable to the *apraxia* argument. So perhaps he thinks that, in addition to

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⁵⁴ R. Stalnaker, *Inquiry* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), esp. 79–81. The same, or a similar, distinction is also drawn by others, though the terminology sometimes differs. The quotation later in this paragraph is from p. 81.


⁵⁷ It is fairly noncontroversial, I think, to say that some actions can be explained by appealing to acceptance and desire. For example, I might act as though I think p is true, though I do not think that p is true, because I am adopting it for the sake of argument. But in this sort of case, my acceptance takes place against a background of beliefs. It is more difficult to see how one could act if one had only acceptance attitudes (other than belief) and desire; indeed, I am not sure whether one can accept a proposition if one has no beliefs whatsoever. But I am not here assessing the cogency of the view: I am merely trying to say what it is. I return to this sort of explanation of action below, in considering Sextus’s reply to the *apraxia* argument.
disavowing knowledge and belief, they do not even accept their non-doXastic appearances, and that is why they cannot act.\textsuperscript{58}

I have not yet asked what we should say about Descartes’s own distinction between the search for truth and matters of action; so far, I have only asked why he thinks the skeptics of his day are not vulnerable to the \textit{apraxia} argument. But I think it is reasonable to interpret Descartes in the same way. For as we have seen, when he is engaged in the search for truth, he suspends judgment as to whether, for example, he has a body. Indeed, he even pretends that he does not have one (AT VII 22/CSM II 15); he accepts, for a particular purpose, that he does not, though he does not believe that he does not. If, in one context, he suspends judgment as to whether he has a body, then it would be irrational for him to believe, in another context, that he has one. Descartes is not guilty of this irrationality if his view is that, when it is a matter of action, he merely accepts (but does not believe) that he has a body. Similarly, we need not say that, for the purpose of action, Descartes decides to believe that he has a body; rather, he accepts (but does not believe) that he does.

On this interpretation, Descartes contrasts interestingly with Hume. In his study, Hume decides that he is not justified in believing various things that he finds he cannot help believing when he is outside his study. He sees that this is irrational, but he can do nothing about it. Descartes sees that he would be irrational to believe in one context what he has, after due re\textit{flection}, suspended judgment on in another. Rather than passively falling back into beliefs on whose truth he has suspended judgment, he instead constructs a code of conduct by which to live: a code he accepts for the purposes of action, but to whose truth he is not committed.\textsuperscript{59} I shall try to make this interpretation more concrete in the next section, when I discuss the code of conduct that Descartes describes in \textit{Discourse on the Method} Part III. Before turning to that, however, I ask whether Descartes is right to level his version of the \textit{apraxia} argument against ancient skeptics.

\textsuperscript{58} That is, they cannot act in a rational manner: Descartes allows that they ‘do’ various things, insofar as they do not stay rooted in place. But he thinks their ‘doings’ are inconsistent and impractical. An anonymous referee has asked: if the appearance of rain (plus a desire to stay dry) caused seventeenth-century skeptics to take umbrellas, why did it not similarly cause ancient skeptics to take evasive action? How could Descartes think that appearance and desire have a particular causal effect in the one case, but not in the other? The answer is that Descartes thinks that the skeptics of his day \textit{accept}, whereas ancient skeptics \textit{reject}, their appearances. We therefore do not have the same complete cause in the two cases.

\textsuperscript{59} See \textit{A Treatise of Human Nature}, the conclusion of Book I. Burnyeat, in ‘The Sceptic in His Place and Time,’ 249, argues that Descartes is not aware of this Humean strategy, saying that if he were, he would not have needed to construct his code of conduct. But I think Descartes is well aware of it, and takes steps to avoid being in Hume’s position. At the end of Meditation I, for example, he notes that his ‘habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief (\textit{credulitatem})’ (AT VII 22/CSM II 15). It is in order to guard against this that he introduces the evil demon hypothesis, so that ‘the weight of preconceived opinion is counter-balanced’ (AT VII 22/CSM II 15). Like ancient skeptics, he hopes to achieve equipollence, so that he can completely suspend judgment. To be sure, he says this in the context of the search for truth. Nonetheless, it shows that Descartes is well aware of the temptation to fall back into one’s preconceived opinions; it is a temptation he strives to resist.
As is well known, Sextus replies to the *apraxia* argument. In the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, for example, he distinguishes criteria of truth from criteria of action (PH I 21).\(^{60}\) Skeptics suspend judgment as to whether there is a criterion of truth; but they rely on a criterion of action. Their criterion of action is ‘what is apparent (*to phainomenon*)’, implicitly meaning by this the appearances (*tên phantasian*) (PH I 22). Sextus then explains how skeptics, by relying on what is apparent, can act:\(^{61}\)

Thus, attending to what is apparent (*prosechontes tois phainomenois*), we live in accordance with everyday observances (*kata tên biótikên térésin*), without belief (*adoxastôs*)—for we are not able to be utterly inactive. These everyday observances seem to be fourfold, and to consist in guidance by nature (*huphêgêsi phuseôs*), necessitation by affections (*pathê*), handing down of laws and customs, and teaching of kinds of expertise. By nature’s guidance we are naturally capable of perceiving and thinking. By the necessitation of affections, hunger conducts us to food and thirst to drink. By the handing down of customs and laws, we accept, from an everyday point of view, that piety is good and impiety bad. By teaching of kinds of expertise we are not inactive in those things which we accept. And we say all this without belief (*adoxastôs*). (PH I 23–4)

I shall not ask here how plausible Sextus’s reply is. Rather, my sole concern is to understand what his reply is. He says that skeptics live by attending to what is apparent but without belief. I take this to mean that skeptics accept, and act on the basis of, their non-doxastic appearances, though they do not take the content of those appearances to be true.\(^{62}\) For example, though they no longer believe that

\(^{60}\) PH I 21 does not use the phrase ‘criterion of truth’; it says that one sort of criterion is ‘adopted to provide conviction about the existence or nonexistence of something.’ However, II 14, among other places, makes it clear that this refers to criteria of truth.

\(^{61}\) Cf. I 226, 237–8; II 246. For a more detailed account of Sextus’s reply than I have space to provide here, see J. Barnes, ‘Pyrrhonism, Belief and Causation: Observations on the Scepticism of Sextus Empiricus,’ *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II 36.4 (1990), 2608–95, pp. 2641–49. (The same material is presented in his ‘The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist,’ *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* NS 28 (1982), 1–29.) Barnes explains how Sextus might be interpreted as explaining how skeptics can act even if they have no beliefs, though he does not think this is the most natural interpretation of what Sextus says.

Sextus also replies to the *apraxia* argument in M XI 165. It is sometimes thought that his reply there differs from the one given in PH I, and/or that he is replying to a different version of the argument. I do not myself favor that view, but I shall not pursue the issue here.

\(^{62}\) This is not to say that Sextus claims that skeptics have no beliefs whatsoever. Rather, his point is that their fourfold way of life does not involve any first-order beliefs. They do not believe, for example, that *piety is good and impiety bad*. But they might, for all that, believe that *it appears to them that piety is good and impiety bad*. As I explained briefly above, I think this is what Sextus says in PH I 13. One advantage of this account is that it makes it easier to see how skeptics could accept their appearances. (But see the next note.)

Not only is it controversial to claim that the fourfold way of life leaves beliefs about appearances intact; it is also controversial to claim that it does not involve first-order beliefs. On an alternative,
piety is good and impiety bad, they accept (in Stalnaker’s technical sense) that it is; and that (in conjunction with their desires) causes them to act as though they believe this, though they do not in fact believe it.⁶³

On this interpretation, Descartes is wrong to say that ancient skeptics do not accept their non-doxastic appearances. As Sextus puts it a bit earlier: ‘Those who say that the sceptics reject what is apparent have not, I think listened to what we say (PH I 19).’⁶⁴ Here, then, is another similarity between ancient skeptics, on the one hand, and Descartes and the skeptics of his day, on the other: they all reply to the apraxia argument by saying that they accept (in Stalnaker’s sense) non-doxastic appearances. In contrast to the other similarities we have uncovered, however, Descartes does not acknowledge this one. Indeed, Descartes never even explicitly considers Sextus’s reply to the apraxia argument. Yet the reply was not unknown in Descartes’s day. In his Disquisitio Metaphysica, for example, Gassendi criticizes Descartes for misinterpreting Pyrrho on just this point.⁶⁵ And in his dictionary entry on Pyrrho, Bayle says that:⁶⁶

Sextus means only that skeptics lack firm or dogmatic beliefs about, for example, piety; but they believe that piety is good ‘in an everyday sense,’ in the way in which ordinary people believe it rather than in the way in which, say, professional theologians believe it. On this latter interpretation, Sextus’s reply to the apraxia argument would be that skeptics act on the basis of their first-order non-dogmatic beliefs. If this were what Sextus meant, it would hardly vindicate Descartes. But, as I have explained, I do not think Sextus should be interpreted in this way.

Like me, Striker, ‘Sceptical Strategies,’ 112 n. 58, also argues that Sextus’s ‘point is that he acts in accordance with what appears to him to be the case without committing himself to the truth of the impression.’ There are, however, various differences between our accounts that I cannot pursue here.

One might argue that acceptance (in Stalnaker’s technical sense) is not part of Sextus’s account. Rather, he appeals only to appearance and desire, saying that they, all by themselves, cause skeptics to act. This suggestion perhaps derives some support from Adv. Col. 1122c–d, where Plutarch says that Arcesilaus (an Academic skeptic) argued (against the Stoics) that appearance (phantasia) and impulse (hormê) are sufficient for action. Some of what Sextus says can perhaps be explained this way: for example, hunger causes one to seek food; one need not, in addition, believe or accept that one is hungry. But I think that my interpretation, in terms of acceptance, fits better with Sextus’s claim that skeptics accept that piety is good and impiety bad, and that they teach kinds of expertise. If, however, acceptance drops out of the picture, then Sextus’s explanation of skeptical action is less similar to Descartes’s explanation of how he and the skeptics of his day can act than it is on my account. But there would still be an important similarity: both act on the basis of something other than their beliefs.

Sextus’s remark suggests that Descartes is not alone in his misinterpretation of ancient skepticism: even in Sextus’s own day, skeptics were—wrongly, in Sextus’s view—accused of not accepting appearances.

⁶³ ‘Life of Pyrrho,’ Remark B, from Bayle’s Dictionnaire historique et critique (Rotterdam: Leers, 1697, 1st ed.; Amsterdam, 1740, 5th ed.). I have used the translation in Pierre Bayle’s Historical and
[w]e must regard as bad jokes or impostures the stories of Antigonus of Carystus to the effect that Pyrrho did not prefer one thing to another and that neither a chariot nor a precipice could ever make him take a step forward or backward and that his friends who followed him around often saved his life. There is no indication that he was this mad.

Moreover, it is striking that Descartes’s own way out of the argument bears more than a passing resemblance to Sextus’s. We have seen, for example, that Sextus distinguishes criteria of truth from criteria of action; skeptics suspend judgment on the former but rely on the latter. In just the same way, Descartes distinguishes the search for truth from matters of action; his doubt concerns the former but not the latter.

Or again, in Discourse Part III, Descartes says that just as one needs somewhere comfortable to live while one is rebuilding one’s house, so he devises ‘a provisional code’ ‘lest I should remain indecisive in my actions while reason obliged me to be so in my judgments, and in order to live as happily as I could during this time’ (AT VI 22/CSM I 122). Like Sextus, Descartes is anxious to show that suspending judgment need not result in inactivity. Just as one can live in a temporary dwelling that is not one’s own, so Descartes adopts a code to which he is not committed. As Descartes explains: ‘I had begun at this time to count my opinions as worthless, because I wished to submit them all to examination, and so I was sure I could do no better than follow those of the most sensible men’ (AT VI 23/CSM I 122). The distinction between acceptance and belief is apposite here: like Sextus, Descartes accepts various propositions that he does not, at the time, believe.

Moreover, the codes themselves—both of which are fourfold⁶⁷—are also quite similar. Descartes’s first maxim, for example, is

to obey the laws and customs of my country, holding constantly to the religion in which by God’s grace I had been instructed from my childhood, and governing myself in all other matters according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions—the opinions commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible of those with whom I should have to live.

In just the same way, Sextus claims that skeptics will follow the customs of their country, including religious ones (PH I 24). Or again, just as Sextus insists that

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⁶⁷ Actually, Descartes begins by saying that his code consists of ‘three or four maxims’ (AT VI 22/CSM I 122); but he then lists four maxims. Perhaps he thinks that the ‘fourth’ maxim has a somewhat different status from the others.
skeptics can have an occupation (and so are not inactive) \((PH I 24)\), so Descartes says what occupation he will follow while living by his code of conduct \((Discourse AT VI 27/CSM I 124)\). Just as Descartes says that ‘I could do no better than to continue with the very [occupation] I was engaged in’ \((AT VI 27/CSM I 124)\), so Sextus thinks that skeptics can live ordinary lives, engaging in ordinary occupations.68

Of course, the similarity between Descartes’s code and Sextus’s fourfold way of life does not show that Descartes had read Sextus for himself. Indeed, it does not even show that he knew at second hand that it was Sextus’s reply: Sextus was not the only one to offer this general sort of reply.69 My point is only that Sextus’s and Descartes’s replies to the apraxia argument are in fact closer than Descartes takes them to be: they both appeal to accepting non-doxastic appearances, as articulated in the skeptic’s fourfold way of life, on the one hand, and in Descartes’s provisional code of conduct, on the other. This allows them to insulate their actions from their skepticism. Sextus puts this by saying that, though skeptics suspend judgment about criteria of truth, they rely on a criterion of action; Descartes puts this by saying that he restricts his skepticism to the search for truth, and does not extend it to action.

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Now, however, it is time to consider some objections. First, one might argue that Descartes’s code of conduct, unlike Sextus’s fourfold way of life, embodies first-order beliefs to whose truth he remains committed even in his skeptical phase.70 It is true that at some stages of his career Descartes seems to believe some of the claims embodied in his code.71 However, it does not follow that he believed them when he was in his skeptical phase. Still, having described his code, Descartes says

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68 Presumably Sextus was a doctor. This raises a problem, however. His name suggests that he was an Empirical doctor. Yet he says that skepticism is in certain respects at odds with Empirical medicine, and that skepticism is closer to Methodical medicine \((PH II 236)\). Perhaps this suggests that Sextus insulated his skepticism from his daily life even more than I have suggested.

69 See, for example, Pierre Charron, *Traité de la sagesse*, vol. II, ch. VIII. (I have consulted Charron in an edition published in Paris by Rapilly, Passage des Panoramas, in 1827.) Gilson, in his commentary on the Discourse, also notes the similarity between Descartes and Charron; he also cites Montaigne. Montaigne and Charron, of course, are themselves indebted to Sextus. Gaukroger, *Descartes*, 307, thinks that Descartes’s first maxim is simply a paraphrase of Guez de Balzac (an essayist and friend of Descartes’s), in his *Dissertations Chrisienennes et Morales*.

Just as we should not infer from the similarity in their replies that Descartes knew of Sextus’s reply, so we should not infer from the fact that Descartes misdescribes Sextus’s reply that he did not know of it. Many who knew the Pyrrhonist reply misunderstood it in just the same way—as Sextus’s exasperated remark in *PH I 19* attests.

70 Christopher Taylor, among others, has urged this objection. Notice that if this objection is correct, then there is a sense in which Descartes’s skepticism is less sweeping than Sextus’s.

71 See, for example, his correspondence with Elizabeth, AT IV 265/CSM III 257.
that ‘[o]nce I had established these maxims and set them on one side together with the truths of faith, which have always been foremost among my beliefs (creance), I judged that I could freely undertake to rid myself of all the rest of my opinions’ (AT VI 28/CSM I 125). And elsewhere he says that his ‘renunciation’ made ‘an exception of all matters concerning faith, and morals in general’ (AT VII 476/CSM II 321).\textsuperscript{72} Does not this suggest that Descartes’s code does not involve suspending judgment on religious or moral matters, at any rate?

If we say this, however, then Descartes believes in one context what he suspends judgment on and does not believe in another context. For in Meditation I, he in some sense questions whether God exists. Nor does the first maxim require the suggested interpretation. Descartes does say that he will hold ‘constantly to the religion in which by God’s grace I had been instructed from my childhood’ (AT VI 23/CSM 122). But this does not need to mean that he will continue to believe, rather than accept (in a sense that does not involve belief), various religious claims: there is the same content, but he has different propositional attitudes to it at different times. Moreover, he immediately goes on to say that he ‘wished to submit . . . all [his opinions] to examination’ (AT VI 23; emphasis added): in which case he presumably questioned his moral and religious beliefs. And at AT VI 30/CSM I 126 he says that during the nine years in which he lived by his code of conduct, he took no side ‘regarding the questions which are commonly debated among the learned’; presumably these included religious and moral questions.

