In Defense of Two Worlds: Plato's Distinction Between Knowledge and Opinion

By Justin Keena

Did Plato believe in a theory of two worlds? Gail Fine has argued that he was committed to no such view (specifically in *Republic* 5-7),[1] presenting five objections to the position which holds that he was. By re-examining what Plato means by knowledge, his distinction between knowledge and opinion, and his various views related to and entailed by these ideas, I will meet her objections one by one, concluding that Plato did believe in two worlds. I here summarize her objections in the order in which I will address them:

1. According to the two worlds view, "no one can know items in the sensible world," e.g. "what actions are just or good" or "such mundane facts as that they're now seeing a tomato." This seems to offend our common sense.
2. The text of the *Republic* itself contradicts the two worlds view: Plato himself says that "he has beliefs about, but no knowledge of, the Form of the good;" and also "that the philosopher who returns to the cave will know the things there, i.e. sensibles."
3. If the sensible world cannot be known, "it is unclear why [philosophers] are specially fitted to rule in this world. They don't know, any more than the rest of us do, which laws to enact."
4. "The objects of knowledge and belief are then disjoint; one cannot move from belief to knowledge about some single thing. I cannot first believe that the sun is shining, and then come to know that it is."
5. Then Plato would contradict his position in the *Meno,* which says that true opinions can become knowledge. "For the *Meno,* knowledge implies true belief; on TW [the theory of Two Worlds], knowledge excludes true belief."[2]

Fine takes the two worlds view to be, or at least to imply, an epistemological thesis "according to which there is no knowledge of sensibles, but only of Forms, and no belief about Forms but only about sensibles."[3] Of course, this view must depend on a prior metaphysical thesis which distinguishes between two fundamental types or kinds of reality—a position so characteristic of the Platonic dialogues that we must accept it as Plato's own.

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[1] Though she also says that she would maintain he is never committed to the two worlds view. Cf. Gail Fine, "Knowledge and Belief in *Republic* 5-7," in *Plato,* ed. Gail Fine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 218.

[2] Ibid. 217-8.

[3] Ibid. 217.

The evidence that Plato held it is abundant, even if we restrict ourselves to the *Republic*.[4] In book 6, he states this metaphysical thesis as plainly as one could ask for: "In any case, you have two kinds of thing, visible and intelligible."[5] Likewise at 508b-c, when making the analogy between the sun and the Good, he rests the analogy on the distinction between "the intelligible realm" (τῷ νοητῷ τόπῳ) and "the visible [realm]" (τῷ ὁρατῷ). At 507b he matter-of-factly states: "And we say that the many beautiful things and the rest are visible but not intelligible, while the forms are intelligible but not visible. —That's completely true." By Plato's own admission, the primary division of the Divided Line depends on the distinction between the intelligible and the visible, as does the entire imagery of the Cave.[6] Thus if we take "the two worlds view" to signify a metaphysical thesis that posits two kinds of reality, then Plato was undoubtedly committed to such a position. Indeed the distinction between the intelligible and the visible captures a fundamental feature of Plato's metaphysics. Verity Harte has rightly called it "the central contrast in his metaphysical theorizing," which "shapes the contours of his ontology."[7] But it also shapes the contours of his epistemology, as we shall see.

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[4] And if we do not, even more evidence surfaces. With one brief exception, all the English translations of Plato's dialogues in this paper are taken from the versions in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis/Cambridge: 1997). Consider, e.g., *Phaedo* 79a: "Do you then want us to assume two kinds of existences, the visible and the invisible? —Let us assume this."

Or *Philebus* 53e-59a, emphasis mine: "When you gave this answer now, did you realize that most of the arts and sciences and those who work at them are in the first place only concerned with opinions and make opinions the center of their search? For even if they think they are studying nature, you must realize that all their lives they are merely dealing with *this world order*, how it came to be, how it is affected, and how it acts?" Socrates goes on to distinguish such things from eternal things, which are the only objects we can really have knowledge and certainty of; thus there are (at least) two distinct world orders, known by different cognitive powers.

Or *Sophist* 248a: "Let's turn to the other people, the friends of the forms. You serve as their interpreter for us. —All right. You people distinguish coming-to-be and being and say that they are separate? Is that right? —Yes. And you say that by our bodies and through perception we have dealings with coming-to-be, but we deal with real being by our souls and through reasoning."

[5] 509d.

[6] On the Line, see 509d: "Understand, then, that, as we said, there are these two things, one sovereign of the intelligible kind and place, the other of the visible….In any case, you have two kinds of thing, visible and intelligible."

And on the Cave, see 517b: "The visible realm should be likened to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire inside it to the power of the sun. And if you interpret the upward journey and the study of things above as the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm, you'll grasp what I hope to convey…"

[7] Verity Harte, "Plato's Metaphysics" in *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*, ed. Gail Fine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 192-3.

We can best meet the five objections to the supposed epistemological implications of the two worlds view by studying what Plato meant by knowledge. This will inevitably lead us into how knowledge is distinct from opinion, for Plato often describes knowledge by contrasting it with opinion. Nevertheless, our line of argument shall proceed by way of emphasizing Plato's view of the nature of knowledge. For this purpose, we only need to establish one (among several)[8] of its defining characteristics. For Plato, then, a defining, and frequently emphasized, feature of knowledge is its *stability*.[9] The stability of knowledge, when we consider knowledge in relation to its object, is of two kinds: the stability that knowledge acquires by virtue of corresponding to a *necessary* (and hence stable) object, and the stability that it acquires by virtue of corresponding to an *unchanging* (and hence stable) object. Both the stability of necessity and the stability of eternal sameness[10] can, when understood by the knower, give rise to, and indeed warrant, certain stable states of mind in him: e.g., the stability of necessity warrants absolute certitude.[11] That is to say, if and only if we are aware why something *must* be so and cannot be otherwise, can we be absolutely certain of it. Hence if we have a case of genuine knowledge accompanied by absolute certitude, that certitude must be based on the stability of necessity, which is itself based on a necessary object. It is in this way that *Republic* 477e, in

[8] R.C. Cross and A.D. Woozley have helpfully (and succinctly) collected the most important of the others in their "Knowledge, Belief and the Forms" in *Plato I: Metaphysics and Epistemology* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 73: "If we put all this together, Plato is then saying that we can distinguish belief from knowledge as states of mind in that (1) (from our present passage in 477E) belief is liable to error, knowledge not, and (from elsewhere) (2) belief can be produced and changed by persuasion, knowledge not, and (3) in the case of belief we do not understand why a proposition is true, whereas in knowledge we do."

[9] Cf. James Lesher, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 no.2 (1987), 279: "…the very feature of knowledge that allows Socrates to distinguish here [*Meno* 98a-b] between knowledge and true opinion is that knowledge is stable (*monimos*), tied down by reasoning, whereas opinion, even true opinion, can slip away." He does not, however, go on to distinguish any kinds of stability.

[10] I do not say "the stability of immutability," because the fact that a thing does not change does not mean that it is incapable of change, and in the passages I will adduce as evidence later, Plato characteristically speaks of the *unchanging* character of the object of knowledge as being "the same in every way," not of its inability to change (though I think it can be shown he thought it was unable to change as well).

[11] 1) It is unclear to me whether the stability of eternal sameness also warrants absolute certitude, or just a high degree of conviction, or something else. 2) Insofar as these mental states are properties that the act of knowledge has as the possession of the knower, they constitute further kinds of stability of knowledge. E.g., certain knowledge is stable in a way that mere opinion, which can only admit of varying degrees of certainty, is not. We may conclude that there are two overarching kinds of stability in knowledge: "subjective" stability like certitude, which has to do with knowledge as it is securely possessed by a subject, and "objective" stability that knowledge acquires by being related to a stable object.

conjunction with *Meno* 97e-98b, indirectly illustrates that knowledge must be grounded in a necessary object. The *Republic* attributes infallibility, and hence absolute certitude, to knowledge, as opposed to fleeting opinions that have not been tied down, as the *Meno* tells us, "by (giving) an account of the reason why."[12] I will more fully explain this argument about the stability of necessity and the relevant passages of the *Republic* and the *Meno* later on.

On the other hand, the *Timaeus* (27d-28a and 52a), for example, directly illustrates the stability of eternal sameness, which is based on a simple principle: knowledge requires an unchanging object. I shall be focusing most of my resources on the stability of eternal sameness, for it is this sort of stability that Plato emphasizes most often. Let us, then, take a closer look at *Timaeus* 27d-28a and 52a. These passages are important because they display the principle that knowledge requires an unchanging, and therefore stable, object; and, having once observed it here, we can subsequently detect its presence all the more easily in many other places in Plato's writings:

> As I see it, then, we must begin by making the following distinction: What is *that which always is* and has no becoming, and what is *that which becomes* but never is? The former is grasped by understanding (νοήσει), which involves a reasoned account. It is unchanging. The latter is grasped by opinion, which involves unreasoning sense perception. It comes to be and passes away, but never really is (27d-28a, translator's emphasis).
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> …[W]e must agree that that which keeps its own form unchangingly, which has not been brought into being and is not destroyed, which neither receives into itself anything else from anywhere else, nor itself enters into anything else anywhere, is one thing. It is invisible—it cannot be perceived by the senses at all—and it is the role of understanding (νόησις) to study it. The second thing is that which shares the other's name and resembles it. This thing can be perceived by the senses, and it has been begotten. It is constantly borne along, now coming to be in a certain place and then perishing out of it. It is apprehended by opinion, which involves sense perception (52a).

[12] "To acquire an untied work of Daedalus is not worth much, like acquiring a runaway slave, for it does not remain, but it is worth much if tied down, for his works are very beautiful. What am I thinking of when I say this? True opinions. For true opinions, as long as they remain, are a fine thing and all they do is good, but they are not willing to remain long, and they escape from a man's mind, so that they are not worth much until one ties them down by (giving) an account of the reason why. …After they are tied down, in the first place they become knowledge, and then they remain in place. That is why knowledge is prized higher than correct opinion, and knowledge differs from correct opinion in being tied down."

Now from the image of the Divided Line in the *Republic* (511d-e) we know that νόησις is the condition of the soul which corresponds to the objects on the Line that occupy the highest and most spacious of its four subsections; these objects are therefore as intelligible and real as anything could possibly be. Thus νόησις, if anything, gives us knowledge. What is more, νόησις may even *be* knowledge. Later in book 7 (533e), when Plato recalls the Line and re-lists the four conditions of the soul, though he says he is simply repeating what he has already gone through before, he puts knowledge (ἐπιστήμην) instead of νόησις as the highest condition, leaving everything else the same and apparently unaware that he has switched the terms.[13] We may perhaps gather that they were, for him, so closely associated as to be, at least in this context, synonymous; or, at the very least, that they were deeply connected and interwoven in his mind.