Even if living by his code does not involve suspending judgment on his moral and religious beliefs, it seems to involve suspending judgment elsewhere. For example, having said that he will obey the laws and customs of his country, and hold to his religion, he says that ‘in all other matters’ he will act ‘according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions—the opinions commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible of those with whom I should have to live’ (AT VI 23/CSM I 122). He does not say that their beliefs are true; he means only that he will accept what they say, without assenting to the truth of what they say. And in describing his second maxim, he says that he will ‘follow even the most doubtful opinions,’ and that ‘[e]ven when no opinions appear more probable than any others, we must still adopt some’ (AT VI 24/CSM I 123). If Descartes takes p and not-p to be equally balanced, or thinks p is most doubtful, then presumably he does not believe p. Yet he says he will nonetheless act according to p. At least in these cases, then, he accepts propositions for the purposes of action that he does not believe.

A second challenge urges that there are important differences in how Sextus’s fourfold way of life and Descartes’s code of conduct are arrived at. In particular,

\textsuperscript{72} Cf. AT VII 15/CSM II 11, where Descartes adds a parenthesis in response to a comment by Arnauld (for which see AT VII 216–17/CSM II 151–2). For an interesting discussion of these and related passages, see Menn, Descartes and Augustine, 322–36.
Sextus seems to think that his way of life is forced on him; he just passively responds as, for example, habit forces him to do. Descartes, by contrast, seems actively to choose his code of conduct.\(^{73}\)

I agree that this is a significant difference. But it can be mitigated if we distinguish different phases in their thought. Before aspiring Pyrrhonists become settled skeptics, they have various beliefs and actively make various choices; once they become skeptics, they lose their beliefs and act according to habit. Sextus describes the fourfold way of life from the point of view of a practicing skeptic, not from the point of view of an aspiring skeptic. Descartes, by contrast, chooses his code before he embarks on the search for truth. Once he is embarked on it, he simply acts according to the code, without any longer questioning it. At this stage, following it is no longer a matter of active choice; he no longer subjects it to evaluation. Hence, he says that his second maxim:\(^{74}\)

\[\text{was to be as firm and decisive in my actions as I could, and to follow even the most doubtful opinions, once I had accepted them, with no less constancy than if they had been quite certain. In this respect, I would be imitating a traveller who, upon finding himself lost in a forest, should not wander about turning this way and that, and still less stay in one place, but should keep walking as straight as he can in one direction, never changing it for slight reasons even if mere chance made him choose it in the first place. (AT VI 24/CSM I 123)}\]

The suggestion is that he blindly follows the code, even if it involves acting on the basis of ‘the most doubtful opinions.’ Again, if he views the opinions as ‘most doubtful,’ presumably he does not believe them. Nonetheless, he accepts them, and acts on their basis. When he is following his code, then, there is an element of passivity in Descartes’s way of life no less than in Sextus’s.

Annas and Barnes raise a third challenge: that unlike ancient skeptics, Descartes does not genuinely disavow belief, and that is why he can act.\(^{75}\) Unlike the first objection, theirs is not based on the details of Descartes’s description of his code of conduct, but on his claim that his doubt is philosophical or hyperbolical. This, Annas and Barnes think, makes Descartes’s doubt ‘idle,’ since it is ‘insulated’ from action: ‘even while “doubting,” [Descartes] will persist in, and act upon, his ordinary belief that the stuff in the cup is coffee’; Descartes’s sort of doubt ‘cannot,

\(^{73}\) Thanks to Julia Annas for this suggestion. For a related suggestion, see Williams, ‘Descartes and the Metaphysics of Doubt,’ 120.

\(^{74}\) Cf. AT VII 149/CSM II 106 for a related point. For discussion (and a different interpretation), see Menn, Descartes and Augustine, 330.

\(^{75}\) Annas and Barnes, Modes, 8–9. The quotations in this and the next paragraph are from these two pages. On insulation (which I mention in the next paragraph), see 53. Annas and Barnes return to this issue later in their book (163ff.). There, however, they focus on ancient and modern moral skepticism, and use Mackie as their representative moral skeptic. As I have mentioned (n. 43), Kenny, Descartes, 23, also claims that, since Descartes’s doubts don’t find any ‘expression in action,’ they are not genuine.
by definition, have any bearing on action.’ But, they ask, if it ‘does not affect action, then how is it doubt at all?’ Ancient skeptics, by contrast, ‘had no interest in philosophical doubt. The doubt they expected to induce was ordinary, non-philosophical doubt; it excluded beliefs, and it was therefore a practical doubt.’

Annas and Barnes seem to think that Descartes retains his belief that there is coffee in his cup, because he continues to act as though he believes this. However, acting as though one believes p does not imply that one believes it.⁷⁶ If it did, though, Annas and Barnes would have to concede that ancient skeptics have beliefs, since they too act as though they believe various things. Yet Annas and Barnes do not think that ancient skeptics have beliefs; they think they act on the basis of their non-doxastic appearances. If Sextus is entitled to say this, then so too is Descartes. Alternatively, if, as Annas and Barnes say, Descartes’s hyperbolical doubt is idle and ‘a sham,’ then so too is Sextus’s.

In any case, contrary to Annas and Barnes, Descartes’s doubts are not completely idle. If they were, he would not need to construct his code of conduct. Moreover, as I noted in section 4, his doubts lead to permanent changes in his eventual belief system. For example, he eventually rejects the sensory view of the world with which he claims to have begun. That presumably affected his actions; for example, it affected his views about the nature of color, and so affected how he thought and wrote about it.

Even if I am right to say that Sextus and Descartes both take skepticism to affect their lives, one might argue that the effects are importantly different. Sextus thinks that skepticism relieves anxiety and ensures tranquillity (PH I 12, 26–30). At the beginning of Meditation II, by contrast, Descartes says that ‘I can neither put them [the doubts] out of my mind nor see any way of resolving them. It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles me around so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top’ (AT VII 23–4/CSM II 16). So far from thinking that skepticism causes contentment, then, Descartes finds it profoundly unsettling.⁷⁷

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⁷⁶ Which is not to take a stand, one way or the other, on the more difficult question of whether action requires one to have some beliefs.

⁷⁷ On the other hand, Descartes also says that, by following his second maxim, ‘I could free myself from all the regrets and remorse which usually trouble the consciences of those weak and faltering spirits who allow themselves to set out on some supposedly good course of action which later, in their inconstancy, they judge to be bad’ (AT VI 25/CSM I 123). Descartes also says that he sets up the code ‘in order to live as happily as I could during this time’ (AT VI 22/CSM I 122). So to some extent Descartes agrees with Sextus that suspending judgment causes contentment.

I am not sure what the relation is between the phase that, in Meditation II, Descartes finds unsettling, and the phase that, in the Discourse, he claims causes contentment. Perhaps they are the same phase, and Descartes is content in his daily life, unsettled when he explicitly considers the doubt-makers of Meditation I to which, at the time, he has no answers. (Compare again Hume, at the end of Book I of A Treatise of Human Nature.) But whatever the relation between the ‘two’ phases is, it is important to be clear that Descartes’s point is not that doubt does not challenge ordinary beliefs; it is just that he is not always focusing on the doubt. This does not mean that he believes in one context what he does not
But whether or not Sextus and Descartes agree about what effect skepticism has on one’s life, they agree that it has an effect; hence Descartes’s doubt is not completely idle. Even if it were, however, one might argue that it does not follow that the doubt is not genuine. I take up this point in the next section.

8.

Myles Burnyeat raises another challenge to my attempt to assimilate Sextus’s and Descartes’s replies to the apraxia argument. In considering Sextus’s reply, he writes: ⁷⁸

The skeptic will carry on acting like the rest of you, responding to the way things appear to him as nature and upbringing have conditioned him to respond. Now, whatever we may think of this rebuttal, it is not the language of a man afflicted with radical Cartesian doubt as to whether he has a body to act with and a world to act in at all. One’s own body has not yet become for philosophy a part of the external world.

So Burnyeat agrees that Sextus replies to the apraxia argument by saying that skeptics act on the basis of their non-doxastic appearances. ⁷⁹ But he thinks that Sextus’s reply, considered as a whole, shows that ancient skepticism is less radical than Cartesian skepticism is: unlike Descartes, ancient skeptics do not doubt whether they have bodies to act with or a world to act in. ⁸⁰

Why, Burnyeat asks, does it ‘not occur to the Pyrrhonian skeptic to push his doubt that far’? The answer, he suggests, is that, like other Hellenistic philosophers, Sextus: ⁸¹

has a practical concern. His skepticism is a solution to uncertainty about how to act in the world or better, a dissolution of that uncertainty. Such being his prime concern, he cannot doubt in a completely general way his ability to act in the world. It is not that he affirms the world or the role of his body in it: these Cartesian questions lie apart from the route traveled by the skeptic’s inquiry, just

believe in another context. It is just that the fact that he has suspended judgment is not always salient to him.

Thanks to Zoltan Szabo for discussion of this issue.


⁷⁹ In ‘Can,’ Burnyeat argues at length that the appearances at issue here are non-doxastic.

⁸⁰ Indeed, sometimes he suggests that Sextus, at least typically, is no more than a property skeptic (Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 29). It is odd that Burnyeat says this, given his view that Sextus claims to have no beliefs. To be sure, Burnyeat does not say that Sextus believes that honey (for example) exists. But he seems to think that Sextus in some sense assumes that it does or, at least, does not suspend judgment as to whether it does. I return to this point briefly below.

⁸¹ Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 30–1. See also Everson, ‘The Objective Appearance of Pyrrhonism,’ 147.
because he is so serious, in a practical sense, about his skepticism. In that sense Descartes was very clear that his skeptical doubt was not serious... It was a strictly methodological affair... And that was what enabled him to take the doubt far enough to raise in absolutely general terms the problem of the existence of the external world.

Later Burnyeat suggests that what the anecdotes about Pyrrho really show is that ancient skepticism even at its most extreme did not seriously question that one can walk around in the world. It did not question this, I have argued, because it was in fact entirely serious about carrying skepticism into the practical affairs of life.

Burnyeat contrasts two attitudes to, or two kinds of, skepticism. Ancient skeptics attempt to 'live their skepticism,' whereas Cartesian skepticism is 'a strictly methodological affair.' A methodological skeptic can be an external world skeptic. But if one wishes to live one's skepticism, one cannot doubt whether there is an external world to live in or whether one has a body to act with.

Burnyeat claims, then, that Sextus's reply to the apraxia argument shows that he is not 'afflicted with radical Cartesian doubt.' He also claims that the explanation for the allegedly different scopes of Sextus's and Descartes's skepticism is that Sextus attempts to live his skepticism, whereas Descartes's skepticism is 'a strictly methodological affair.'

I find it odd that Burnyeat makes the first claim. For it does not seem to sit well with another claim he makes: that skeptics say that, although they have no beliefs, they can act on the basis of their non-doxastic appearances. To be sure, in the passages just quoted, Burnyeat does not say that ancient skeptics believe that they have bodies or that there is an external world; indeed, he says that they do not affirm these things. But he also says that they 'did not seriously question' these things, and that they 'rely upon... the notion... that [t]here is a reality of some sort confronting us, even if this something, reality, is not at all what we think it to be.' Perhaps Burnyeat's view is that ancient philosophers do not explicitly consider, one way or the other, whether they have bodies or whether there is an external world, though they nonetheless tacitly rely on the view that these things exist. Even this, however, seems to me to sit somewhat awkwardly with his claim that skeptics claim to have no beliefs.

Burnyeat, 'Idealism,' 40. See n. 79.

The latter passage is from Burnyeat, 'Idealism,' 19 (emphasis added). The remark is not about Sextus in particular, but what follows makes it clear that Sextus is included within its scope: 'Greek philosophy does not know the problem of proving in a general way the existence of an external world. That problem is a modern invention.'
Leaving this possible tension to one side, the present point is that Burnyeat sometimes seems to suggest that anyone who wishes to live his skepticism cannot appeal to non-doxastic appearances across the board. If such a person is to act, he cannot doubt whether he has a body or whether there is a world to act in; non-doxastic appearances will not do here.

I am uncomfortable with the line Burnyeat seems to draw. Consider two cases. In both of them, it non-doxastically seems to me that there is a cliff in front of me. But in one of them, I assume that I have a body and that there is an external world, whereas, in the other of them, it merely non-doxastically seems to me that I have a body and that there is an external world. Burnyeat seems to think that, if my skepticism is practical, I can take evasive action in the first case but not in the second. I do not see why this should be so.\(^85\)

Burnyeat also assumes that an external world skeptic who attempts to live his skepticism will act differently from how others act. For one of his reasons for thinking that Sextus is not afflicted with Cartesian doubt is that he (Sextus) says that skeptics ‘will carry on acting like the rest of you.’ Since Sextus had a practical concern, yet lived an ordinary life, he was not a radical skeptic. At other times, however, Burnyeat seems to assume that an external world skeptic who attempts to live his skepticism could not act at all. (I suppose that is one way of having a very different sort of life!) For he says that what the anecdotes about Pyrrho really show is that ancient skeptics were not external world skeptics; the reason is that, even if Pyrrho did not act prudently, he did at any rate walk. That is, since he did something, he was not an external world skeptic.

Whichever of these views Burnyeat intends, he seems to accept the following conditional: ‘An external world sceptic who tries to live her skepticism cannot act (normally).’ Annas and Barnes rely on the same, or on a related, assumption when they argue that since Descartes’s doubts did not issue in action, they were not genuine. But ought we to accept this conditional? As Margaret Wilson notes, it relies on the assumption ‘that real doubt about, say, the existence of the physical world, has

\(^85\) Or suppose I am only a property skeptic, as Burnyeat says Sextus (at least typically) is (see n. 80). Suppose further that someone gives me some honey. I do not suspend judgment as to whether it is honey, but I do suspend judgment as to whether it is poisonous. Will I taste it or not? (For an interesting discussion of this sort of case, see Williams, Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry, 54–5. Descartes discusses a similar case at AT III 422/CSM III 188.) Burnyeat seems to think I can make a decision on the basis of a non-doxastic appearance about the honey’s poisonousness; if, for example, it non-doxastically seems to me to be poisonous, I will not taste it. But he seems to think that in order to make this decision, I must assume that I have a body and that there is an external world. Again, I do not see why we should draw a line just here. If, in order to avoid tasting the honey, I must assume that it is honey or, at least, that there is an external world, then, it seems to me, I equally need to assume that the honey is poisonous. If, on the other hand, it only needs to non-doxastically seem to me that the honey is poisonous, then why won’t non-doxastic appearances do more widely? My point here is not that one can act even if one has no beliefs: I have not taken a stand on that issue (see n. 74). My point is only that I cannot see what justifies drawing a line where Burnyeat draws it.
a logical implication for action. As Wilson argues, however, this assumption can be questioned. She says, for example, that it is very hard to imagine what it would be to “act as if there were (or might be) no physical world”—unless it is to act just as Descartes does in writing (more exactly in thinking) the first five Meditations: or, we might add, as Sextus does in writing the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism.* Wilson also notes that many philosophical positions do not in any obvious way have implications for action. If one is going to say that Descartes’s skepticism was not seriously held, on the ground that it did not lead him to act differently, one might also have to say that lots of philosophical beliefs are not genuinely held. Be that as it may, we saw above that Descartes’s doubts did affect his life.

Wilson concludes her discussion by saying that “[t]he crucial point…is this. Descartes has not said, or even implied, that the Deceiver Hypothesis calls in question one’s beliefs about the continued constancy of one’s perceptions. And such beliefs are all that one needs to avoid directing one’s will in various “irresponsible” directions.” So although Wilson does not think ‘responsible’ action requires one to believe that there is an external world or that one has a body, she thinks it does require one to have beliefs about how one is appeared to; and she thinks that Descartes, even in his skeptical phase, retains such beliefs. Hence he can act, not because his doubts are not serious, but because he has beliefs about how he is appeared to. I suggested briefly above (in section 4) that Sextus says that skeptics have beliefs about how they are appeared to. Perhaps we have here, then, yet another similarity between ancient and Cartesian skeptics; and perhaps this similarity helps to explain how both can act in the face of radical doubt.

Be that as it may, Burnyeat agrees that Descartes’s skepticism allows him to carry on in the ordinary way. But he thinks this is because Descartes’s skepticism is purely methodological, whereas Sextus’s is not. As he puts it in ‘The Sceptic in His Place and Time’: 

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86 Wilson, *Descartes*, 46. Wilson criticizes this assumption on 46–9, and all quotations from her in this connection are from these pages. The discussion that follows is heavily indebted to hers.

87 At least, this is so on the assumption, which I accept, that Pyrrhonian skepticism includes external world skepticism.

88 Wilson also argues that the assumption implies ‘an unskeptical commitment to common sense.’ Yet the Pyrrhonists are skeptical about common sense—or about *bios*, as they sometimes put it—no less than about philosophical theories. On the other hand, Pyrrhonists sometimes claim to side with common sense. See, for example, *PH* II 246; cf. II 254; III 235. But contrast *PH* I 165, where Sextus says that the first Agrippan Mode applies not only to philosophical views but also to ordinary life. It is, of course, a nice question what ‘ordinary life’ consists in. For a good discussion of the Pyrrhonist’s attitude to common sense, see Barnes, *Pyrrhonism, Belief and Causation.*

89 Wilson, *Descartes*, 48. She is commenting on a passage in the Fifth Set of Replies (AT VII 351/CSM II 243), cited in part above, in section 5.