It is plain on any reading of the above texts from the *Timaeus* that Plato is strongly correlating νόησις (and, by comparison with the *Republic,* ἐπιστήμη) with an unchanging, eternally identical, and permanently stable object. The object that corresponds to νόησις is "that which always is and has no becoming;" "it is unchanging;" keeps "its own form unchangingly," "has not been brought into being and is not destroyed," and all the rest. Hence it would be quite reasonable to conclude[14] from the evidence of the *Republic* and the *Timaeus* combined that, if someone has knowledge of the highest and most stable kind (i.e. νόησις or ἐπιστήμη), then he must be dealing with an equally stable object. For if it is the "role" of νόησις or ἐπιστήμη to study what is unchanging and permanent, it only makes sense that, if a person does in fact possess νόησις or ἐπιστήμη, then he must be dealing with an unchanging and permanent object. *Prima facie,* Plato here

[13] "It will therefore be enough to call the first section knowledge (ἐπιστήμην), the second thought (διάνοιαν), the third belief (πίστιν), and the fourth imaging (εἰκασίαν), just as we did before." But compare with what he did say before (511d-e): "There are four such conditions in the soul, corresponding to the four subsections of our line: Understanding (νόησιν) for the highest, thought (διάνοιαν) for the second, belief (πίστιν) for the third, and imaging (εἰκασίαν)for the last."

[14] As C.C.W. Taylor does in "Plato's Epistemology," *The Oxford Handbook of Plato,* note 15 on p.175.

seems to be expressing the following idea: to have knowledge is to have knowledge of an unchanging, stable object; or, put another way, knowledge by nature requires an unchanging, stable object.[15] Can we be sure that he would have endorsed this principle? Indeed, a great deal of evidence from other passages in other dialogues all converges on just this point.

At the end of the *Cratylus* (439b-440c), the enduring stability of an object, however short, is shown to be a necessary condition for any kind of apprehension of it.[16] If an object did not endure even for an instant in the same way, then one could have no epistemic acquaintance with it at all. How could one mentally grasp an object that has already slipped away before it can be grasped? It seems reasonable to extrapolate that, if an object did endure for a little while, it would for that small amount of time be intelligible; for the duration of its brief (but stable) existence and no longer, one could become acquainted with it by a proportionately fleeting power.[17] If it endured for even longer, it would in that sense be even more knowable. We therefore naturally conclude that, if an object is permanently stable, it is then also perfectly knowable; and hence one could in principle have perfect knowledge of it. The principle is this: the degree (or kind) of cognition increases in a manner directly proportionate to the stability of the object. Therefore, as the degree (or kind) of cognition increases, so must the stability of the object. It can only follow that knowledge in the strictest sense requires a permanently stable object.

Furthermore—to continue adducing evidence in support of this conclusion—in *Republic* 5, Plato rests his argument for the distinction between knowledge and opinion on the principle that

[15] I only note by way of anticipation that, from the principle "to have knowledge is to have knowledge of a stable object," it follows that if an object is unstable, then there can be no knowledge of it.

[16] Cf. especially 439e-440a (translator's emphasis): "Then if it never stays the same, how can it *be* something? After all, if it ever stays the same, it clearly isn't changing—at least, not during that time; and if it always stays the same and is always the same thing, so that it never departs from its own form, how can it ever change or move? —There's no way. Then again it can't even be known by anyone. For at the very instant the knower-to-be approaches, what he is approaching is becoming a different thing, of a different character, so that he can't yet come to know either what sort of thing it is or what it is like—surely, no knowledge is knowledge of what isn't in any way. —That's right. Indeed, it isn't even reasonable to say that there is such a thing as knowledge, Cratylus, if all things are passing on and none remain."

[17] Cf. *Republic* 479d, where Plato himself expresses the principle that 'cognitive powers must be proportionate to the stability of the object' (my emphasis): "And we agreed that anything of that kind would have to be called the opinable, not the knowable—*the wandering intermediate grasped by the intermediate power.*"

"knowledge is set over what is."[18] But he also makes it clear that "what is," or "what purely is,"[19] by which he means what is most real (and hence can be said to *be* without qualification)—for example, the Form of Beauty—is the sort of thing that "remains always the same in all respects;"[20] indeed, all the "things themselves" are "always the same in every respect."[21] In other words, knowledge is only "set over" *stable* objects, the Forms.[22] Therefore, Plato concludes, those who cannot ascend to the Forms, eternally the same and hence perfectly stable, "opine everything but have no knowledge of anything they opine."[23] Since they cannot grasp a stable object, they cannot have knowledge. Once again, we can only conclude that the possession of knowledge *demands* that the object of one's knowledge be a permanently stable object.

The same conclusion in an even stronger form follows when we consider the nature of the stability that must underlie the certitude which accompanies genuine knowledge. Knowledge is not only stable by relying on a stable object; it is eminently and absolutely reliable, a stable and certain touchstone of one's mental resources. That is to say, the person who is aware that he has genuine knowledge[24] also has absolute certitude. He realizes that he can rely on his knowledge, that he can place the entire burden of his intellectual weight on it with full confidence. This is the real import of Plato's dual claim in *Republic* 477e that knowledge is infallible and that its infallibility is what distinguishes it from opinion as such. Of course knowledge, being knowledge, must be free from error; but as Socrates points out in *Meno* 97b-d, true opinion is just as inerrant as genuine

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[18] 478a, which nearly repeats the same sentence at 477b.

[19] Cf., e.g., 478d and 479d.

[20] 479a.

[21] 479e.

[22] Cf. Harte, "Plato's Metaphysics," 202: "And this is the overarching contrast between Forms and their counterparts: Forms are not perceptible, but intelligible; their counterparts are perceptible. These two sorts of beings are further characterized in terms of their respective stability or instability. Intelligible Forms are invariant; they do not change. Their perceptible counterparts, by contrast, are in no way invariant but subject to change."

[23] Ibid.

[24] As, in Plato's view, all who have knowledge must be, for in order to have knowledge they must be able to give an account of what they know; and one cannot give an account of his knowledge without being aware of that knowledge. C.C.W. Taylor ("Plato's Epistemology," 181 note 20) has helpfully collected many (if not most) of the principal passages where Plato asserts the necessity of an account: *Republic* 534b-c, 510c, 531e, 533b-c; *Phaedo* 76b; *Symposium* 202a; *Theaetetus* 202c; *Timaeus* 51e; *Laws* 966b, 967e.

knowledge.[25] What, then, distinguishes knowledge from opinion, if true opinion is infallible, but infallibility is what distinguishes knowledge from opinion as such? Gregory Vlastos has argued convincingly[26] that if both true opinion and knowledge are equally infallible insofar as they are both free from error, then it must be the case that there is a stronger sense of "infallible" that applies only to knowledge. And Plato himself tells us what that stronger sense is. After Meno admits that true opinion is just as inerrant as knowledge, he asks the very question we are now interested in getting an answer to: "That appears to be so of necessity, and it makes me wonder, Socrates, this being the case, why knowledge is prized far more highly than right opinion, and why they are different."[27] Socrates tells him (97d-98b) that knowledge is different because it is tied down "by (giving) an account of the reason why." In other words, the person who has given "an account of the reason why" has seen for himself *why* a truth must be true, why a thing must be such-and-such, or its nature so-and-so. Thus, his thought is stabilized; it is his secure possession; he is certain of it, and rightly so. True opinions, on the other hand, are just as transient as any other opinion, for the simple reason that the person who has a true opinion is not aware that it *really is* true; not having given an account of the reason why, he does not see why it must be so. If he did, his opinion would disappear as an opinion and he would instead have acquired knowledge: for knowledge is distinguished from opinion precisely by this account-giving. He may suppose his opinion to be true; he may even have some degree of certitude; but he can never be *absolutely* certain, so long as he is only dealing with an opinion. We can never be sure, absolutely sure, of our opinions: that is why they are worth less than knowledge. Absolute certitude is the exclusive right of knowledge. Indeed, one can have any measure of certainty about his opinions, true or false, with a single exception: the absolute, stabilizing certitude that can only result from an insight into a certain, very special kind of object.

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[25] Indeed at *Theaetetus* 200e, true opinion is called "infallible" by the same word used in *Republic* 477e (ἀναμάρτητον).

[26] Gregory Vlastos, "Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 35, no. 138 (1985) 12-3.

[27] *Meno* 97c-d.

Now we are ready to see why the certitude of knowledge, relying, as it does, on the stability of necessity, requires a stable object at least as much as the stability of eternal sameness does. We have seen that absolute certitude is a mark of knowledge that distinguishes it definitively from opinion as such. But what sort of object can we be absolutely certain about? If our certainty is absolute, it can only be because we have an absolute guarantee that we cannot be mistaken. If there were some chance of our being mistaken, we could never be absolutely sure that we are right. The nature of the object must therefore rule out the possibility of error altogether. But the only adequate reason that could explain why an object cannot be otherwise than it is is that it *must* be the way it is. The only sufficient proof against all alternative possibilities is the *necessity* of a given state of affairs. To be absolutely certain of something, and for that certitude to be warranted—which is guaranteed by one's having genuine knowledge, having seen for oneself why something is so and so—is for that something to be necessary. Thus, to have the certitude of knowledge is to know a necessary state of affairs.[28] An object of absolutely certain knowledge cannot be otherwise than as we know it to be. Vlastos, too, was led to the same conclusion:

> And for [Plato] too, as for Aristotle, if *P* is known to be true, then *P* is necessarily true: his whole epistemology is built on the restriction of what is known to what is necessarily true. This is the unavoidable consequence of his cardinal metaphysical doctrine that the subject matter of *bona fide* knowledge consists exclusively of eternal forms—entities, all of whose properties, locked into their definitions, are as immune to contingency as are the truths of mathematics.[29]

We hardly need to ask ourselves whether a necessary object is stable to see that the stability of necessity demands a whole new level of stability (indeed, the highest possible) from the object of knowledge. Anything less than such stability would prevent such an object from being an object of knowledge.

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[28] This explains why Plato says (*Timaeus* 51e) that "while understanding remains unmoved by persuasion, true belief gives in to persuasion." For if we have seen why something *must* be so-and-so, then we cannot be persuaded to the contrary. Vlastos makes this point also (Ibid. 16), and cites *Timaeus* 28b7 as additional evidence.

[29] Vlastos, Ibid. He also traces this conception of knowledge through Aristotle and certain Presocratics (14-8).

I now return to the stability of eternal sameness. One final passage from Plato in its support should clinch the point that the object of knowledge must be stable beyond dispute.