90 I said before that both explain action by appealing to acceptance of appearances (and desire). But I also said (n. 60) that this explanation is more plausible if one has beliefs about how one is appeared to.

91 Burnyeat, ‘The Sceptic in His Place and Time,’ 248. Just before this passage, Burnyeat says that Descartes does not insulate. Burnyeat distinguishes two sorts of insulation: (i) insulation by subject matter or content, which involves being skeptical in one area (for example, about underlying structures) but not in another (for example, about surface properties), in which case the latter is insulated
Descartes has to insist that his doubt is strictly theoretical and methodological, not practical, precisely because he believes that the judgements of ordinary life really are put in doubt by the sceptical arguments. They are rendered so completely and utterly doubtful that Descartes feels he must construct a provisional code of conduct to keep his practical life going while he is conducting the enquiry into truth.

This is an odd passage, however. On the one hand, Burnyeat says that Descartes’s skepticism is ‘strictly theoretical and methodological.’ On the other hand, he says that Descartes takes his skepticism to have practical implications, and that that is why he devises a code of conduct. But if his skepticism has practical implications, then it is not purely theoretical. I therefore think it is better to say that, like Sextus, Descartes takes skepticism to affect one’s life, in which case it is not strictly methodological. It is because they both think that skepticism affects one’s life that they feel the need to explain how they can nonetheless act. Alternatively, if one wishes to say that Descartes’s skepticism is methodological insofar as it does not apply to his code of conduct, then one should also say that Sextus’s skepticism is methodological, insofar as it concerns the criterion of truth but not the criterion of action.92

9.

We have seen that Descartes’s account of how his skepticism, and the skepticism of his day, compares with ancient skepticism is different from a standard modern from skepticism about the former; and what we might call (ii) transcendental insulation (Burnyeat does not supply a name for this second type of insulation), which involves thinking that the ordinary beliefs of everyday life are not put into doubt by skeptical arguments (see the beginning of sect. XI of Burnyeat, ‘The Sceptic in His Place and Time’). Burnyeat thinks that this latter sort of skepticism was invented by Kant.

I agree that Descartes does not insulate in senses (i) or (ii). But I am not sure whether Burnyeat can consistently claim both that Sextus does not insulate by subject matter (which seems to imply that no subject matter is exempt from his skepticism) and that he relies on the notion that there is an external world.

Burnyeat also says that Descartes’s ‘distinction between the theoretical [that is, methodological] and practical is not insulation but a deliberate abstraction of himself from practical concerns, a resolution to remain noncommittal toward everything in the practical sphere until theory has given him the truth about the world and a morality he can believe in’ (248; here Burnyeat seems to agree with my suggestion that in matters of action, Descartes accepts without belief.) But insofar as Descartes takes his skeptical views to affect his attitude to the practical sphere, his skepticism affects his life and so is not purely theoretical; insofar as his skepticism does not affect his life, it is insulated from action.

92 Recall that Burnyeat cites this alleged difference between Sextus and Descartes as a reason for the allegedly more limited scope of Sextus’s skepticism. If I am right that this difference does not obtain, then, if Sextus’s skepticism is indeed more limited than Descartes’s, we would need a different explanation for that fact. For my part, I agree with Descartes, as against Burnyeat and others, about the radical scope of Sextus’s skepticism. I discuss the scope of Sextus’s skepticism in Chapter 14. If I am right, then we have yet another similarity between Descartes’s and Sextus’s skepticism—this time, one Descartes is anxious to insist on.
verdict. The modern view is that ancient skeptics disavow belief, whereas modern skeptics disavow only knowledge; Descartes’s view is that both ancient and modern skeptics disavow belief. Or again, the modern view is that ancient skepticism is less radical in its scope than is Cartesian skepticism; Descartes’s view is that his own skepticism is no more radical than ancient skepticism, and that both go considerably beyond property skepticism.

I have argued, if only briefly, that Descartes is right to say that ancient skeptics challenge not only knowledge but also belief, and that he himself is an example of one ‘modern’ skeptic who does the same. Hence on this score, ancient and modern—or at least Cartesian—skepticism are more similar than they are sometimes taken to be. I have not asked, in this chapter, about the precise scope of either ancient or Cartesian skepticism. But, for the record, I think Descartes is right to say that the scope of his skepticism is not more radical than that of ancient skepticism.

Though Descartes’s assessment differs from the modern one on these two points, he and contemporary commentators agree on a different point: that Descartes’s reply to the apraxia argument is quite different from Sextus’s. Although there are some differences here, I have argued that their replies are nonetheless more similar than they are generally taken to be. So on this point, I think that Descartes’s (and the contemporary) interpretation is wrong.

It has been claimed that Descartes’s account of ancient skepticism is a ‘caricature.’ However, despite Descartes’s misunderstanding of Sextus’s reply to the apraxia argument, on various other important points he is more nearly right than a familiar current account is. To be sure, Descartes does not present a systematic or scholarly account of ancient skepticism. But his basic instincts are sound. Whether or not his verdict is accepted, the effort to understand his account of ancient skepticism should help us to understand both ancient and Cartesian skepticism; and it may provide a useful corrective to attempts to distance them from one another.

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93 Menn, Descartes and Augustine, 224 n. 18.
94 This chapter began life as part of a longer paper, versions of which were read at MIT (May 1997), Stanford (October 1997), the University of Michigan (December 1997), and the Classical Seminar in Corpus Christi College, Oxford (June 1998). A version of the present chapter was presented at Cornell’s Society for the Humanities (March 1999), and at the Keeling Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy, held at University College, London (November 1999). I thank the audiences on these occasions for helpful comments, especially Jean-Marie Beyssade, Chris Bobonich, Justin Brockace, Lesley Brown, David Charles, Ed Curley, Stephen Everson, Dan Garber, Louis Loeb, Gisela Striker, and Ralph Wedgwood. Thanks are also due to Carl Ginet, who saved me from a mistake and suggested a way to repair it; to Michael Ayers, Al-Quassim Cassam, and Zoltan Szabo for stimulating discussion; to an anonymous referee for, and the then editors of, the Philosophical Review; and to Christopher Taylor, my commentator at the Keeling Colloquium. Marjorie Grene’s paper, ‘Descartes and Ancient Skepticism,’ Review of Metaphysics 52 (1999), 553–71, reached me only after my paper had been completed; I regret that I was not able to take account of it.
Sextus and External World Skepticism

1.

In his Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Hegel argues that ancient skepticism is more profound and all-encompassing than are Cartesian skepticism and the skepticism of his day.¹ Lately, however, several commentators have argued to the contrary that ancient skepticism is less all-encompassing than are Cartesian and post-Cartesian skepticism.² One way in which ancient skepticism is thought to be less all-encompassing than Cartesian and post-Cartesian skepticism is that it allegedly does not question whether there is an external world. Myles Burnyeat, for example, says that ‘the Greeks never posed the problem of the existence of an external world in the general form we have known it since Descartes.’³ Indeed, it has been argued that ancient skeptics, so far from being External World Skeptics, are no more than what I shall call Property Skeptics:⁴ they assume that there is an

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, Lectures on the History of Philosophy, ed. and trans. E. S. Haldane and F. H. Simson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), vol. 2, 331–2; cf. 347. In a similar vein, T. Reid, in his Inquiry into the Human Mind, in The Works of Thomas Reid, ed. Sir William Hamilton (2 vols.; Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1944); originally published Edinburgh: MacLachlan and Stewart (1863), characterizes Hume as a ‘semi-sceptic’ and ‘half-sceptic,’ because he doesn’t question the existence of ideas or impressions (ch. 5, sect. 7). He thinks the same is true of Descartes, for which see also ch. 1 sect. 3. Thanks to Sydney Shoemaker for the Reid references. I shall follow convention and use ‘Cartesian skepticism’ for the sort of skepticism that Descartes considers in, for example, Meditation I and the beginning of Meditation II. The phrase is strictly a misnomer, since Descartes is not a skeptic.


³ ‘Idealism,’ 23. Cf. 19: ‘Greek philosophy does not know the problem of proving in a general way the existence of an external world. That problem is a modern invention.’

⁴ My phrase ‘Property Skepticism’ is an adaptation of what Hankinson calls Essential, in contrast to Existential, Skepticism (The Sceptics, 25–6). I prefer my terminology since, at least on some versions of Property Skepticism, all properties, not merely essential properties, are at issue (though see n. 5).
external world housed with familiar sorts of objects; they even assume that I can identify what object I'm confronted with on a given occasion. They question only whether such objects have the properties they appear to have. Burnyeat, for example, says:

Ask Sextus what he means when he claims to suspend judgment about everything, and he will typically reply, ‘Well, take honey: it appears sweet to me but bitter to people with jaundice, and there is no criterion for deciding which it really is. Likewise the tower appears round from a distance and square from close by. And so on. That's how it is with everything.’ It is one and the same external thing, honey or the tower, which appears thus and so, and which has a real nature that the skeptic is unable to determine.

And Stephen Everson writes:

The subject-matter of the [ancient] sceptic’s investigation - and thus what he will find himself suspending judgement about—is what the honey is really like. What he does not question is whether the honey is really there. Whereas Descartes will acknowledge, indeed be certain of the fact, that his experience is such that honey appears sweet, but doubt that there is anything beyond that experience, the ancient sceptic merely suspends judgment as to whether the honey is sweet.

that in this context, being honey, for example, is not a property, though being sweet is. If someone doubts, or suspends judgment about, whether she is tasting honey, or about whether the predicate 'is honey' is true of anything, she is what we might call an Object Skeptic, doubting whether a given object is present, or whether a certain kind of object exists. (These are themselves two different versions of Object Skepticism, a less and a more extensive one.) Hence Property Skepticism and External World Skepticism are not exhaustive options; moreover, there are different versions of each of them. I discuss some of these issues in G. Fine, 'Scepticism, Existence, and Belief: A Discussion of R. J. Hankinson's The Skeptics,' Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy 14 (1996), 273–90, at 276. Various 'grades of sceptical involvement' are usefully discussed by J. Barnes, 'Ancient Scepticism and Causation,' in Burnyeat (ed.), The Skeptical Tradition, 149–86, at 159–60.

Burnyeat, 'Idealism,' 29. Burnyeat says that Sextus typically speaks in this way; others omit 'typically,' and simply characterize Sextus as (what I call) a Property Skeptic. See, for example, the passage I quote next (from Everson). Though Burnyeat says that Sextus typically advertes to no more than Property Skepticism, he thinks that Sextus is committed to a more extensive skepticism. But he thinks the practical nature of Sextus’s skepticism prevents him from seeing what he is committed to: see 'Idealism,' 29–31. I discuss this issue in Chapter 13. In saying that Sextus suspends judgment only about the 'real nature' of honey and the tower, Burnyeat makes it sound as though he thinks Sextus suspends judgment only about the essential properties of things, which would leave him free not to suspend judgment about their non-essential properties. However, I don’t think Burnyeat intends to limit Sextus’s alleged Property Skepticism in this way. For one thing, he says that Sextus suspends judgment as to whether the tower is round or square; but its particular shape is presumably not an essential property of it. But some of those who say that Sextus suspends judgment only about the natures of things sometimes seem to mean that he suspends judgment only about their essential properties. See, e.g., M. Frede, 'The Skeptic's Beliefs,' in his Essays in Ancient Philosophy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), ch. 10, 179–200 at 187 (reprinted in The Original Sceptics). However, this is not his only or even, I think, his main view. I discuss Frede further in Chapter 11.

Although he points to a distinction between appearance and reality, he does not, as the Cartesian sceptic does, argue that since knowledge is limited to the first half of the divide, we cannot say whether there is anything at all on the second. His doubt is just whether reality is like its appearance.

Is it true that Sextus is (typically) no more than a Property Skeptic? Or is he an External World Skeptic? Or is he neither of these sorts of sceptic? Is Hegel right to think that Sextus’s skepticism is more extensive than Cartesian skepticism is? Or are modern commentators right to think that it is less extensive?⁷

Even if Sextus is not himself an External World Skeptic, he could nonetheless advert to it in, for example, describing someone else’s position; or it could be a view he entertains. If he does so, then External World Skepticism was at least discussed by ancient skeptics: in which case it was not invented by Descartes. Accordingly, I shall sometimes ask whether a given passage adverts to External World Skepticism, even if it doesn’t describe Pyrrhonism.

2.

I have already said something about Property Skepticism: it assumes that the world is housed with familiar objects such as honey and towers, and that I can identify such objects on particular occasions; it suspends judgment only about what properties such objects have. Property Skepticism may be an unstable position. Suppose, for example, that I take myself to be confronted by an apple, but suspend judgment about whether it is sweet, juicy, red, round, or edible; I suspend judgment about all the properties it appears to have. How, then, can I be justified in thinking I am confronted by an apple? And if I suspend judgment about whether anything is sweet, juicy, red, round, or edible (or green or tart . . . ), how can I be justified in thinking that apples exist? An extreme form of Property Skepticism—one that suspends judgment about all the properties of a thing—seems to lead to Object Skepticism, which suspends judgment about whether a given object exists, or about whether certain sorts of objects exist.⁸ It might even lead to External World Skepticism: though whether it does so depends, among other things, on precisely how we characterize External World Skepticism, an

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⁷ I do not have the space here to ask about all ancient skeptics, so I shall limit my scope to Sextus Empiricus, who is the main exponent of Pyrrhonian skepticism, which is one of the two main schools of ancient skepticism. In asking about Sextus’s skepticism, I am asking how he characterizes Pyrrhonism. I take no stand on what his epistemic stance to it is. In particular, I don’t assume that he claims to know, or even believe, that skepticism of any particular variety is true: perhaps he suspends judgment on the matter.

⁸ See n. 4. Cf. Hankinson, The Sceptics, e.g. 301–3. I discuss Hankinson’s views on this issue in ‘Scepticism, Existence, and Belief.’
issue I take up shortly. But even if someone who holds an extreme version of Property Skepticism is committed to a stronger sort of skepticism, it doesn’t follow that she sees that she is so committed. And my question here is not whether Sextus is committed to more than Property Skepticism; my question is whether he in some sense explicitly endorses, or adverts to, a more extensive sort of skepticism.

Let me now say something about External World Skepticism. More than one position has been housed under this rubric. The version I shall focus on asks whether there is anything external to one’s mind, or to one’s present states of being appeared to. That, however, is only part of the relevant ‘problematic,’ as we might call it. In addition, the mind must be viewed in the right way, as the locus of subjective states; alternatively, states of being appeared to must be conceived as subjective states. External World Skepticism also involves a ‘radically first-person stance.’ The idea is that one has some sort of privileged access to one’s mental or subjective states. External World Skepticism, therefore, involves a More than one position has been housed under this rubric.¹⁰ The version I shall focus on asks whether there is anything external to one’s mind, or to one’s present states of being appeared to.¹¹ That, however, is only part of the relevant ‘problematic,’ as we might call it.¹² In addition, the mind must be viewed in the right way, as the locus of subjective states; alternatively, states of being appeared to must be conceived as subjective states. External World Skepticism also involves a ‘radically first-person stance.’¹³ The idea is that one has some sort of privileged access to one’s mental or subjective states. External World Skepticism, therefore, involves a

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¹ Hankinson seems to think that Property or Object Skepticism could lead to External World Skepticism only by means of a fallacious any/all slide; see The Sceptics, 302. I’m not convinced this is so; be that as it may, I largely focus here on other possible routes to External World Skepticism.

¹⁰ In his entry under ‘the problem of the external world’ in J. Dancy and E. Sosa (eds.), A Companion to Epistemology (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), for example, G. Pappas asks: ‘What, then, is the problem of the external world . . . ? Certainly it is not whether there is an external world; this much is taken for granted’ (381). He goes on to describe two different problems of the external world: (PEW1) Can one have knowledge of propositions about objects and events in the external world based upon propositions which describe how the external world appears, i.e. upon appearances? (381–2); and (PEW2) Can one have knowledge of propositions about objects and events in the external world based upon propositions about directly perceived sensa? (383). If we answer Pappas’s two questions ‘no,’ we get two versions of skepticism, each of which is less extensive than is the sort of External World Skepticism that I shall focus on. Modern brain-in-vat scenarios are also less extensive than is the sort of External World Skepticism I shall focus on. For according to these scenarios, for all I know I am a brain in a vat manipulated by, say, a mad scientist. Were this alleged possibility realized, I would be, or have, a brain (in which case something physical would exist); and there would be vats and scientists (and so something physical and external to me would exist). It’s important to bear in mind that there are different formulations, or kinds, of External World Skepticism: for even if Sextus isn’t an External World Skeptic of one stripe, he might be an External World Skeptic of a different stripe.

¹¹ I take it that ‘external’ here means ‘independent.’ It can’t mean ‘spatially external’ since the mind is not being conceived as a material object; which is not to say that dualism is being assumed. It is worth bearing in mind that not all modern accounts of subjectivity and skepticism assume dualism. For a lucid explanation of this, see McDowell, Singular Thought, esp. sects. 6–8. In addition to, or rather than, asking whether there is anything other than one’s mind or one’s present states of being appeared to, one might ask whether there is anything other than one’s body; here ‘external’ presumably does mean ‘spatially external’ (or at least includes that notion). Even if ancient skeptics don’t ask whether there is anything other than one’s mind or present states of being appeared to, they might ask whether there is anything other than one’s body. (Cf. Everson, ‘The Objective Appearance of Pyrrhonism,’ 146.) That wouldn’t be External World Skepticism of the sort I shall focus on here, though it would nonetheless be reasonable to count it as a sort of External World Skepticism; be that as it may, it certainly goes beyond Property Skepticism.

Though External World Skepticism is often formulated in the way suggested in the text, in practice it often focuses on whether we can know, or justifiably believe, that there are external physical or material things. If, for example, Platonic forms exist, they are external to—independent of—my mind. But External World Skepticism doesn’t typically ask whether there are such things. On the other hand, when Descartes, in Meditation III, argues that God exists, he is arguing against something properly called External World Skepticism, even though he still suspends judgment about whether there is a corporeal world. Thanks to Calvin Normore for getting me to think about this issue.

¹² Thanks to Michael Martin for this way of putting the point.

¹³ The idea is that one has some sort of privileged access to one’s mental or subjective states. External World Skepticism, therefore, involves a
subjective states, but thinks there is ‘an epistemological barrier between soul and body,’ or between how one is appeared to and everything else, such that one suspends judgment as to whether there are any justified inferences from claims about the former to claims about the latter.¹⁴ External World Skepticism suspends judgment not only about whether any inferences from claims about one’s mind (or about one’s states of being appeared to) to claims about an external world are justified, but also about the existence of other routes to knowledge or justified belief about an external world. It does not, for example, mean to allow that we have knowledge of, or justified belief about, external things by direct inspection of them or through revelation. The idea is that we could know, or justifiably believe, that there is an external world only by way of an inference from claims about our own minds or states of being appeared to; since we must suspend judgment about whether any such inferences are justified, we must also suspend judgment about whether there is an external world. External World Skepticism therefore involves some sort of epistemological asymmetry; it privileges claims about the first person over other claims. I ask later precisely what sort of privileged access and epistemological asymmetry are required for External World Skepticism. But for now, this preliminary account will do.

3.

I shall now consider five objections to the view that Sextus countenances External World Skepticism.¹⁵ In subsequent sections I ask whether these objections can be overcome.

Objection 1: Sextus’s phainetai-statements are of the form ‘x appears F’ rather than of the form ‘it appears that x is F.’ And, according to Stephen Everson:¹⁶ there is an important difference between ‘x appears F’ and ‘it appears that x is F.’ Whilst the former presupposes the existence of x, the second does not. Framing their argument in this way [as ‘x appears F’], the sceptics challenge merely the attribution of properties to objects and do not question their existence.

¹⁴ The quotation is from Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 30 n. 39; emphasis in the original. Some External World Skeptics, rather than suspending judgment about whether there is an external world, claim flat out that one can’t know whether, or justifiably believe that, there is an external world. For Sextus, this is a form of dogmatism rather than genuine skepticism: see e.g. PH I 1–4. Hence if he is in some sense an External World Skeptic, he is not the sort who claims that knowledge or justified belief about the existence of an external world is impossible; he would suspend judgment.

¹⁵ These objections are far from exhaustive. But they are among the most common and important objections, and they fit together in ways that make it appropriate to focus on them in a single chapter.

¹⁶ Everson, ‘The Objective Appearance of Pyrrhonism,’ 136. Cf. Hankinson: ‘Sextus is, indeed, quite happy with locutions of the form x appears to be F, which apparently at least entail x’s existence’ (The Sceptics, 25; emphasis added). See also Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 29 (quoted in section 1).
That is, the (alleged) fact that Sextus uses the locution ‘x appears F,’ rather than ‘it appears that x is F,’ shows that he assumes that there are external objects.

**Objection 2:** Sextus doesn’t conceive of appearances in the right way to be an External World Skeptic. In her seminal paper ‘The Ten Tropes of Aenesidemus,’ for example, Gisela Striker writes:

I suspect that it is only when we begin to think of appearances as entities intervening between the observer and the object of his observation that we are tempted to ask how we can say that there is one object, or any object at all. But while the skeptics obviously distinguished between the way a thing appears and the way it really is, I see no reason to attribute to them the view that this distinction must be made in terms of special entities—images or otherwise—mediating between observers and observed objects.

**Objection 3:** External World Skepticism asks whether there is anything external to the mind. But Sextus doesn’t use ‘external’ to mean ‘external to the mind.’ Rather, according to Burnyeat, he uses it to mean:

external to oneself, the cognitive subject, i.e. a man (cf. adv. Math. VII 167)—and the question is, ‘What does that come to?’ Sextus can contrast the external thing with the bodily humors which affect one’s perception of it (PH I 102) or with the medium through which it is perceived (ib. 124–27), so it seems plain that the line is not drawn in Cartesian fashion between the mind and everything else outside it, including the skeptic’s own body. By the same token, ‘external’ in Sextus’ use of it imports no Cartesian (Augustinian) break between things outside and an inner (subjective) world of things apparent.

**Objection 4:** According to Burnyeat, Sextus is not ‘afflicted with radical Cartesian doubt as to whether he has a body.’ But doubting, or suspending...
judgment about, whether one has a body is necessary for being an External World Skeptic.

Objection 5: Sextus doesn’t view the mind, or states of being appeared to, in the way necessary for being an External World Skeptic. He lacks a concept of subjectivity or, at least, a sufficiently robust one. And insofar as he thinks there are subjective states, he doesn’t accord us the right sort of privileged access to them, or favor the right sort of epistemological asymmetry.²°

It’s not always clear whether those who favor these objections intend to argue that (a) Sextus lacks the conceptual resources for entertaining External World Skepticism; or (b) though he has the conceptual resources for entertaining External World Skepticism, he for other reasons nonetheless doesn’t do so; or (c) he doesn’t use various words or phrases (such as ‘what is apparent’ or ‘external’) in the ways in which they are typically used in modern formulations of External World Skepticism. Accordingly, the plausibility of each objection needs to be assessed along more than one dimension: a given objection might succeed along one dimension but not along another. For example, an objection that succeeds in showing that Sextus doesn’t use ‘external’ as contemporary formulations of External World Skepticism do doesn’t show thereby that he doesn’t consider External World Skepticism; for he might simply describe it in unfamiliar terms. If, however, a given objection succeeds in showing that Sextus lacks the conceptual resources for considering External World Skepticism, then a fortiori he doesn’t consider it. Conversely, if he in fact considers it, then of course he has the conceptual resources for doing so.

4.

Having described five objections to finding External World Skepticism in Sextus, I shall now ask how many of them can be overcome. I begin with Objection 1, because he is so serious, in a practical sense, about his skepticism (‘Idealism,’ 31). That is, the practical nature of ancient skepticism prevents Sextus from seeing that there is a question about the status of his body; the issue just didn’t occur to him. See n. 5.

²° In ‘The Objective Appearance of Pyrrhonism,’ Everson argues that none of the ancients has a concept of subjectivity; so, in his view, neither do any of them take anything to be subjective. Burnyeat seems to think that Sextus countenances subjective states. But he argues, for reasons I explore in section 9, that Sextus doesn’t accord us the right sort of access to such states, and doesn’t favor the right sort of epistemological asymmetry, to count as an External World Skeptic. There are, of course, different conceptions of subjectivity. Just as Sextus might be an External World Skeptic of one stripe if not of another, so he might acknowledge subjective states on one conception of them but not on another. I discuss this in Chapter 12, and in G. Fine, ‘The Subjective Appearance of Cyrenaic Pathē,’ in V. Karasmanis (ed.), Socrates: 2400 Years Since His Death (Athens: European Cultural Centre of Delphi, 2004), 383–394. In both papers, I argue that the Cyrenaics think there are subjective states, as I understand subjectivity; in Chapter 12, I argue that Sextus thinks this as well.
according to which Sextus’s *phainetai*-statements are of the form ‘x appears F’ which, in turn, implies that x is being assumed to exist.

First, it is worth noting that not all of Sextus’s *phainetai*-statements are clearly of the form ‘x appears F’; at least some of them can be taken to be of the form ‘it appears that x is F.’ Consider, for example, the following two translations of *PH I 20:*²¹

*Translation 1:* For instance, *honey appears to us to be sweet.* We allow this, since we are perceptually sweetened. But we doubt if it is sweet as regards its definition; this is not the appearance, but something said about the appearance.

*Translation 2:* For example, *it appears to us that honey sweetens* (we concede this inasmuch as we are sweetened in a perceptual way); but whether (as far as the argument goes) it is actually sweet is something we investigate—and this is not what is apparent but something said about what is apparent.

This important passage raises many issues. The crucial point here is just that Translation 1 takes the first sentence to be of the form ‘x appears F,’ whereas Translation 2 takes it to be of the form ‘it appears that x is F.’ Both translations are justifiable.²² However, it is true that, in many of the relevant passages, *phainetai*-statements are most naturally taken to be of the form ‘x appears F.’ But that, by itself, does not show that Sextus presupposes x’s existence. Macbeth asks: ‘Is this a dagger which I see before me, the handle toward my hand . . . ? or art thou but a dagger of the mind, a false creation proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain? I see thee yet, in form as palpable as this which now I draw.’²³ He is not assuming that there is a real dagger there; nor, of course, is there a real dagger there. The ‘dagger’ he mentions is what we might call an ‘ostensible object,’ in something like the sense defined by H. H. Price:²⁴

²¹ The first translation is Hankinson’s (*The Sceptics*, 25; in n. 23 he notes that his translation is controversial); the second is Annas and Barnes’s. Emphases added to both translations.

²² This is because ‘honey’ (*to meli*) is neuter, and so it has the same form in both the nominative and accusative. This makes it unclear whether it falls within, or outside, the scope of *phainetai*. I am not suggesting that either translation is completely satisfactory in every respect. The crucial issue here is just the translation of *phainetai*-statements.

²³ Act II, Scene I, 33–41. Accompanying *Le rêve,* a painting by Puvis de Chavannes in the Musée d’Orsay, are the following words: ‘Il voit dans son sommeil l’Amour; la Gloire et la Richesse lui apparaître.’ These too are presumably ostensible objects only.

²⁴ H. H. Price, *Perception* (London: Methuen and Co., 1932), 148. In a note, he adds: ‘I here mean by ‘object’ only ‘object-of,’ i.e. that which is before the mind in a particular sort of consciousness. There is no reason why this should not be unreal—unless ‘consciousness’ be equated with ‘knowing,’ which
The object of any one act of perceptual consciousness is as such ostensible only, and has, as it were, a prima facie character. It ‘claims’ to be real and to have certain characteristics, and it may in the end turn out to have them; but equally it may not.

Moreover, it is far more natural to say ‘I see a dagger’ than it is to say, for example, ‘I am appeared to as though confronted by a dagger’ or ‘It appears to me that I am confronted by a dagger.’²⁵ And Sextus tells us that he does not like to fuss about words.²⁶

Contrary to Objection 1, then, it is not clear that Sextus’s phainetai-statements should always be taken to be of the form ‘x appears F’ rather than of the form ‘it appears that x is F.’ But even if they should always be so taken, that by itself does not commit him to the existence of external objects, for x might be an ostensible object.

Of course, even if Sextus’s use of the locution ‘x appears F’ does not, on its own, show that he assumes that x exists, his use of that locution in a given context might show that he does so. And it has been argued that the Ten Modes of Aenesidemus are such a context.²⁷ In a fuller chapter, I would argue that the Ten Modes do not in the end assume that there are external objects; thinking they do so ignores their concessive strategy. The Ten Modes are, in any case, just one weapon in the Pyrrhonist’s arsenal; even if they assume that there are external objects, it doesn’t follow that Sextus always does so. There is also the question of whether the Ten Modes are purely ad hominem. If they are, then even if they assume that there are external objects, it wouldn’t follow that Pyrrhonists ever assume that there are external objects.

seems an unfortunate use of language. So also we speak of the object of hope or of desire; plainly, only that which is not real can be desired or hoped for’ (148 n. 1). One might also mention here the notion of an intentional object. See, for example, G. Harman, ‘The Intrinsic Quality of Experience,’ reprinted in his Reasoning, Meaning, and Mind (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 244–61. (Originally published in Philosophical Perspectives 4 (1990), 31–52.) Ostensible objects are a sub-class of intentional objects: the ones that, as Price puts it, ‘claim’ to be real.

²⁵ Cf. R. Chisholm, Theory of Knowledge (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), who says: ‘Let us consider another way of describing these self-presenting states. In our examples, “appears” requires a grammatical subject and thus requires a term that purports to refer not merely to a way of appearing, but also to a thing that is said to appear in that way. However, we may eliminate the reference to the thing that appears if we convert our appear-sentences. Instead of saying “Something appears white to me,” we may say, more awkwardly, “I am appeared white to by something.” We may then eliminate the substantival “something” by merely dropping the final clause, saying, “I am appeared white to.”’ (34).

²⁶ ‘We say too that we do not use phrases strictly, making clear the objects to which they are applied, but indifferently and, if you like, in a loose sense—for it is unbecoming for a sceptic to fight over phrases’ (PH I 207; cf. I 191). Cf. Plato, Theaetetus 184c.

I now turn to Objection 2, which says that External World Skepticism would not be tempting unless one viewed appearances as intermediate entities. I turn in a moment to the question whether this assumption is correct. But first it will be helpful to ask whether Sextus ever countenances intermediate entities. He may seem to do so in *PH II* 72–5.\(^{28}\)

Even if we grant that appearances (phantasiai) are apprehended, [external] objects cannot be judged in virtue of them. For the intellect, as they say, sets itself upon external objects and receives appearances of them, not through itself, but through the senses, and the senses do not apprehend external objects but only—if anything—their own affections (pathē). An appearance, then, will actually be of the affection of a sense—and that is different from an external existing object. For honey is not the same as my being sweetened, nor is wormwood the same as my being bittered; they are different.

And since this affection is different from the external existing object, an appearance will not be of the external existing object, but of something else different from it. So if the intellect judges in virtue of appearances, it judges badly and not in accordance with the existing object. Hence it is absurd to say that external objects are judged in virtue of appearances.

Nor can we say that the soul apprehends external existing objects through its sensory affections (pathē) inasmuch as the affections of the sense are similar to the external existing objects. For how will the intellect know whether the affections of the senses are like the sense-objects, given that the senses make clear to it not the nature of these [external] objects, but their own affections, as we deduced in the modes of suspension? Just as someone who does not know Socrates but has looked at a picture of him does not know whether the picture is

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\(^{28}\) In this passage, Sextus uses ‘appearances’ (phantasiai) and ‘affections’ (pathē), but not ‘what is apparent’ (phainomena). See n. 17. Phantasiai are a subclass of pathē. I take it that they are the only sort of pathē that are relevant here. Though appearances can, and in Sextus often do, range outside the perceptual sphere, in the present passage he is discussing only sensory appearances. I use ‘being sweetened’ and ‘being bittered’ to translate glukazesthai and pikrazesthai respectively. As Sextus’s next sentence makes clear, these terms refer to affections, in particular, to states of being appeared to: being affected sweetly (bitterly) is seeming to taste something sweet (bitter). The terminology is Cyrenaic. My understanding of it, though not unusual, is controversial. (See, for example, n. 63 below, where I mention Frede’s alternative understanding.)

Cf. *M VII* 352–3: ‘Furthermore, since, according to most philosophers, there is in us not only a thinking but also a perceiving part, the latter, being set in front of the thinking part, will necessarily prevent thought from grasping external objects. For just as the body which lies between sight and the object of sight prevents sight from grasping the object of sight, so if the nonrational sense of sight intervenes between thought and the external object of sight, sight will prevent thought from grasping the external object of thought… Thought, then, being locked away inside, and being kept in the dark by the senses, will not be able to grasp any of the external objects.’ The whole of *M VII* 352–8 is worth looking at in this connection.
like Socrates, so the intellect, studying the affections of the senses but not observing the external objects, will not know whether the affections of the senses are like the external existing objects.

Sextus’s comparison of appearances, or sensory affections, with pictures suggests that he is treating them as intermediate entities. The idea is that we have access to pictures of things, but not to the things themselves. Pictures are entities that interpose themselves between us and the external world. So, contrary to Objection 2, a case can be made for the claim that Sextus sometimes describes appearances as intermediate entities. But I don’t want to press this suggestion. For one thing, in addition to comparing appearances to pictures, Sextus also speaks of being sweetened (bittered). This seems to treat appearances as states of being appeared to: to be sweetened (bittered) is to be appeared to as though tasting something sweet (bitter).