> Socrates: When you gave this answer just now, did you realize that most of the arts and sciences and those who work at them are in the first place only concerned with opinions and make opinions the center of their search? For even if they think they are studying nature, you must realize that all their lives they are merely dealing with this world order, how it came to be, how it is affected, and how it acts? Is that our position or not?
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> Protarchus: Quite so.
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> Socrates: So such a person assumes the task of dealing, not with things eternal, but with what comes to be, will come to be, or has come to be?
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> Protarchus: Undeniably.
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> Socrates: So how could we assert anything definite about these matters with exact truth if it never did possess nor will possess nor now possesses any kind of sameness?
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> Protarchus: Impossible.
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> Socrates: And how could we ever hope to achieve any kind of certainty about subject matters that do not in themselves possess any certainty?
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> Protarchus: I see no way.
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> Socrates: Then there can be no reason or knowledge that attains the highest truth about these subjects![30]

The link that has been forged here between knowledge and the sameness or stability of its object is almost too plain to require any comment. Notice, though, how Socrates associates both overarching kinds of stability with knowing things "with exact truth." We may call them "subjective" and "objective" stability. Subjective stability comes in when he emphasizes the *certainty* which we are entitled to by knowing something, and objective stability comes in when he repeatedly emphasizes how the object of knowledge must remain the same and never change. As I close my survey of the evidence in favor of the knowledge-stability connection, I remark that we have been able to clearly see its presence in five separate dialogues (*Timaeus, Meno, Republic, Cratylus,* and *Philebus*); it was obviously an idea Plato had given much thought. I take it as firmly established, then, that knowledge in the strict sense requires a permanently stable object.[31] For Plato, nothing less will do.

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[30] *Philebus* 58e-59b.

[31] This conclusion is also re-confirmed in the *Philebus* (59d) when Socrates concludes: "So, in their most accurate sense and appropriate use, they [i.e., reason and knowledge] are applied to insights into true reality?" And "true

If this is so, then it follows at once that there can be no knowledge, in the strict sense, of unstable objects. But unstable objects include everything that does not belong to the intelligible world; indeed, all the objects of our empirical, everyday experience are unstable. We can only conclude that there can be no knowledge of them. This is the answer to the first of Fine's objections:[32] Plato really *does* think that "no one can know items in the sensible world," e.g. "what actions are just or good" or "such mundane facts as that they're now seeing a tomato." It is the plainly intended consequence of his theory of knowledge. How could one possibly *know,* in the strict sense, an object or a fact about an object that will only exist for a short while, and can never attain to perfect sameness? When I stop seeing the tomato—suppose it is plucked by a farmer, or bought by a customer at the market, or eaten by someone for lunch—I cannot possibly keep on *knowing* that I am seeing it. The object has shifted, thereby precluding any knowledge of it.[33] It only admits of opinion, which, as we have already seen, is just as transitory as the objects it "knows." Even if I stared at the tomato for months and perhaps years on end, eventually it will rot, wither, and cease to be. But since knowledge requires a stable object, I can never *know* that I am seeing a tomato; both the tomato and the fact that I am seeing it are unstable. If an object changes, the cognition of it must change with it, if it is to remain accurate. As the *Phaedrus* puts it, knowledge in the strict sense is "not that knowledge that is close to change, that *becomes different as it knows the different things* which we consider real down here. No, it is the knowledge of what really is what it is."[34] Thus, if we try to know a changing thing, then our "knowledge" too would change with the thing, in which case it would not be knowledge; and if it does not, then it would become obsolete. On either supposition it would not be genuine knowledge. We cannot know the tomato, or even the just act, for they both

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reality," as we have seen from the *Republic,* can only mean objects that are always the same in every way, i.e. perfectly stable.

[32] Though it has been noted by others: cf. Harte, note 15 on pp.175-6.

[33] C.C.W. Taylor's alternative elucidations of how the sight-lover's objects admit of both truth and falsehood ("Plato's Epistemology, pp.177-9) makes some related points (although I do not admit that sensible particulars can be known in the strict sense).

[34] 247d-e, my emphasis.

go out of existence and do not remain to be an object of knowledge. Only the eternal sameness and stability of objects, Plato thinks, can guarantee the stability of knowledge. It is simply impossible to know—to *really* know—sensible objects; it would be like trying to paint every wave and curve and contour of the ocean, in all the complexities of their multifarious arrangements, just as they are in the single instant of the painter's first observation as he begins to paint.

But it is when we consider that the object of knowledge, which affords us complete subjective stability (i.e. absolute certitude) must be not only an unchanging but also a *necessary* object, that the position which makes Plato say that we can know sensibles becomes really indefensible. For sensible, empirical objects are all contingent, utterly dependent upon the Forms for their existence: they are, after all, merely images of them. What would the shapes in the mirror be without the objects they reflect?[35] Nothing in the empirical world is necessary, nor even the empirical world itself;[36] therefore, nothing in the empirical world can be known in the strict sense. How could we ever have absolute certitude about any sensible object, all of which could be otherwise than they are? Indeed, if to endure in time is to become older, then with every passing second every time-bound object is becoming otherwise than it was in the previous instant. To demand knowledge of sensibles—and hence absolute certitude about them—is to ask for the impossible. To protest that Plato takes away our knowledge of the sensible world is not really an objection to the two-worlds interpretation of Plato's philosophy. On the basis of the textual evidence we have been confronted with, it is nothing less than the inevitable application and direct consequence of his thought. But we may go even further than that. For he drew this consequence explicitly himself:

I can't conceive of any subject making the soul look upward except one concerned

[35] I owe this image (which is really, at bottom, Plato's own), or more precisely, re-thinking of Plato's metaphysics in terms of mirrors and images, to R.E. Allen's "Participation and Predication in Plato's Middle Dialogues," reprinted in *Plato I,* cited above, 172-4, the section on the Copy Theory. Allen has shown how the image metaphor, Plato's metaphor of choice, solves many supposed problems of his metaphysics.