Even if Sextus means to describe appearances as states of being appeared to, rather than as entities (in a narrow sense), he clearly describes them as ‘things’ (in a broad sense) that block our access to external objects. For he says that the senses do not apprehend external objects, but only (‘if anything,’ he carefully says in 72, but the qualification is omitted in 74) their own affections. He also says that any access the intellect has to external objects will be not direct, but through the senses. But, he argues, no inferences from one’s sensory affections to external objects are justified. So sensory affections, whether they are states or entities, are viewed as blocking, rather than as enabling, cognitive access to external objects.

One might argue that in order to find External World Skepticism tempting, one must view appearances as entities; viewing them as states won’t do. In my view, however, it is not necessary for being an External World Skeptic that one view appearances as intermediate entities rather than as states: I reject the assumption on which Objection 2 rests. Adverbial theorists, for example, do not posit intervening entities; they posit states of being appeared to. But an adverbial theorist

29 The similarity with Berkeley is striking. Just as Sextus suggests that we have direct access only (or at most) to our sensory affections, so Berkeley says that we immediately perceive only our own ideas. Like Sextus, Berkeley then argues that we do not know that there are external material objects through perception, since each of us perceives only our own ideas. He also argues that neither do we know that there are external material objects through reason. In the course of arguing this, he considers but rejects the suggestion that we can infer that there are external objects from the (alleged) similarity they have to our ideas. See Principles of Human Knowledge, Principles 18 and 19; cf. Prin. 8. There are also, however, significant differences between Sextus’s argument and Berkeley’s. For example, unlike Sextus, Berkeley argues in his own right that ideas can’t resemble external objects, and that material things can’t exist. M VII 352–3, cited in the previous note, also seems to conceive of appearances as intermediate entities: for they are compared to bodies that interpose themselves between sight and external objects, thereby preventing us from perceiving the latter.

30 For a classic statement of an adverbial theory, see R. Chisholm, Perceiving: A Philosophical Study (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957). It’s true that twentieth-century adverbialists have not typically been External World Skeptics; indeed, the position is often advocated in reaction against sense-data theories that seemed to give rise to External World Skepticism. But my point is just that an adverbialist is not prevented from being an External World Skeptic; one could consistently hold both views.
can be just as robust an External World Skeptic as someone who views appearances as intervening entities. All she needs to do is argue that one is aware only of how one is appeared to, and that there are no justified inferences from claims about how one is appeared to, to claims about anything else. What’s crucial is not the ontological status of appearances—whether they are entities or states—but whether one has direct access only to them, so that all other claims can be justified only by inference from claims about them. So even if Sextus does not view appearances as intervening entities (as opposed to states) that block our access to external things, he might nonetheless find External World Skepticism tempting.³¹

One might put my argument in the form of a dilemma: if one thinks that, in order to be an External World Skeptic, one needs to view appearances as intervening entities as opposed to states, one is wrong; hence even if Sextus never so describes appearances, that would not show that he is not in a position to consider External World Skepticism. If, on the other hand, one thinks states will do, one is right—but Sextus so describes appearances, and so he is in a position to find External World Skepticism tempting.

To be sure, PH II 72–5 is at least partly ad hominem; hence it is not clearly evidence of what views Sextus himself in some sense endorses or finds tempting. But it shows that he has the conceptual resources for considering External World Skepticism, insofar as he is aware of a view on which appearances function as intermediate ‘things’ (whether entities or states) that block our access to external objects.³²

So far I’ve argued that Sextus sometimes describes appearances (phantasiai) as intermediate ‘things’ (whether entities or states) that block our access to external objects. It’s worth noting that he is also aware of a view on which phainomena are not external objects, but affections. In M VII 193–4, in the course of discussing the Cyrenaics, he writes:

Hence we must posit as what is apparent either affections (pathē) or what produces affections. And if we say that affections are what is apparent, then we must say that everything that is apparent is true and apprehensible; whereas if we

³¹ Not only is countenancing intermediate entities not necessary for being an External World Skeptic, but neither is it sufficient. For one might countenance such entities, but think one has a knock-down argument for the claim that there are external objects, or think it is obvious that there are such objects. For the view that positing intermediate entities (as opposed to states) is neither necessary nor sufficient for being an External World Skeptic, see J. Greco, ‘Modern Ontology and the Problems of Epistemology,’ American Philosophical Quarterly 32 (1995), 241–51; and his Putting the Sceptics in their Place (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

³² Sextus’s target in PH II 72–5 is, or at least includes, the Stoics. They seem to view phantasiai as states that enable (rather than preclude) perception of external objects; they favor a form of direct realism. Sextus argues that they are committed to treating phantasiai as intermediate ‘things’ that preclude apprehension of external objects.
call what produces affections what is apparent, everything that is apparent is false
and inapprehensible. For the affection which occurs in us reveals nothing more
than itself.

Here Sextus contrasts two ways of conceiving of *ta phainomena*: as *pathê* (which
in this context I take to be subjective states of being appeared to), and as what
produces them (presumably external objects—or, perhaps better in this context,
ostensible external objects). According to the Cyrenaics, *pathê* are the only
*phainomena*; in their view, external objects are not *phainomena*. Now, if x is a
*phainomenon*, it is clear, and something we are aware of non-inferentially. So in
arguing that *pathê* are the only *phainomena*, the Cyrenaics imply that we do not
have direct access to external objects. This fits with the view expressed in *PH II
72–5*, according to which the most we can apprehend directly are *phantasiai* or
*pathê*: that is, at most they are *phainomena*. On both views, we lack direct access to
external things. One might argue that we perceive them indirectly. But the
Cyrenaics argue, more strongly, that *pathê* reveal only themselves. Similarly,
we’ve seen that in *PH II 74*, Sextus says that the senses make clear to the intellect
*only* their own *pathê* (though cf. *PH II 72*: ‘if anything’). In both places, *phantasiai* or
*pathê* block our access to external things; they don’t enable us to perceive them.

I now turn to Objection 3, according to which Sextus doesn’t use ‘external’ to
mean ‘external to the mind,’ and so doesn’t view his body as external. An
interesting passage in *Against the Ethicists* (= *M XI*) 79–89 (cf. *PH III 183–90*)
dermines this objection. Sextus is in the course of arguing (*ad hominem*) that
nothing is good or bad by nature. He argues that if anything is worth choosing for
its own sake (as the good is alleged to be), it is either the act of choice itself or the
object of that act. In 81–2 he argues against the first alternative. He then divides
the second alternative into two: any object of choice that is worth choosing for
its own sake (as the good is alleged to be), it is either the act of choice itself or the
object of that act. In 81–2 he argues against the first alternative. He then divides
the second alternative into two: any object of choice that is worth choosing for
its own sake must be either ‘separate from us’—that is, external (*ektos*) to us—or
something ‘relating to us’ (*peri hȇmas* 83). He then argues that if a separate object
of choice is intrinsically choiceworthy, it either has an effect on us (*sumbainei ti
peri hȇmas*) or it does not. If it does not, it is not intrinsically choiceworthy after
all; if it does, it is the effect, not the object, that is intrinsically choiceworthy. He

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33 I defend this interpretation, and discuss the Cyrenaics in more detail, in Chapter 12, and in ‘The
Subjective Appearance of Cyrenaic Pathê.’

34 Thanks to Charles Brittain for calling my attention to this passage. It is well discussed by R. Bett,
pp. 260–1). Both my translation and discussion are indebted to his.

35 I assume that *kai* in 83 is epexegetic.
describes the relevant effect as ‘a civilized motion (asteion kinēma)’36 ‘a welcome condition (apodekton katastēma)’ and ‘an agreeable affection (agaston pathos). He seems to be describing subjective states under, as we might put it, a subjective mode of presentation: being civilized, welcome, and agreeable are subjective or psychological properties; they are not wholly and only physical or objective properties.37

By 87, Sextus has argued that nothing external to us is chosen for its own sake. He then argues that neither is anything relating to us intrinsically choiceworthy:

Nor, however, is that which is to be chosen and good among the things relating to us. For this belongs either just to the body, or to the soul. But it could not belong just to the body. For if it belongs just to the body, and is no longer also an affection (pathos) of the soul, it will escape our awareness (gnōsis) (for all awareness is on the part of the soul), and it will be equivalent (ison) to things which exist externally and have no affinity with us. (87)

First Sextus says more about what it is for something to ‘relate to us’: either such things belong just to the body (that is, they are not identical to and do not constitute any psychological state); or else they are psychological states (even if such states are identical to or are constituted by physical ones). Here, then, he views the body as something relating to me, in which case it is not external. However, he goes on to qualify the remark: he says that if the thing (allegedly) relating to me is just bodily, and not at all psychological, then it is equivalent (ison 87) to things separate from us and so has no affinity with us. That is to say, every purely bodily state of myself is, for present purposes, external to me.

Sextus also explains why purely bodily states of myself are equivalent to something external to me: because ‘it will escape our awareness (gnōsis) since all awareness is on the part of the soul’ (87). This seems to say that since states of awareness are psychological, one can only be aware of—and so can know only38—what is psychological. That is a peculiar argument. But whether or not that is his argument, he seems to conclude that all one can be aware of are one’s own mental

36 I follow Bekker (who, in turn, is followed by Mutschmann and Bury) in adding asteion before kinēma; cf. PH III 184. Contrast Bett. I agree with Bett that the mere fact that PH III 184 has asteion doesn’t by itself mean that asteion should be included here. However, since katastēma and pathos are both qualified by adjectives, it seems reasonable to think that so too is kinēma. Be that as it may, nothing I say depends on including asteion.

37 Which is not to say that the states at issue are not also physical: one and the same state can be both subjective and physical. I discuss this further in Chapter 12, and in 'The Subjective Appearance of Cyrenaic Pathē.'

38 David Sedley (in conversation) objects that the mere fact that we lack gnōsis of something doesn’t mean that we don’t know it: to lack gnōsis of x is to lack direct acquaintance with it; but we might know x in some other way. However, Sextus—here as elsewhere—seems to assume (if only ad hominem) that we must suspend judgment about any inferences from what is directly accessible to anything else. Hence if we don’t have gnōsis of x, we suspend judgment about x altogether.
states, under a subjective mode of presentation; one is aware of them only insofar as they are mental states.³⁹

In 88, Sextus says that:

if the pleasing effect which it has extends as far as the soul, it will be something to be chosen and good as far as that is concerned, but not insofar as it is a movement merely of the body. For everything which is to be chosen is judged to be so by way of sensation or thought, not by way of an unreasoning body. But the sense or intelligence which grasps that which is to be chosen belongs by its very definition to the soul; so none of the things which happen to the body is to be chosen for its own sake and good, but, if any, those which happen to the soul.

Sextus seems to assume here that the relevant affections are not only psychological but are also bodily. Nonetheless, the bodily component or aspect is viewed as external. He seems to be distinguishing between his affections conceived as psychological states and conceived as physical states; and he argues that it is at most the former that are choiceworthy. This suggests that, at least at this stage, he leaves certain forms of materialism open;⁴⁰ but he insists that the material constitution of one’s mental states, if there is one, is irrelevant to their being choiceworthy. For he is at the moment interested only in subjective states under their subjective mode of presentation. Something is intrinsically worth choosing, at this stage of the argument, only insofar as it is a psychological state of oneself, so described. Even if my subjective states are identical to or are constituted by material states, the latter are (or should for present purposes be viewed as being) external to me.⁴¹

In M XI, then, Sextus explicitly uses ‘external’ for being external to the mind; and he explicitly counts his body as external. We should therefore be open to the idea that that is also how he understands externality elsewhere. To be sure, Sextus doesn’t (so far as I know) elsewhere explicitly say that one’s body is external. This can, however, easily be explained. For in M XI, Sextus is working with a familiar

³⁹ Similarly, we saw that in PH II 72, Sextus says that if the senses apprehend anything, they apprehend only their own pathē. These claims are reminiscent of the Cyrenaics, who argue that each of us has katalēpsis only of our own affections (which, in my view, are, and are viewed by the Cyrenaics as being, subjective states); see e.g. PH I 215; M VII 190–200. I discuss the former passage briefly below; I discussed part of the latter passage briefly at the end of the previous section.

⁴⁰ What Sextus says is, for example, compatible with non-reductive materialism, but not with eliminative materialism.

⁴¹ This is very like Descartes’s position in Meditation II. Descartes says he is certain of his psychological states so described; for example, he is certain that it seems to him that he sees light. But (in Meditation II) he suspends judgment as to whether these states are physical. He says, for example: ‘And yet may it not perhaps be the case that these very [bodily] things which I am supposing to be nothing, because they are unknown to me, are in reality identical with the “I” of which I am aware? I do not know’ (AT VII 27/CSM II 18). Hence at this stage Descartes takes himself to be certain of a state under a subjective mode of presentation, whilst suspending judgment as to whether that state is physical.
tripartite division of goods into external goods, bodily goods, and goods of the soul. In this context, one’s body would not normally be classified as external; hence Sextus needs to make his understanding of externality clear. But that special ethical understanding of externality isn’t relevant in epistemological contexts; so perhaps in such contexts, Sextus doesn’t feel the need to spell out his understanding of externality. Nonetheless, a given context might make it clear that he takes his body to be external, even if he doesn’t make the point as explicitly as he does in M XI. Let us, accordingly, look at some further passages.

In PH I 15 (an important passage that I explore further below), Sextus says:

the main point is this: in uttering these [skeptical] phrases, they [the skeptics] say what is apparent to themselves and report their own affections without holding opinions, affirming nothing about external objects.

τὸ δὲ μέγιστον, ἐν τῇ προφορᾷ τῶν φαινόν τούτων τὸ ἑαυτῷ φαινόμενον λέγει καὶ τὸ πάθος ἀπαγγέλλει τὸ ἑαυτῷ ἀδοξάστως, μηδὲν περὶ τῶν ἐξωθεν ὑποκειμένων διαβεβαιούμενος.

To say what is apparent to oneself is to report one’s affections, in particular, how one is appeared to. How one is affected—that is, how one is appeared to—is contrasted with ‘external objects.’ The contrast is surely meant to be not only exclusive but also exhaustive. Presumably here, then, ‘external’ means ‘external to how one is appeared to.’ Now, being external to a given state of being appeared to is different from being external to the mind: the class of things that is external to a given state of being appeared to is if anything larger than is the class of things that is external to the mind. In particular, as we shall see in section 7, one can suspend judgment about whether there are minds or souls without suspending judgment about whether there are states of being appeared to. Be that as it may, since Sextus says that everything other than how one is appeared to is external, he is committed to viewing his body as external.

Thanks to David Sedley here.

As my account in the text makes clear, I take kai to be epexegetic: to report what is apparent to oneself just is to report one’s affections. One’s affections, that is, are precisely what is apparent to one. Cf. I 203. I take it that the relevant affections here are states of being appeared to. Hence, what’s clear to one is how one is appeared to. In section 8, I present further reasons for thinking that this is Sextus’s view. PH I 15 uses exōthen; M XI uses ektos. I assume that this is mere stylistic variance. I 15 is the first place in PH in which Sextus explicitly mentions what’s external. With I 15, cf. I 208: ‘Besides, you must remember that we do not use these [skeptical] phrases about all objects universally, but about what is unclear and investigated in dogmatic fashion, and that we say what is apparent to us and do not make firm assertions about the nature of externally existing things.’

I assume that states of being appeared to are not being conceived as physical: which, again, is not to say that dualism or any form of immaterialism is being assumed. See the first paragraph of n. 10. In Skepticism (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), A. Naess suggests that Sextus standardly understands externality as being external to a given present state of being appeared to (17). In The Skeptic Way (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), B. Mates says that Sextus ‘plainly’ uses ‘external’ for what is ‘external to our minds or souls, and not necessarily external to our bodies’ (18).
One might argue that he doesn’t see what he is committed to: perhaps he didn’t have the conceptual resources for treating his body as external; or perhaps the idea of treating it as external was for some other reason just not a salient option for him. We’ve seen, however, that Sextus not only has the conceptual resources for viewing his body as external, but also explicitly describes his body as external. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that he sees what I commits him to. In sections 7 and 8, we will find further evidence for this view.

Sextus tells us that I makes his main point. He is telling us, at the beginning of his inquiry, how he is to be understood. If externality here means being external to a given present state of being appeared to, there is a presumption that that is his official understanding of externality. If other passages understand externality differently, we should infer that Sextus is being loose or colloquial, or explaining someone else’s view. In fact, though Sextus doesn’t always adhere to his official usage, he often does so. Consider, for example, the conclusion of the Third Mode of Aenesidemus:

if the senses do not apprehend external objects, the intellect is not able to apprehend them either (since its guides fail it), so by means of this argument too we shall be thought to conclude to suspension of judgment about external existing objects (peri tôn eksos hupokeimenon). (PH I 99)

If the senses don’t apprehend external objects, what do they apprehend? Sextus addresses this question in PH II 74, which we looked at earlier. He says there that he

He adds, however, that Sextus is skeptical about the coherence of the concepts of soul and body, and suggests we should perhaps speak instead of a distinction between reporting ‘that something appears to one to be the case’ and flat-out asserting that it is the case’ (21).

In this connection, it is worth noting that post-Cartesian philosophers do not always clearly use ‘external’ for being external to the mind rather than for being external to the body. Berkeley, for example, sometimes seems to conceive of externality (he uses ‘without’) in terms of physical distance. See, for example, Prin. 42–4, and near the end of the First Dialogue (164–6 in D. Armstrong, Berkeley’s Philosophical Writings (London: Collier Macmillan, 1965)). There are also passages where he speaks of perception as being done, not just by the senses, but by specific bodily sense organs such as the eyes (and so by bodily parts); see e.g. First Dialogue, 165; Prin. 29 and 35. (Of course, he might say in reply that sense organs are nothing but ideas. The point is just that he isn’t always careful to speak in that way.) Thanks to Nick Sturgeon for the point and the references. Hume also uses ‘external’ not only for being external to one’s mind, but also for being external to one’s body. See A Treatise of Human Nature Liv.2, entitled ‘Of Scepticism with regard to the senses.’ For example, on pp. 190–1 (Selby-Bigge), in asking whether the senses account for the belief that objects are external, he seems to use ‘external’ for being external to one’s body. But the existence of one’s body is itself in question. So he should be using ‘external’ for being external to the mind, where ‘external’ means ‘independent.’ Yet Hume speaks as though externality and independence are distinct. Here I am indebted to Sydney Shoemaker. Just as Berkeley and Hume, if read out of context, might not be thought to have the relevant notion of externality, so too with Sextus. But attention to their official usages makes it clear what notion they have in mind. We shouldn’t focus on their casual uses of ‘external’ in order to determine their official understanding of it.

See, for example, PH I 102 (where bodily humors seem to be treated as internal) and 126 (where the membranes and liquids in our eyes are treated as internal). Cf. Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 29 (cited above in connection with Objection 3). Interestingly, in I 125 the color of our skin is treated as external.
deduced in the Modes (that is, in the Ten Modes of Aenesidemus) that ‘the senses make clear to [the intellect] not the nature of [external] objects but their own affections.’ Here ‘external’ again means ‘external to a given present affection (i.e. appearance).’ We apprehend (if anything) only how we are appeared to at a time. We do not apprehend anything external to such affections; and so we suspend judgment about everything external to such affections. II 74 says that this is the general moral of the Ten Modes; again, then, it is not an isolated use of ‘external.’

I conclude that Sextus has the conceptual resources for using ‘external’ to mean both ‘external to the mind’ and ‘external to a given present state of being appeared to’; indeed, he uses it in both ways. He uses it in the first way in M XI; and he uses it in the second way in PH I 15, in explaining his official understanding of externality. He also has the conceptual resources for viewing his body as external: indeed, he explicitly so views it in M XI. Nor is that passage aberrant. On the contrary, our discussion of PH I 15 suggests that on his official position, one’s body counts as external.

According to Objection 4, Sextus never suspends judgment about whether he has a body. So far as I know, there is no passage in which Sextus explicitly says ‘I suspend judgment about whether I have a body.’ What, however, should we make of this interesting empirical fact? Should we conclude that Sextus doesn’t suspend judgment about whether he has a body, either because he lacks the conceptual resources for doing so or because, though he has the conceptual resources for doing so, he nonetheless doesn’t do so? Or does he in some way indicate that he suspends judgment about whether he has a body, even though he doesn’t say this explicitly? We’ve already seen some reason for thinking that the...

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47 If this is the moral of the Modes, we should hesitate before concluding (as some people conclude: see n. 27) that they assume the existence of external objects. Is this understanding of externality one that Sextus accepts in his own right? If not, it is not evidence of his own views, though it would still be evidence of views he is aware of. On the one hand, we’ve seen that PH II 72–4 is at least partly ad hominem. But PH I 15 is not. I’ve argued that PH I 15 uses ‘external’ for being external to a given present state of being appeared to. Externality also seems to be understood in that way in the Modes and in PH II 72–4. Hence that aspect of these latter passages is not merely ad hominem, even if other aspects of them are. One might object that Sextus would be inappropriately dogmatic were he to accept this division—between how one is appeared to, on the one hand, and everything external to that, on the other—in his own right. In ‘Appearances and Impressions,’ Phronesis 37 (1992), 283–313, for example, Rachel Barney says that the distinction between ‘internal subjective experience and external world’ is ‘theory-laden’ (304), and so should not be attributed to Sextus. She is more sanguine than I am about there being ‘ordinary’ views that are not in any sense theory-laden. Nor is assuming some sort of distinction between how one is appeared to and everything external to that as divorced from ordinary life as she takes it to be. (Not that I think Sextus is as wedded to bios as he is sometimes taken to be.) Certainly operating with some such distinction doesn’t require one to have a detailed theory of subjectivity; and I have not ascribed the latter to Sextus.
latter is the case. For in the previous section, we saw that Sextus seems to view his body as external; and he says that he suspends judgment about everything that’s external. If so, he suspends judgment about whether he has a body. I shall now reinforce this suggestion from another angle.

In PH III 38–46, Sextus considers several concepts (epinoia, ennoia) of body, and argues that all of them are defective; he concludes that (so far as the concept of body is concerned) body is inapprehensible. The underlying thought is that if we do not have a clear account of what body is, bodies are not apprehensible. That is, we can’t know, or justifiably believe, anything about bodies, including whether there are any. In III 47–9 he pursues a somewhat different strategy. He says that according to his dogmatic opponents, everything that exists is an object either of perception or of thought; so if there are bodies, they are objects either of perception or of thought. But they can’t be either. Hence (so far as this argument goes) there are no bodies (48). On the other hand, ‘bodies seem to appear real’ (tōi phainesthai [dokein] huparchon to sōma) (49). Hence there are conflicting appearances as to whether there are any bodies. Sextus tacitly assumes here, as he often does elsewhere, that the appearances are, or seem to be, equipollent. And so skeptics suspend judgment about whether there are any bodies (III 49). If Sextus suspends judgment about whether there are any bodies, he presumably suspends judgment about whether he has a body.

One might argue that PH III 49 shows only that Sextus is committed to suspending judgment as to whether he has a body; it doesn’t show that he is aware that he is so committed. However, Sextus is well aware that if one suspends judgment about a general principle, one likewise suspends judgment about everything that rests on it. In M IX 1–3, for example, he says that instead of engaging in unduly prolonged counterargument against the Stoics, he will:

48 For an excellent discussion of how to understand this and related phrases, see Brunschwig, J., ‘The hoson epi tō(i) logō(i) formula in Sextus Empiricus,’ Papers in Hellenistic Philosophy, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 244–58. (Originally published as ‘La formule hoson epi tō(i) logō(i) chez Sextus Empiricus,’ in A. J. Voelke (ed.), Le Scepticisme antique, Cahiers de la Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie (Genève/Lausanne/Neuchâtel, 1990), 107–21.)

49 According to Everson, PH III 38–55 and M IX 359–440 are ‘concerned mainly with causing problems with definitions and accounts of matter’ (‘The Objective Appearance of Pyrrhonism,’ 126 n. 11). And, one might think, even if one can’t offer a satisfactory definition or account of matter or body, one needn’t suspend judgment about whether there are any bodies. Cf. Striker, ‘Ten Tropes,’ 124. Of course, Sextus may not in his own right accept the view that body is apprehensible only if there is a satisfactory account of body. But he seems to rely on that view here, if only ad hominem. Cf. Plato, Meno 71a: if one doesn’t know what virtue is, one doesn’t know anything at all about virtue. In any case, in 46–9 Sextus doesn’t rely (just) on difficulties about accounts of body. He deploys an argument from conflicting appearances, in which the inadequacy of such accounts is at most a part.

50 Cf. PH II 84. The similarity with Descartes is striking. In Meditation I, Descartes says that ‘it will not be necessary for me to show that all my opinions are false, which is something I could perhaps never manage…So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I can find in each of them some reason for doubt. And to do this, I will not need to run through them all individually, which would be an endless task. Once the foundations of a building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord; so I will go straight for the basic principles on which all my former beliefs rested’ (AT VII 18/CSM II). Though Descartes and Sextus are making the same point, and
attack the most important and most comprehensive of their doctrines, since in the doubts cast on these we shall find the rest also included. For just as, in a siege, those who have undermined the foundation of a wall find that the towers tumble down along with it, so too in philosophical investigations those who have routed the primary assumptions on which the theories are based have virtually abolished the apprehension of every particular theory.

*PH* III also opens with this very point (III 1). It therefore governs the discussion about body that we have just considered. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that Sextus sees that in suspending judgment about whether there are any bodies, he is committed to suspending judgment about whether he has a body. He chooses, reasonably enough, to focus on the general and stronger claim (suspending judgment as to whether there are any bodies) rather than on the weaker and more particular claim (suspending judgment as to whether he has a body). This explains why he does not trouble to mention his own body as an example of something about whose existence he suspends judgment.

One might argue that the passages just discussed concern only scientific concepts of body, and that one can suspend judgment about the coherence of such concepts without suspending judgment about whether there are any bodies in an everyday, ordinary sense. This line of argument might appeal to those who think that Sextus ‘insulates’ ordinary claims from scientific ones. This is a large issue that I cannot discuss here. So I shall just say that I agree with Burnyeat when he says:

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> [e]very statement making a truth-claim falls within the scope of scientific investigation because, even if the statement itself is not at a theoretical level, it will still use concepts which are the subject of theoretical speculation: concepts such as motion, time, place, *body*. If these concepts are problematical, which Sextus argues they all are, and no line is drawn between philosophical and empirical doubt, the original statement will be equally problematical.

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A different but related objection is that Sextus is not discussing body as such, whether scientific or everyday, but only a special, limited concept (or a limited range of concepts) of body, as that notion figures in the distinction between

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51 See, for example, Frede’s *The Skeptic’s Beliefs*; and his *The Skeptic’s Two Kinds of Assent and the Possibility of Knowledge,* in his *Essays,* 179–200. Originally published in Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy in History,* 255–78; and reprinted in *The Original Sceptics.* I use the pagination of his *Essays.*

52 Burnyeat, ‘The Sceptic in His Place and Time,’ 115; emphasis added. I discuss insulation briefly in Chapter 13.
corporeal and incorporeal entities. Surely one can suspend judgment about whether there are any bodies in this special limited sense, whilst still thinking one has a body in some other sense? It is true that, for at least much of the discussion, Sextus focuses on extended corporeal body. But that is the sort of body whose existence is relevant to External World Skepticism about bodies. If one says that one has a body, but then adds that bodies are just collections of ideas, one hasn’t asserted that one has a body in a sense that is incompatible with External World Skepticism about bodies. Moreover, in PH II 29–30, Sextus says:

Even if we grant by way of concession that humans can be conceived of, we shall find that they are inapprehensible. For they are composed of soul and body; but neither bodies nor souls perhaps are apprehended; nor, therefore, are humans.

This suggests that skeptics suspend judgment, not just about whether there are bodies in some limited special sense, but also about whether there are any human bodies.

In PH II 29–30, Sextus suspends judgment not just about whether human body is apprehensible, but also about whether soul is apprehensible. Similarly, in III 186 he suspends judgment about whether soul exists just as, in PH III 49, he suspends judgment about whether there are any bodies. This might seem problematic for two reasons. First, we now seem to lose any asymmetry between soul and body. Yet didn’t we say that some such asymmetry is required for External World Skepticism? Secondly, if Sextus suspends judgment about whether there are any bodies or souls, he might seem to suspend judgment about whether he exists; and that might seem problematic.

Let’s consider the second problem first. Contrary to what it suggests, one can suspend judgment about whether there are any bodies or souls without

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53 Thanks to David Sedley for raising this objection; the discussion that follows is indebted to him.

54 At PH III 38, however, he says that ‘Some say that body is that which can act and be acted upon. But so far as this concept goes, bodies are inapprehensible.’ This notion of body is quite broad.

55 It’s true that Berkeley, for example, both takes bodies (in one sense of the term) to be collections of ideas and claims not to be a skeptic. But the plausibility of his claiming not to be a skeptic about the existence of body is much disputed. If skeptics either suspend judgment about whether something exists, or claim that it can’t be known whether something exists, then there is a sense in which Berkeley is a skeptic about body, since he says in Principle 20 that ‘if there were external bodies, it is impossible we should ever come to know it.’ However, he also argues that body, in the sense of matter or corporeal substance, can’t exist. So there is a sense in which he thinks it can be known that body doesn’t exist. That is no longer skepticism, in the sense in which I just explained it, though it is skepticism if we expand the label to include denying that something exists. (Berkeley himself asks how to define skepticism in, for example, the beginning of the First Dialogue.) Even if Berkeley should be counted as a skeptic about the existence of body, it doesn’t follow that he’s an External World Skeptic tout court. For he thinks there are other spirits, including God (though whether he’s entitled to think this is another question). Here, however, my main concern is skepticism about the existence of body. See also the last paragraph of n. 11. Thanks to Nick Sturgeon for helpful discussion about Berkeley.
suspending judgment about whether one exists. Descartes does just this at the beginning of Meditation II:

I have convinced myself that there is nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed.  (AT VII 25/CSM II 16–17)

He goes on to say:

But I do not yet have a sufficient understanding of what this ‘I’ is, that now necessarily exists.  (AT 25/CSM II 17)

That is, Descartes is certain that he exists, even though he claims not to know what he is. And since he says he doesn’t yet know whether there are any minds or bodies, he doesn’t yet know whether he is or has a mind or a body. Hence he suspends judgment about whether there are any minds or bodies without suspending judgment about whether he exists.⁵⁶ Perhaps Sextus does so as well.

Let’s now turn to the first objection: that if one suspends judgment about whether there are any souls or bodies, one loses the sort of asymmetry that is required for External World Skepticism. Here my reply is that it is not true that one can’t be an External World Skeptic if one suspends judgment not only about bodies but also about souls. For even if one suspends judgment about whether there are any bodies or souls, one need not suspend judgment about how one is appeared to; and if one doesn’t suspend judgment about that, but does suspend judgment about everything else, that provides the sort of asymmetry that can sustain External World Skeptic. Consider, for example, Hume, who, in a famous passage in the *Treatise on Human Nature* (I.iv.6), writes:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception. When my perceptions are remov’d for any time, as by sound sleep; so long am I insensible of myself, and may truly be said not to exist. And were all my perceptions remov’d by death, and cou’d I neither think, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate after the dissolution of my body, I shou’d be entirely annihilated, nor do I conceive what is farther requisite to make me a perfect non-entity. If any

⁵⁶ To be sure, he goes on to argue, or discover, that he is a thinking thing; and he equates that with being a mind: ‘I am, then, in the strict sense, only a thing that thinks; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason’ (AT VII 27/CSM II 18). However, he doesn’t affirm this until after he’s discovered that he exists; he claims to discover that he is before he makes any claims about what he is.
one, upon serious and unprejudic’d reflection thinks he has a different notion of himself, I must confess I call reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular. He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continu’d, which he calls himself; tho’ I am certain there is no such principle in me.

Hume doesn’t doubt that he has perceptions, though he doubts whether there is anything ‘simple and continu’d’ which constitutes himself. In just the same way, Sextus can suspend judgment about whether he is or has a soul, without suspending judgment about whether he exists and has perceptions or states of being appeared to. And, interestingly enough, though he questions whether there are any souls, he never seriously questions whether there are states of being appeared to.⁵⁷ This may be why, in PH I 15 (which we looked at in section 6), as often elsewhere, he distinguishes, not between the mind and everything external to it, but between how one is appeared to and everything external to that. If this latter asymmetry is spelled out in the right way, it is adequate for External World Skepticism.⁵⁸

This in turn gives us a further reply to Objection 3, according to which an impediment to viewing Sextus as an External World Skeptic is that he doesn’t use ‘external’ to mean ‘external to the mind.’ We’ve seen that he does so use ‘external’ in M XI. But we can now also say that even if he never used ‘external’ in this way, that wouldn’t necessarily be an impediment to viewing him as an External World Skeptic. For even if he didn’t speak of being external to the mind, he could speak of what’s external to a given present state of being appeared to; and, as we’ve seen, he does speak in this way. Notice, in this connection, that I initially formulated External World Skepticism disjunctively, in terms of suspending judgment

⁵⁷ In PH I 19 Sextus says: ‘And if we do propound arguments directly against what is apparent, it is not because we want to reject what is apparent that we set them out, but rather to display the rashness of the dogmatists. For if reasoning is such a deceiver that it all but snatches even what is apparent from under our very eyes, surely we should keep watch on it in unclear matters, to avoid being led into rashness by following it?’ Sextus is here speaking in proprí a personæ, and he tells us that he doesn’t question what is apparent (phainomena). Now as we’ve seen (n 17), it’s often thought that he generally uses phainomena for external objects. But I do not think that is how he is using it here; for if he were, he’d be saying he doesn’t question whether there are external objects. (Contrast Hankinson, The Sceptics, 302.) In Chapter 11, I argue that in I 19–22, he takes phainomena to be states of being appeared to or their contents. We considered some evidence for this view in section 5; and I defend it further in section 8. (Cf. C. Stough, in Greek Skepticism: A Study in Epistemology (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969)). There are, however, many differences between us. For example, she thinks phantasiai are just sensory states, whereas I think Sextus conceives of them more broadly.) Any passages in which Sextus seems to suggest that he suspends judgment about how he is appeared to need to be read in light of I 19. So, for example, in PH II 70, he says that phantasiai are inconceivable; and in III 71 he argues that even if they can be conceived of, they are not apprehensible. But in view of I 19, he presumably doesn’t mean to suspend judgment about how he is appeared to. Cf. Mates, The Skeptic Way, 21.