[36] At *Timaeus* 28b, Plato asserts that the universe has not always existed, but began. Therefore, it is possible for the world not to be, for at one time it was not; but anything that could be otherwise is not necessary; hence, the universe itself is not necessary.

> with that which is, and that which is is invisible. If anyone attempts to learn something about sensible things, whether by gaping upward or squinting downward, I'd claim—since *there's no knowledge of such things*—that he never learns anything…[37]

If Plato was at all consistent, as all the evidence considered so far suggests and confirms, then we cannot interpret him as also admitting that there can be knowledge of sensibles.

This immediately raises (the second half of) Fine's second objection, that Plato does tell us in the *Republic* that the philosophers can know sensibles. Now it would be very surprising, to say the least, that Plato, having gone through an entire program of education based on inculcating right opinion in the early books of the *Republic*, and after carefully laying out the hard-and-fast distinction between knowledge and opinion in book 5 in order to signal a transition to an education that is, unlike his earlier program, capable of engendering knowledge,[38] would so quickly (and apparently without noticing) flatly contradict himself in book 7. Let us therefore look at the alleged evidence in the *Republic* for ourselves. Socrates, pretending to speak to the philosopher-guardians, tells them:

> You're better and more completely educated than the others and are better able to share in both types of life. Therefore each of you in turn must go down to live in the common dwelling place of the others and grow accustomed to seeing in the dark. When you are used to it you'll see vastly better than the people there. And because you've seen the truth about fine, just, and good things, you'll *know* each image for what it is and also that of which it is the image.[39]

Is Socrates saying that the philosopher will have knowledge in the strict sense of these images? Plainly not; for, as he is keen to point out, the conditions for knowing are drastically worse. The

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[37] *Republic* 529b, my emphasis. Cf. 508d: "Well, understand the soul in the same way: When it focuses on something illuminated by truth and what is, it understands, knows, and apparently possesses understanding, but when it focuses on what is mixed with obscurity, on what comes to be and passes away, it opines and is dimmed, changes its opinions this way and that, and seems bereft of understanding."

[38] I owe these points to J.E. Raven, who has noted (following Cornford, as he tells us) in his *Plato's Thought in the Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965) 119-21, that the *Republic* is more naturally divided into thematic parts than 10 books. Books 2, 3, 4 and most of 5 of the *Republic* constitute a natural unity on primary education; the next natural unity is formed by the rest of 5, 6, and 7 on the education of the guardians. What is of note here is that this first natural unity (126) "is concerned exclusively with right belief; it is designed to show just how far right belief, when properly trained, can carry us," whereas the theme of the next natural unity is knowledge (122). Thus the careful thematic structure of the *Republic* makes us sure that Plato was very aware of his transition from a treatment of right opinion or belief to a treatment of knowledge.

[39] 520b-c, emphasis mine.

philosopher must see in the dark; he has to once again spend his time among images, which are by definition less real than the purely intelligible objects he is used to; he must let his mind grow accustomed to no longer living in the light[40] of the intelligible Sun, the Good, by which alone he knows (and really *knows*) the Forms. The imagery of darkness, all on its own, strongly suggests that the philosopher no longer enjoys knowledge in the fullest and most dignified sense; for the full splendor of the light of intelligibility only emanates from the Good in the realm of the non-sensible.

What is it, then, that the philosophers are supposed to know about the images (i.e., about sensible things)? 1) That they are images[41] and 2) that of which they are the images. Now the second of these is just to know the Forms, and so does not amount to a claim that sensibles can be known in the strict sense. The first must be the alleged evidence for saying that Plato is asserting that the philosopher can know sensibles. But consider what it means to "know" that a sensible thing is an image. It means that the person (i.e., the philosopher) realizes that this or that sensible object is, in effect, a pale imitation, a resemblance, even a fraud or a counterfeit, of something really real. He realizes that it is only an image, a shadow, and that it cannot withstand the full light of the noonday Sun of knowledge; under the intensity of such heat, it would vanish like a dream in the morning. This is especially obvious to him from the contrast in intelligibility he experiences when he tries to look at such an object with the eye of his mind. Having been accustomed to purely intelligible objects, he "knows" that this pale imitation is not one of them. But that is just the point. The sensible object is not given to him with any measure of clarity approaching the brilliantly luminous intelligibility of the Forms; its outlines are fuzzy, its shape unclear, its nature resistant to his delving mind. To say that he "knows" it is an image is to say that nothing about it appears clearly or exactly to him; and what is this but to say precisely that he does *not* have strict knowledge of it?

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[40] Cf. 518a.

[41] The Greek here is γνώσεσθε ἕκαστα τὰ εἴδωλα ἅττα ἐστὶ. So although it literally says "you will know each of the images, what they are (ἅττα ἐστὶ)" this is just to say, you will know that they are images; and Grube's translation is equivalent to this.