⁵⁸ One would need to spell it out so that it involves the right sort of privileged access, for example. I ask below whether Sextus does this.
about what’s external either to the mind or to states of being appeared to. I did so, because External World Skepticism need not posit a mind or soul over and above states of being appeared to.

8.

Let us now take stock. We’ve looked at four of the five objections mentioned at the outset. We’ve seen that, contrary to Objection 1, it’s not clear that all of Sextus’s appearance-statements are of the form ‘x appears F’ rather than of the form ‘it appears that x is F.’ But even if they are, that, by itself, doesn’t commit Sextus to the existence of external objects; for x might be an ostensible object. Against Objection 2, we saw that Sextus sometimes describes appearances (phantasiai) as intermediate things (whether as entities in a narrow sense or as states of being appeared to) that block our access to external objects. He is therefore aware of a view that might seem to make External World Skepticism tempting. Against Objection 3, we’ve seen that in M XI Sextus explicitly uses ‘external’ to mean ‘external to the mind’; and, on his official usage, as in PH I 15, he uses it for being external to a given present state of being appeared to. The latter formulation is adequate to the demands of External World Skepticism. Against Objection 4, we’ve seen that he suspends judgment about whether there are any bodies; and he seems to see that this commits him to suspending judgment about whether he has a body.

With all of this in mind, let us now look again at PH I 15, which we considered briefly at the end of section 6:

the main point is this: in uttering these [skeptical] phrases, they [the skeptics] say what is apparent to themselves and report their own affections without holding opinions, affirming nothing about external objects.

In section 6, I argued that Sextus here distinguishes between how one is appeared to, on the one hand, and everything external to that, on the other hand. Hence he is committed to viewing his body as external. I have also argued that it is reasonable to think that he sees, and intends, this. I now turn to further aspects of the passage. In it, Sextus says that he affirms nothing about external objects. That is, I take it, he suspends judgment about everything external: that is, about everything external to how he is appeared to. Hence he is committed to suspending judgment about whether he has a body. I think it is reasonable to think that he sees that this is what he is committed to. For as we saw in the last section, he says that skeptics suspend judgment about whether there are any bodies; and we saw that it is reasonable to think he sees that this includes suspending judgment about whether he has a body.
Why not say instead that skeptics suspend judgment about what is external only in the sense that they don’t ascribe properties to what’s external? That would be compatible with their not suspending judgment about the very existence of external objects. But on this reading, the contrast between how one is affected, on the one hand, and what’s external, on the other, is not exhaustive. Yet surely it is supposed to be. One might yet again argue that Sextus doesn’t see this; but I have been arguing that there are good reasons for thinking he does see it.

If Sextus suspends judgment about whether there is anything external to his present states of being appeared to, where even his body counts as external, then, one might think, he is an External World Skeptic. But such an inference would be too quick. For as we saw in section 2, being an External World Skeptic involves more than suspending judgment about everything external to one’s mind, or states of being appeared to. It also involves a ‘radically first-person stance,’ according to which one has some sort of privileged access to one’s subjective states. And it erects ‘an epistemological barrier between soul and body’ (or between states of being appeared to and everything else). Though I suspends judgment about everything external to one’s present states of being appeared to, it might not seem to involve these further features of External World Skepticism. For it can be taken to say that skeptics lack beliefs, not just about what is external, but about everything, including how they are appeared to. This is the No Belief View, according to which skeptics claim to have no beliefs whatsoever.¹⁰

⁵⁹ David Sedley suggests another reason, beyond those I have considered so far, for thinking that Sextus doesn’t see that he is committed to suspending judgment about the existence of external objects: that Sextus suspends judgment only in cases where there is an existing debate. But there was no existing debate about the very existence of an external world; there was debate only about how to characterize it. I am not convinced that there was no debate about the existence of an external world. In my view, the Cyrenaics argue that it is unknowable whether there is an external world, whereas others assume that it exists. (This interpretation of the Cyrenaics is controversial. It is disputed by, for example, V. Tsouna, in her The Epistemology of the Cyrenaic School (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).) Nor do I think Sextus limits suspension of judgment to cases in which there was actual debate: see PH I 33–4.

¹⁰ The No Belief View is favored by, among others, Burnyeat, in ‘Idealism, ‘Can,’ and ‘The Sceptic in His Place and Time.’ One might ask how Burnyeat can both favor the No Belief View and also say that Sextus is typically no more than a Property Skeptic. One way to reconcile the two views would be to say that, though skeptics do not believe that there is an external world, they assume that there is one, where assuming something does not imply believing it. Alternatively, one might say that, while skeptics do not believe Property Skepticism, it (typically) non-doxastically appears to them to be true. (A non-doxastic appearance is an appearance that is not a belief, that is, not a doxa. For example, if an oar appears bent in water but I don’t think it is bent, the oar’s appearing bent in water is a non-doxastic appearance. Non-doxastic appearances are not limited to cases of illusion or even to the perceptual sphere. An argument can non-doxastically appear sound to me: it looks sound, but I don’t have even a tentative belief as to whether it is sound. What I call non-doxastic appearances are sometimes called non-epistemic appearances. I prefer my terminology, since the appearances aren’t supposed to be beliefs, doxai, any more than they are supposed to be knowledge, epistémē.) I will not ask here how plausible either reply is.

The No Belief View is rejected by, among others, Frede, in ‘The Skeptic’s Beliefs’ and ‘The Skeptic’s Two Kinds of Assent.’ Though, as will become clear, I favor a version of the Some Belief View (according to which skeptics claim to have some beliefs), my version of it is very different from Frede’s; see Chapter 11. In addition to the question whether skeptics claim to have some, or no, beliefs,
And the No Belief View might seem incompatible with External World Skepticism: for if skeptics disclaim all beliefs, it is difficult to see what sort of privileged access they could claim to have to their subjective states. I shall argue later that some versions of the No Belief View are in fact compatible with External World Skepticism. But first I shall argue that when I 15 is read in context, we can see that it does not so clearly express the No Belief View.

Whether I 15 expresses the No Belief View depends on how we understand the scope of ‘without holding opinions’ (adoxastōs). Sextus might mean that skeptics have no beliefs whatsoever: neither about external objects nor about how they are appeared to. On this reading, I 15 does express the No Belief View. However, ‘without holding opinions’ might go just with what follows the phrase in the text: skeptics have no beliefs in that they don’t affirm anything about external objects; that is, they have no beliefs about external objects. On this reading, I 15 does not express the No Belief View, since it does not disavow all beliefs, but only beliefs about external objects. I don’t think we can tell, from I 15 alone, which way to read the passage. So we can’t tell, from this passage alone, whether it expresses the No Belief View. To see how it is best read, we need to look at the fuller context of which it is a part. So let us turn to it.

Before recording various systems of modes, Sextus tells us how to understand the general nature of Pyrrhonism (PH I 1–35); and after recording them, he tells us how to understand various skeptical phrases (I 187–209). These general, theoretical remarks play a special role in helping us understand the nature and scope of Pyrrhonian skepticism. For Sextus is here speaking in propria persona, not merely ad hominem.⁶¹

In I 12, Sextus says that skeptics ‘have no beliefs’ (mē dogmatizein). This might seem to favor the No Belief View. However, in I 13 Sextus tells us what he means in saying that skeptics have no beliefs; and it emerges that there is a crucial exception:

When we say that sceptics do not hold beliefs, we do not take ‘belief’ in the sense in which some say, quite generally, that belief is acquiescing in something. For sceptics assent to the affections forced upon them by appearances. For example,
they would not say, when they are heated or chilled, ‘I think I am not heated (or: chilled).’ Rather, we say that they do not hold beliefs in the sense in which some say that belief is assent to some unclear object of investigation in the sciences. For Pyrrhonists do not assent to anything unclear.

The interpretation of this difficult passage is disputed. On the interpretation I favor, it says that even skeptics have some beliefs. For they ‘assent to the affections forced upon them by appearances’: that is, they have beliefs about how they are affected, more precisely, about how they are appeared to. For example, when they are heated—that is, when they feel hot—they believe they feel hot. So despite I 12 and other similar passages, skeptics have some beliefs after all: they have beliefs about how they are appeared to. They lack beliefs only about what (in their view) is unclear: hence they apparently take claims about how one is appeared to to be clear. That is presumably why Sextus says that how one is appeared to is not a matter of investigation, and that no one will raise a controversy here (I 19–20, 22).

To say that skeptics have beliefs about how they are appeared to and lack beliefs about what (in their view) is unclear leaves open the possibility that they have beliefs about more than how they are appeared to: it all depends on how many things are (in their view) clear. If nothing else is (in their view) clear, then they claim to have no further beliefs; if something else is (in their view) clear, then they allow themselves further beliefs.

In M VIII 316, Sextus explains that for something to be clear (enarges, dēlon, prodēlon) is for it to be grasped non-inferentially, simply on the basis of an

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62 I discuss PH I 13 in detail in Chapter 11; here I just briefly describe the view I defend in more detail there. For quite different interpretations, see Frede (especially ‘The Skeptic’s Beliefs,’ 186–97) and Burnyeat (esp. ‘Can,’ 129–30, and ‘The Sceptic in His Place and Time,’ 96–8). They, in turn, differ from one another.

63 J. Barnes, ‘The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist,’ Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society NS 28 (1982), 1–28, at 10 (reprinted in The Original Sceptics) argues that when Sextus says that the skeptic, when heated, will not say ‘I think I am not heated,’ the point is not that he believes he is heated, but that he has no beliefs at all. Even if that is a possible interpretation of I 13, it does not so easily accommodate other passages; see also M VIII 475. I question Barnes’s general interpretation in Chapter 11. Frede, ‘The Skeptic’s Beliefs,’ 196–7, thinks that ‘being heated’ indicates, not the subjective state of feeling warm, but just the physical state of being heated. I question this view in Chapter 11; see also Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 134–5. Though (in my view) skeptics claim to have beliefs about how they are appeared to, skeptical appearance-statements are themselves non-doxastic. A skeptic believes that it appears to her that honey is sweet. But when she says ‘it appears to me that honey is sweet,’ she is not expressing even a tentative belief that honey is sweet. See Chapter 11. For a defense of the view that appearance-statements are non-doxastic, see Burnyeat, ‘Can’—though he does not agree with my further claim that skeptics claim to have beliefs about how they are appeared to.

64 For an alternative account of what Sextus means in saying that how one is appeared to is not a matter of investigation, see Barney, ‘Appearances and Impressions.’ She also disputes a suggestion I go on to make, namely, that skeptical reports are merely autobiographical reports of how one is affected at the time. Her main objection is that this would be dogmatic; but see n. 47.
appearance.⁶⁵ Only appearances—that is, states of being appeared to—are grasped in this way; external objects are not grasped in this way. As Sextus says in M VII 366:

Since, then, what is grasped through something else is agreed by everyone to be non-evident (adēlon), and since all [external] things are grasped through our affections, from which they differ, all external things are unclear and so are not objects of awareness (agnōsta) for us.

That is, since we do not have any non-inferential access to external things, but only to our affections, we are not aware of—and so do not know—anything external.⁶⁶ And since whatever is grasped only non-inferentially is unclear, skeptics suspend judgment about everything other than how they are affected: that is, about everything other than how they are appeared to in the present.

Or again, consider I 187–205, where Sextus says how to understand various skeptical phrases. In I 203 he says:

when I say ‘Opposed to every account there is an equal account,’ I am implicitly saying this: ‘Opposed to every account I have scrutinized which purports to establish something in dogmatic fashion, there appears to me to be opposed another account, purporting to establish something in dogmatic fashion, equal to it in convincingness or lack of convincingness.’ Thus the utterance of this remark is not dogmatic, but a report of a human affection which is apparent to the person who is affected.

Once again, skeptical remarks are to be interpreted autobiographically, as reporting how the skeptic is, at the time, affected, that is, how he is appeared to.

We can now see how we should interpret I 15. Skeptics say how they are affected, that is, how they are appeared to in the present. In doing so, they express their beliefs about how they are appeared to. For as I 13 has just explained, skeptics have beliefs about how they are appeared to. In saying that skeptics have no beliefs, Sextus means only that they have no beliefs about external objects. For as he has also just told us (in I 13), skeptics lack beliefs about everything they take to be unclear; and, as we have seen him saying elsewhere, skeptics take what is

⁶⁵ ἐναργῇ μὲν τὰ ἐκ φαντασίας ἀβουλήτως καὶ ἐκ πάθους λαμβανόμενα. I take καὶ to be epexegetic. Sextus is indicating that phantasiai are passive; that, in turn, explains aboulētos. As examples of what is clear, Sextus mentions (apparently in his own right) ‘It is day’ and ‘This is a man.’ This might seem to count against my view. But I take it he means that what’s clear is ‘It appears that this is day’ and ‘It appears that this is a man’; as he explains elsewhere (PH I 135, 198, 202, M XI 18–19), he often uses ‘is’ to mean ‘appears.’

⁶⁶ See n. 38.
If skeptics have no beliefs about anything external, then they don’t believe that there are any external objects; they suspend judgment on the matter. All skeptics do is issue autobiographical reports about how they are appeared to; for they have beliefs here, but not elsewhere. If this is what I 15 says, then it seems to express External World Skepticism. Nor, as we have seen, is I 15 aberrant. So not only does Sextus have the conceptual resources for entertaining External World Skepticism; it is also his official position. And it is expressed in a familiar way: by saying that skeptics suspend judgment about everything external to how they are appeared to at a time.

9.

One might argue that even if Sextus’s official position is some sort of External World Skepticism, it is not the sort described earlier. To be sure, we’ve seen that Sextus thinks we have some sort of privileged access to our subjective states. He also erects some sort of epistemological barrier between soul and body—or, as we should say instead, between states of being appeared to and everything other than such states—insofar as he says that skeptics have beliefs about how they are appeared to but suspend judgment elsewhere. But one might argue that Sextus does not accord us the right sort of privileged access to our subjective states, or favor the right sort of epistemological barrier between soul and body (or between states of being appeared to and everything else), or the right sort of epistemological asymmetry, for being an External World Skeptic of the relevant sort. This is Objection 5, the one objection raised in section 3 that I have not yet discussed. Let me now turn to it.

Burnyeat is one person who raises Objection 5; I shall focus on his version of it. According to Burnyeat, ‘the radically first-person stance of the skepticisms we are familiar with is a distinctively modern development.’ That is, the sort of radically first-person stance that is part and parcel of External World Skepticism is not to be found in ancient skepticism. It might seem surprising that Burnyeat says

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67 Hence I think that ‘without holding opinions’ in I 15 qualifies just what’s external. I think PH I 208 (cited above in n. 43) supports this reading: skeptical phrases apply only to what’s unclear and investigated in dogmatic fashion; they do not apply to what is apparent, i.e. (on my view) to how we are appeared to. But what, then, of passages like PH I 178, where Sextus says (in recording the two modes) that ‘nothing is apprehended by means of itself’? Doesn’t this suggest that, contrary to what I’ve said, skeptics don’t take anything to be clear and so don’t claim to have any beliefs? No; for all such passages need to be read in the light of I 12–24, where Sextus tells us, among other things, that skeptics have some beliefs (about how they are appeared to) and don’t question how they are appeared to. ‘Nothing’ is therefore not completely general; it means ‘nothing, except from the cases already exempted in I 12–24.’

68 Burnyeat seems to allow that Sextus takes appearances to be subjective states, and I think he is right to do so; so I shall take this point for granted in what follows. See n. 20.

69 Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 147 n. 32.
this. For he seems to think that Sextus both favors some sort of first-person privileged access and also erects some sort of epistemological barrier between soul and body. He says, for example, that ‘[i]ncorrigibility was there before [Descartes] in Hellenistic philosophy, in the shape of Sextus’ description [in PH I 22] of appearance statements as azêtētos, immune to question or inquiry.’⁷⁰ He also says that Sextus’s point in saying this ‘is one familiar in modern philosophy, that how a thing appears or seems is authoritatively answered by each individual.’⁷¹ He also thinks that skeptics assent only to claims about how they are appeared to.⁷² Hence he seems to think that Sextus takes us to have some sort of privileged access to our subjective states. And since, on his view, Sextus urges us to suspend judgment about everything else, he also thinks that, according to Sextus, there is some sort of epistemological barrier between soul (or states of being appeared to) and body.