What Plato is really saying is this. Having seen the Forms, the philosopher will be better able (though not, of course, infallibly so) to recognize its resemblances; in effect, he will have vastly more reliable and trustworthy opinions concerning which laws or policies are good and just. *That* is what qualifies him as a ruler of the city, thus resolving Fine's third objection as well. Plato is not asking of him the impossible—to know objects that cannot be known. He is asking him to humble himself, pause temporarily from "graz[ing] freely in the pastures of philosophy"[42] and resign himself, for the good of the city which raised and educated him, to consorting once again with objects that yield something less than knowledge pure and simple, but which can be ordered, by the knowledge he does have, into a good, just, and ultimately happy city. Using his knowledge of the Forms, he models the customs and laws and affairs of the city, and even the hearts of his citizens, after them as best he may. Plato compares him to a painter who, striving for realism, constantly compares his subject to his painting.[43] Who should we believe about what is good and just for the city—the average craftsman or the typical soldier, who spend all their lives thinking that unstable, sensible, empirical objects are what is really real, or the philosopher-guardian, who has seen for himself the Good, the Beautiful, and the Just themselves? Whose intuitions shall we trust, whose opinions shall we expect to be more probably true and correct? The philosopher does not need to have knowledge of sensibles in order to be a fit and fully qualified ruler—only the (laborious and time-consuming) training that gives his opinions of sensibles the greatest possible likelihood of being true and correct. So much, then, for the third objection.

But what of the first half of the second objection, which claims that Plato had opinions about the Good? *Republic* 506c is specifically adduced as evidence. However, Plato's Socrates does

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[42] *Republic* 498b.

[43] Cf. *Republic* 500b-501c; the philosopher is (501c) a "painter of constitutions;" 500e: "the city will never find happiness until its outline is sketched by painters who use the divine model;" 500a-b: "Then don't you think they'd next sketch the outline of the constitution? —Of course. And I suppose that, as they work, they'd look often in each direction, towards the natures of justice, beauty, moderation, and the like, on the one hand, and towards those they're trying to put into human beings, on the other."

not there say that he has opinions about the Good. What he does say is that "opinions without knowledge are shameful and ugly things;" that "the best of them are blind;" and that they are "shameful, blind, and crooked things." If Plato really did have Socrates state his own opinions on the Good at some point (which, as we will see, he did not), he is plainly not about to let us think that such things are worth very much; this is no prelude of confidence. And when Plato does have Socrates begin his discussion of the Good (506d-e), Socrates explicitly says that he will put his own view (δοκοῦντος) aside and instead try to describe what the Good is like. So in what follows we are a degree removed even from Socrates' view, and only get what it is like; again our expectations are severely attenuated. However, even if the discussion of the Good that follows is not Socrates' own view but only its image, this does not change the fact that Socrates did have a view (which I take to be equivalent to an opinion) about the Good.[44] How is this possible on the two worlds thesis? The better question would be, why should this not be possible? All that opinions are, ultimately, are guesses; true or correct opinions are little better than lucky guesses. Plato can still maintain that there is a fundamental metaphysical divide between the intelligible and the opinable (and sensible)—i.e., that there are two worlds—and that knowledge is only of purely intelligible and permanently stable objects, while simultaneously admitting that opinion may sometimes stray beyond the realm it is proportioned to and competent in, without ever being able to attain the dignity of knowledge.

In fact, in light of Plato's metaphysics and philosophy of education, we should be surprised if he did not actively *encourage* pushing our opinions beyond the sensible. For sensible things, though the mere images of the Forms, *are* images. If they are indeed resemblances of what is really real, then the road that leads by and through them is the natural path to take on our upward ascent to the Forms. And now we have arrived at the core of Plato's philosophy of education. Education, as Plato sees it, is essentially a preparation for something (an activity or state) to come; and that preparation

[44] And also that that view or opinion shaped his discussion of the Good in the images that he chose.

consists in training the soul, practicing it on things and activities that are *like* what it will be doing when its educational course has been completed. By such activities the soul is made ready to receive what otherwise would have been too foreign to it. It is acclimatized and prepared by its education. The games of children should be "law-abiding," for by absorbing lawfulness in play they will "grow up into good and law-abiding men;"[45] the stories to be told to them should be "fine or beautiful,"[46] and their education in music and poetry should surround them with things that are fine and good, so that, "being nurtured" by such things, they will "become fine and good" and recognize the λόγος of the Beautiful and the Fine and the Good when they come;[47] the potential guardian should exercise his mind first on mathematics, geometry, and astronomy, whose objects are much closer to the changeless and perfect being of the Forms, thereby preparing him to gaze upon them;[48] the slave boy in the *Meno* is led by drawings in the sand, images of the true intelligible world, to recollect his knowledge of geometry;[49] and, grandest and most splendid of all, the true lover of beauty must be led through all the levels of beauty, from the beauty of bodies to souls, from souls to laws and customs, from laws and customs to the beauty of knowledge, and thence, having been thus prepared by its images and traces in particular things, to the vision of the Beautiful itself.[50] Nor must we forget that it is Plato's way to lead us out of images and shadows into the truth. As he recommends to others, so he educates us in his own writings. What is better known in almost all philosophy than the image of philosophical discovery, his Allegory of the Cave? What is more distinctive about his philosophizing than its use of stories, parables, and myths? What are the dialogues themselves but representations of living conversations, drawing us into philosophical discourse all the more effectively for that? And what are these stories, these myths, these parables and allegories, other than

[45] *Republic* 424e.
[46] Ibid. 377b-c
[47] Ibid. 401e-402b.
[48] Ibid. 521c-541b.
[49] *Meno* 81e-86c.
[50] *Symposium* 210a-211d.

images meant to lead us to the truth of which they are the images? Plato clearly thinks there is great merit in appealing to our lower cognitive capacities as a means of raising our souls to the truth of higher reality.

Plato's propaedeutic method also provides the solution to the fourth and fifth objections. First, as to the fourth (that "one cannot move from belief to knowledge about some single thing"): it is clearly Plato's intention to lead us from our beliefs upward to knowledge, if we are so capable. Plato's thought was this: opinions can, by mysteriously intimating the true, intelligible realm—one thinks especially of the way in which Beauty breaks through in the sensible world[51]—lead us beyond the world that we are, as yet, most familiar with. He would not deny that opinions can lead us to knowledge, and would in fact endorse their use (when it is rightly done) as the best and most effective way of coming to know. The only thing he would deny is that each and every opinion can lead to knowledge on the very same subject that the opinion was about. My opinion that the sun is shining (Fine's example) can never become knowledge, for such an object does not admit of knowledge, as we have seen over and over again; and the same applies to all sensible things. On the other hand, given the results of our study, there is nothing to prevent Plato from allowing the possibility that one could opine about the Forms, and then, by philosophical effort, come to realize that one's opinion is indeed true, and thereby acquire knowledge. The opinion would not then have *become* knowledge, but have been replaced by the knowledge. For even if one's opinion about the Forms turns out (upon reflection and after giving an adequate account) to be true, thereby giving one knowledge, these two mental states or possessions—opinion and knowledge—would still have been different in kind. One does not slowly merge into the other by a gradual process of transformation.

This leads me to the fifth objection, that according to the *Meno,* true opinions do in fact

[51] Cf. *Phaedrus* 250d-e.

become knowledge. Now it must be true, as we have seen, that knowledge in the strict sense is stable, both as a mental possession of the knower and by virtue of its object. What this means for opinions "aspiring" to knowledge is that, when they hover on the edge of the intelligible realm, about to break into the realm of the really real, they are also about to cease to be as opinions. As soon as we grasp the inner reason *why* some being is so and so, or see for ourselves the inner essence of some Form, we have ceased to opine, and begun to know. We have woken up; the dream is over. Opinion does not literally "become knowledge," any more than waking life is still a dream. The language of the *Meno* (97e-98a) in this respect is misleading, and thus plausibly suggesting the objection, but it gets the job done.

Once our opinion has been tied down, it is no longer an opinion; it is knowledge. For if, as knowledge, it were still as fleeting and transient as an opinion, it would *ipso facto* not yet be knowledge. Even a true opinion, like all opinions, can give us no guarantee that it *is* true, even though it is. If it could do that, then it would at once cease to be opinion and become—that is, be replaced by—knowledge. For if opinion could give us a secure guarantee that it had hit upon the truth, then we would no longer simply opine or believe *that* something is so and so; we would know *why* it is so and so. We would have given the "account of the reason why" that *Meno* 98a says makes knowledge different from opinion, true or false. The security afforded us, the insight into the "reason why," would tie the opinion down and "make" it knowledge. If true opinion does happen to "know" something stable, it will never realize it has hit upon something stable; it can always be persuaded away from its correct assertion, so long as it remains a mere opinion. Knowledge supplants true opinion and belief; the two cannot coexist simultaneously. So it cannot be true that, as the fifth and final objection has it, "For the *Meno,* knowledge implies true belief."[52] It would,

[52] Fine 218. Furthermore, as Taylor ("Plato's Epistemology," 172) points out, if the soul "is always in a state of 'having learned,'" [as the *Meno* has it,] then "there was no time at which it *did acquire* that knowledge; 'always having learned' is thus equivalent to 'never having *learned,* but always knowing." So it is more accurate to say that "true

however, be true to say that our opinions give way to, and hence can lead us towards, genuine knowledge.

Interrelated as they are, we must retain Plato's distinction between knowledge and opinion just as much as his distinction between the intelligible and sensible realms. I have, for the most part, been reinforcing the great divisions that separate the elements of these polarities; but at this point a sense of balance requires that their unity, both within each polarity and among both polarities together, should also be noted. Knowledge and opinion may be fundamentally distinct, but they are not antithetical; and the same can be said of the two worlds, the intelligible and the sensible. It should, I trust, be evident from what we have seen of Plato's upward ascent of knowledge—indeed, as he calls it, "the ascent to what is, which we say is true philosophy"[53]—that his two worlds were not separate or disjoint, but integrated and whole. There are two worlds, indeed, but only one *reality.*[54] Despite, and perhaps because of, the exclusive dignity of the Forms and the fact that knowledge can only be of them, his metaphysical picture is thoroughly unified. The Line may be divided, but it is still a continuous *line.* Sensible objects may at times confuse us and obscure our view of what is really real; but in fact the two worlds are not in competition.[55] For when properly viewed, the things of this world are meant to lead us on to those of the next.

belief…presupposes the permanent possession of knowledge" than that knowledge presupposes true belief. By recollection, we come to re-possess the knowledge *that we already have.*

[53] *Republic* 521c.

[54] Cf. Harte, "Plato's Metaphysics," 207: "One direction we should be careful to avoid being led is in the direction of talking as though Plato is somehow committed to two different *realities.* Assuming that reality is what there is—whatever that turns out to be—then it is hard to see that it makes any sense to talk of *two* realities; Plato's view, rather, should be understood as the view that the deliverances of perception do not exhaust (and may in some way distort) the contents of reality.

[55] Harte seems to indicate (Ibid.) that the "two worlds" doctrine is generally interpreted to mean that the two worlds must either work in harmony *or* be rivals. They seem to do a bit of both.