Why, then, does Burnyeat deny that ancient skepticism has a ‘radically first-person stance’ of the sort we are familiar with? In the note in which he says this, he refers to an earlier note,⁷³ so perhaps it holds the key. In the text to that earlier note, he says that none of the ancients think there are truths about how one is appeared to. For “true” in these discussions means “true of a real objective world”; the true, if there is such a thing, is what conforms with the real.⁷⁴ Burnyeat then imagines someone objecting that surely even the ancients think there are truths about how I am appeared to? If it appears to me that there is a pink elephant in front of me, surely it is true that I am appeared to that way? Burnyeat replies that this ‘objection, though natural, is anachronistic. The idea that truth can be obtained without going outside subjective experience was not always the philosophical commonplace it has come to be. It was Descartes who made it so.’⁷⁵

According to Burnyeat, since Sextus does not view claims about how one is appeared to as truth-evaluable, neither does he think there are beliefs about them. For, as Burnyeat puts it in ‘Can the Skeptic Live His Skepticism?’.⁷⁶

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⁷⁰ Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 39 n. 53.
⁷¹ Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 128.
⁷² See, for example, the section in Burnyeat, ‘Can’ called ‘Assent and Constraint.’
⁷³ The earlier note is Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 142–3 n. 8.
⁷⁴ Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 121. Burnyeat thinks this is not only how Sextus understands truth, but also how the ancients generally understand truth. He has at least a partial ally in John Cooper, who argues that that is how Plato uses ‘truth’ in Theaetetus 184–6. See J. Cooper’s Plato’s Theaetetus (New York: Garland, 1990) (= a reprint of his 1969 Harvard Ph.D. dissertation), 134–5.
⁷⁵ Both the objection and Burnyeat’s reply to it are in ‘Can,’ 142–3 n. 8; cf. ‘Idealism,’ 26.
⁷⁶ Burnyeat, ‘Can,’ 121–2 (‘they’ in the last clause must refer to ‘things’ rather than to ‘appearances’). For the record, I agree with Burnyeat that belief, both in fact and according to the ancients (when they talk about doxa and dogma) involves accepting something as true. For a different view, see Frede, ‘The Skeptic’s Beliefs’ and ‘The Skeptic’s Two Kinds of Assent.’ I discuss the nature of belief, and Burnyeat’s and Frede’s views of it, in Chapter 11.
belief is the accepting of something as true. There can be no question of belief about appearance, as opposed to real existence, if statements recording how things appear cannot be described as true or false, only statements making claims as to how they really are.

Nor, in Burnyeat’s view, does Sextus think there is knowledge about how one is appeared to. For knowledge (both in fact and according to the ancients) implies truth; but, on the view under consideration, Sextus does not think there are truths about how one is appeared to. As Burnyeat puts it, ‘the addition of truth [recognized by Descartes, but not by the ancients, as applicable to appearance-statements] is what opens up a new realm for substantial knowledge.’

So according to Burnyeat, Sextus takes us to be incorrigible, and to have first-person authority, about how we are appeared to; but he does not think this incorrigibility, or first-person authority, amounts to knowledge or even belief, since he doesn’t view the relevant claims as truth-evaluable. By contrast, when Descartes claims that we are incorrigible about, and have first-person access to, our subjective experiences, he means that we have certain knowledge about them. Hence Descartes, but not Sextus, can countenance External World Skepticism. The idea, then, is that in order to be an External World Skeptic, one must think there are truths, beliefs, and knowledge about how one is appeared to: that is the relevant sort of privileged access, in contrast to the reduced sort that Sextus, in Burnyeat’s view, accords us.

77 Burnyeat, ‘Idealism,’ 39 n. 53. (I don’t know what, if anything, ‘substantial’ adds to ‘knowledge.’) The view that knowledge implies truth is at least as early as Plato: see Gorg. 454d; Meno 98a; Rep. 477aff.

78 Burnyeat may also want to say that the sort of incorrigibility and first-person authority Sextus grants us doesn’t amount to anything properly called privileged access; hence, above, I said that Burnyeat seems to think that Sextus grants us such access. In ‘The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist,’ Barnes suggests that skeptical reports of their appearances are avowals, in something like Wittgenstein’s sense. Perhaps on this view, we don’t have privileged access to how we are appeared to: though whether that is so depends on precisely how we spell out the notion of an avowal, an issue about which there is considerable dispute. Perhaps Burnyeat has some such view in mind, though he doesn’t explicitly mention it. However, if the fuller account I give of Burnyeat in Chapter 12 is correct, his view is rather different from Barnes’s. For Barnes’s own view of how his account compares with Burnyeat’s, see ‘The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist,’ n. 21.

Whatever may be true of Burnyeat, Hankinson thinks one can have privileged access to one’s affections even if one doesn’t take claims about them to be truth-evaluable: ‘It is worth stressing that the Skeptics’ claims about their own experiences need not commit them to any kind of dogmatism. It does not matter for this whether or not one agrees with Burnyeat . . . that for the ancients in general (and for the Skeptics in particular) private mental states were not considered appropriate objects of knowledge as they have been since the Cartesian revolution. What does matter is that the Skeptics do allow themselves privileged access to their own affections, whether or not it is appropriate to describe them in terms of truth and falsity’ (The Sceptics, 280).

79 Burnyeat says that ‘it is no accident that in Descartes’s philosophy the following elements are found in the closest association: hyperbolical doubt and the problem of the external world, subjective knowledge and truth, the dualism which makes one’s own body part of the external world—and the refutation of the ancient skeptical tradition. All these are substantially new with Descartes’ (Idealism,’ 39). So he thinks that there is a non-accidental connection between External World Skepticism, on the one hand, and thinking there are truths and knowledge about the subjective, on the other hand.
Now in the last section, I argued that Sextus thinks that even skeptics have beliefs about how they are appeared to. Hence he also thinks that claims about how one is appeared to are truth-evaluable; for, as Burnyeat says, belief, both in fact and according to the ancients, involves taking something to be true. There is also some reason to believe that Sextus thinks that even skeptics know how they are appeared to. For example, in PH I 215 he says:

Some say that the Cyrenaic way is the same as scepticism, since it too says that we only apprehend affections. But it differs from scepticism since it says that the aim is pleasure and a smooth motion of the flesh, while we say that it is tranquillity, which is contrary to the aim they propose… Further, we suspend judgment, so far as the argument goes (hoson epi tô(i) logô(i)), about external objects (ta ektos hupokeimenai), while the Cyrenaics assert that they have an inapprehensible nature.

Some people think that Cyrenaics and skeptics (i.e. Pyrrhonists) have the same views, since they both claim that only affections are apprehended. Sextus objects

However, he doesn’t say precisely what the non-accidental connection is. And in his reply to me at a conference in Toronto (September 2001), he said that he did not mean that one must think there are truths, belief, and knowledge about the subjective to be an External World Skeptic. Rather, he said, what explains Sextus’s failure to consider External World Skepticism is the practical nature of his skepticism. So have I misrepresented Burnyeat, in writing as though he thinks that, in order to be an External World Skeptic, one needs to think there are subjective experiences, and that we have a certain sort of access to them? I don’t think so. Burnyeat’s appeal to the practical nature of ancient skepticism is his ‘deep’ explanation of why, as he thinks, the ancients don’t consider External World Skepticism. When I say that he thinks they fail to consider External World Skepticism because they don’t have the right view of the mind or of our epistemic access to it, I’m giving a ‘shallow’ explanation of his account of why they don’t (as he thinks) countenance External World Skepticism. The point is that Burnyeat conceives of External World Skepticism in a certain way; and, in his view, Sextus doesn’t accept all the necessary conditions for being an External World Skeptic so conceived. Hence it trivially follows that he isn’t an External World Skeptic of that sort.

For what it’s worth, both Everson and McDowell take Burnyeat to argue that one needs a certain conception of the mind and of our epistemic access to it to be an External World Skeptic; and they agree with (what they take to be) his view, that the ancients aren’t External World Skeptics, partly because they don’t so view the mind or our epistemic access to it. McDowell writes: ‘I have followed M. F. Burnyeat on the newly radical character of Cartesian skepticism. In a perceptive discussion, Burnyeat identifies one Cartesian innovation which certainly helps account for this’ (‘Singular Thought,’ 148), namely, the view that there are truths about subjective experiences. He goes on to say that ‘the inward step to a region of reality where we can call a halt to skepticism [by claiming knowledge of our subjective experiences] involves conceding that we have no knowledge of outer reality’ (‘Singular Thought,’ 149): so he endorses what he takes to be Burnyeat’s view, though he goes on to argue that Cartesian skepticism requires an even stronger view of our access to subjective experiences than Burnyeat suggests. Similarly, Everson writes that: ‘In a subtle discussion, Myles Burnyeat has argued that there are three Cartesian innovations which allowed a move towards the newly radical character of his scepticism; two of the moves are thinking that there are truths about, and knowledge about, subjective states (‘The Objective Appearance of Pyrrhonism,’ 127). So Everson also thinks that Burnyeat’s view is that, in order to be an External World Skeptic, one must think there are truths and knowledge about subjective experiences. Hence, even if I’m wrong to say that Burnyeat holds this view, I’m in good company in saying that he holds it; and whether or not this is his view, it’s relevant to consider it, since McDowell and Everson hold it.
that Cyrenaics are not genuine skeptics. For they claim that external objects ‘have an inapprehensible nature,’ whereas skeptics suspend judgment about external objects ‘so far as the argument goes.’ That is, unlike the Cyrenaics, Pyrrhonists do not claim that knowledge of external objects is impossible. One might expect Sextus to add that, unlike the Cyrenaics, Pyrrhonists do not claim to know their affections either. But he does not say this.⁸⁰ It is tempting to think he doesn’t do so because he agrees with the Cyrenaics that only affections are known.⁸¹ And Diogenes Laertius, for one, explicitly ascribes this view to the Pyrrhonists.⁸² Of course, arguments ex silentio are not decisive; but Sextus’s silence here is suggestive.⁸³

So a case can be made for the claim that Sextus satisfies all of Burnyeat’s conditions for being an External World Skeptic. However, I am not sure Sextus thinks we know how we are appeared to; if he doesn’t, he fails to satisfy one of Burnyeat’s conditions. But, on my interpretation, he satisfies all the other conditions. Still, if he doesn’t claim that we know how we are appeared to, should we conclude that he isn’t an External World Skeptic? Of course, he would not be one, if we define the position so that one must claim to know how one is appeared to. But I find it useful to distinguish a core conception of External World Skepticism, on the one hand, and an outer shell, on the other. The core conception says that External World Skepticism involves treating the mind as the locus of subjective states (or involves treating states of being appeared to as subjective states); it accords us privileged access to our subjective states; and it asserts epistemological asymmetry, suspending judgment about whether any inferences from claims about one’s subjective states to anything else are justified. The outer shell offers a more determinate account of what privileged access consists in: it says that claims about one’s subjective states must be viewed as truth-evaluable, and that one must claim to have beliefs, and even knowledge, about one’s subjective states.

If we look at the matter in this way, then we can say that, on both my view and Burnyeat’s, Sextus satisfies the core conception. On my view, he accepts at least part of the shell, perhaps all of it; on Burnyeat’s view, he does not accept any of the shell. But if he accepts the core conception, as well as the part of the shell that


⁸¹ Kai in 215 might support this suggestion.

⁸² DL IX 103: *mona de ta pathê ginôskomen.*

⁸³ David Sedley objects that Sextus’s ensuing discussion of the Protagoreans counts against my reading of I 215. For, he argues, Sextus doesn’t explicitly say there that, unlike the Protagoreans, Pyrrhonists do not accept the measure doctrine; yet surely they do not do so. Hence I make too much of the fact that, in I 215, Sextus doesn’t explicitly say that Cyrenaics but not Pyrrhonists think that affections are known. However, I think Sextus at least implies that Pyrrhonists do not accept the measure doctrine. For in I 218, he spells out how it connects appearance and reality; in I 219, he says that Pyrrhonists suspend judgment about this connection. It follows that they suspend judgment about the measure doctrine (or are at least committed to doing so). By contrast, in I 215 he does not in any way distance himself from the Cyrenaics on the issue of whether affections are known.
I take him to accept, then it seems reasonable to characterize him as an External World Skeptic: for claiming to know one’s subjective states shouldn’t be viewed as a necessary condition for being an External World Skeptic, as though one needs to be that dogmatic about the inner realm in order to be skeptical about the outer realm. Claiming to have beliefs about one’s subjective states, and thinking that there is or might be a gap between how one is appeared to and how (purported) things are, is sufficient to lead one to suspend judgment about whether there is anything external to one. ⁸⁴

To be sure, if Sextus doesn’t think we know our subjective states, then, on that point, his skepticism differs from Cartesian skepticism since, at least by the beginning of Meditation II, Descartes takes us to have certain knowledge of at least some aspects of our subjective states. ⁸⁵ But we should not infer from that (possible) difference alone that Descartes but not Sextus countenances External World Skepticism. Nor should we conclude that Descartes’s skepticism is more extensive than Sextus’s. On the contrary, if Descartes but not Sextus claims to know his subjective states, then there is a sense in which Sextus’s skepticism is more extensive, precisely because it disclaims knowledge in a case where Descartes claims to have it.

I said a moment ago that claiming to have beliefs about one’s subjective states, and disclaiming all other beliefs, is sufficient for External World Skepticism. Is it also necessary? The question is pressing, because my view that Sextus says that even skeptics have beliefs about how they are appeared to is, to say the least, controversial. On the No Belief View, he claims that skeptics have no beliefs whatsoever. If the No Belief View is correct—and it is my second favorite view—then Sextus accepts less of the outer shell of External World Skepticism than he does on my preferred view. ⁸⁶ But he could still accept the core conception of

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⁸⁴ Why, then, is it sometimes thought that, in order to be an External World Sceptic, one must claim to know one’s subjective states? In some cases, I suspect the reason is that ‘knowledge’ is being used loosely, such that it needn’t go beyond true belief. In other cases the reason seems to be that viewing the subjective as a realm about which there are truths, beliefs, and knowledge is taken to be a package deal. In yet other cases, the reason seems to be that thinking that one has certain knowledge of one’s subjective states opens the way for thinking that one’s mental states are ‘autonomous,’ and autonomy is taken to be the crucial view that leads to External World Skepticism. For this latter line of thought, see McDowell, ‘Singular Thought,’ 149–52; and Everson, ‘The Objective Appearance of Pyrrhonism,’ 133.

⁸⁵ It’s worth noting, however, that he doesn’t take us to have as strong an epistemic access to our subjective states as is sometimes supposed; see Chapter 12.

⁸⁶ But he might accept some of it. For he could disclaim beliefs about his subjective states, whilst thinking that claims about them are (or might be) truth-evaluable. His reasons for disclaiming beliefs here (if, contrary to my view, he does so) need not be that he doesn’t view claims about subjective states as truth-evaluable. His reasons for suspending judgment here (if, contrary to my view, he does so) would be the same as his reasons for suspending judgment elsewhere: for example, that such claims are subject to various modes. It’s also worth remarking that even if skeptics disclaim beliefs about how they are appeared to, they might think that non-skeptics have such beliefs: in general, non-skeptics have lots of beliefs that skeptics eschew. So one can easily accept the No Belief View without being at all inclined to think that skeptics don’t view claims about how one is appeared to as truth-evaluable. I discuss these issues further in Chapter 12.
External World Skepticism. For, at least on one version of the No Belief View, even though skeptical assent falls short of belief, Sextus nonetheless says that skeptics assent only to claims about how they are appeared to; and one might take that to be sufficient for External World Skepticism. This version of External World Skepticism is more all-encompassing than Descartes’s version is, insofar as it disclaims even belief about the subjective.

However, one might favor a different version of the No Belief View from the one just discussed, a version that does not in any way privilege claims about the first person. On this view, Sextus would not be an External World Skeptic. But there would still be a sense in which his skepticism is more, not less, extensive than Descartes’s, precisely because it disclaims all belief. We need to distinguish two questions, which I did not distinguish at the beginning of this chapter: (a) is Sextus an External World Skeptic?; and (b) is his skepticism less extensive than Cartesian and post-Cartesian skepticism? Even if the answer to (a) is ‘no,’ it doesn’t follow that the answer to (b) is ‘yes.’ And whether we favor any version of the No Belief View, or my version of the Some Belief View, there is a sense in which Sextus’s skepticism is more, not less, extensive than Cartesian skepticism.

87 On Burnyeat’s version of the No Belief View, skeptics assent only to claims about how they are appeared to. However, as we’ve seen, he doesn’t think that is enough for External World Skepticism; he thinks one must accept not only the core conception but also the outer shell.

88 If Sextus claims to have beliefs only about how he is appeared to, and disavows all knowledge, including about how he is appeared to, that also yields a version of External World Skepticism that is more extensive than Descartes’s, since the latter does claim knowledge about one’s subjective states.

89 I don’t know anyone who holds precisely this view, but perhaps Frede and Barney, among others, come close. At least, they deny that, in assenting to appearance-statements, skeptics are merely making autobiographical reports; so in this sense, they deny that Sextus takes there to be any sort of epistemological asymmetry. However, Frede and Barney think that skeptical assent amounts to belief—of one sort, though not of another. Frede, for example, argues that skeptics have beliefs about how things are, though not about how things really are. See, e.g. ‘The Skeptic’s Beliefs,’ 186–7. I discuss this in Chapter 11.

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