# Chapter 4
# Reason, knowledge and scepticism



In Chapters 1 and 2 we saw how immediately gripping a topic in ancient philosophy can be, but also how we engage with the tradition in ways which reflect our own historical openness to some aspects rather than others. In Chapter 3 we explored an aspect of ancient philosophy – the ethical framework of virtue and happiness – which has turned out particularly fruitful for modern philosophical explorations. Now we shall look at some of the strands of ancient thinking about knowledge, and the lack of it, which on the face of it show more contrast than likeness to modern thinking on the topic.

## Assumptions about knowledge



In modern epistemology, or theory of knowledge, certain assumptions are common. Among them is the view that the existence of knowledge must be justified against the sceptic, that is, the person who thinks that we can never know anything, because he holds that we can never meet the conditions for knowledge. Knowledge is taken to be, at least in part, a matter of being in the right relation to facts or information. (What is this right relation? Here we find very different views, which can barely be indicated here. Some philosophers stress justification, others the right causal connection, and there are sophisticated variants and combinations of these positions.) It is hard to imagine a modern epistemologist being impressed by the thought that your mechanic *knows* how to fix cars. It is

equally hard to think of her finding it important that someone who knows lots of facts in science, say, may lack understanding of them. And what modern epistemologist would greet an authoritative pronouncement that she in fact possessed knowledge by trying to refute it?

We can start to understand what is distinctive about ancient attitudes to knowledge by beginning with Socrates. His friend Chaerephon, we are told, asked the oracle of the god Apollo at Delphi whether anyone was wiser than Socrates, and Apollo replied that nobody was. On being told this, Socrates was surprised, and wondered what the oracle could possibly mean, since he was aware that he possessed no wisdom or expertise of his own. So he went round people considered experts, questioning them about their alleged expertise, but always finding either that they could produce no remotely adequate account of what they were supposed to be experts in, or that the expertise they did have was less important than they thought it. He concluded that Apollo's meaning must be that the wisest person is the person most aware of their own ignorance.



Of all ancient philosophers, Socrates is the most recognizable. There is good reason for this; for ancient culture in general Socrates serves as the symbolic figure of the Philosopher. However, it is also remarkable, given that his life is elusive, he wrote nothing, and left a series of wildly differing philosophical legacies.

Socrates lived from about 468–399 BC. His father was a stonemason called Sophroniscus, his mother a midwife called Phainarete. His circumstances were initially prosperous, but by the end of his life he was poor, as a result of neglecting his practical affairs in his devotion to philosophy. His wife, Xanthippe, has an aristocratic name; she passed into legend as the shrewish wife of the undomestic philosopher, but we do not know what lies behind this. They had three sons, one young at

the time of Socrates' death. Later, unreliable tradition ascribes to him a second wife, Myrto.

In 399 Socrates was tried and executed. The charges are strikingly vague and prejudicial, and it has always been suspected that the real agenda was political. We shall never know the facts. Clearly Socrates was widely regarded as an annoying and subversive presence in Athens.

Socrates identified the practice of philosophy with personal discussion and questioning, refusing to write anything. His followers elevated him to the founding figure of their mutually conflicting approaches to philosophy. Through his austere disciple Antisthenes, Socrates was regarded as the inspiration for the convention-rejecting Cynics; through his disciple Aristippus, he was claimed as the first hedonist. Through the tradition of Plato's Academy he was hailed as the first sceptic; through the Stoics he was regarded as the first ethical philosopher. In the writings of his younger follower Xenophon he appears as a conventional moralizer. In the writings of Plato, Socrates appears in a variety of guises. Sometimes he is the questioner who undermines the pretensions of others to understanding; sometimes he puts forward positive claims about ethics and metaphysics; sometimes he merely introduces other philosophers who have things of their own to say. Socrates continued to be influential as the figure of the philosopher par excellence, and his refusal to commit himself to authoritative teaching made him a usefully plastic figure whose influence could be claimed for widely different views and approaches.



This minimal construal of what a god means by calling a human 'wise' is in keeping with a Greek tradition of emphasizing the gulf between human and divine capacities. It also brings out some assumptions about ancient epistemology. Socrates goes round denying that he has knowledge, but this is never understood to mean that he does not know ordinary, everyday facts; he is aware of knowing large numbers of these. Further, he

sometimes claims to know quite substantial pieces of moral knowledge, such as that he should never do wrong, or abandon what he regards as his divine mission. What he denies having is knowledge in the sense of wisdom or understanding, which goes beyond mere knowledge of isolated facts and is assumed to be found, if at all, in people who are experts in something. When Apollo says that he is the wisest person, then, Socrates is troubled by it, since if a person is an expert in something, he would normally be expected at least to be aware of what he is an expert in. He responds to the oracle by trying to find someone wiser than he is, then, not out of a rude desire to show Apollo wrong, but because he does not understand the oracle, and the only way to find out how he is the wisest person is to find out what the expertise is which he is supposed to have. And, since this is obviously not self-declaring, the only way to find it out is to see how well he compares with other people in understanding what they are supposed to be wise about or experts in; and this can only be achieved by questioning them about what they are supposed to understand.



## The trial of Socrates

'The following sworn indictment has been brought by Meletus, son of Meletus, of Pitthos, against Socrates, son of Sophroniscus, of Alopeke. Socrates does wrong in not recognizing the gods which the city recognizes, and in introducing other, new divinities. Further, he is a wrongdoer in corrupting the young.'

This indictment against Socrates was preserved in the archives of Athens and reported by later scholars. Socrates was found guilty by about 280 votes to 220. (Juries consisted of 501 citizens.) The prosecutor proposed death as a penalty. Socrates at first refused to allow that he had done anything deserving of a penalty, but eventually suggested a fine. The jury voted for death by a larger margin, about 360 to 140.

A number of points emerge in Socrates' response to the oracle. Philosophically interesting questions about knowledge are taken not to concern our relation to particular facts – how I can *know*, for example, that the cat is on the mat. Philosophical attention is focused on a more complex matter: the possession of wisdom (*sophia* – the wisdom loved by the *philosophos*). It is assumed, taken to be a matter beyond argument, that wisdom is not just knowing individual facts, but being able to relate them to one another in a unified and structured way, one that involves understanding of a field or area of knowledge. (A useful parallel is that of knowing a language, which obviously involves more than knowing individual pieces of information about vocabulary and syntax, and requires the understanding of how these fit together in a unified way. The language example also brings out the way that this unified understanding is not a theoretical grasp cut off from practice, but may itself involve a practical ability to apply the understanding in question.) The philosophically interesting kind of knowledge involves a complex of items grasped together in a way that enables the knower to relate them to one another and to the structure as a whole. In all but the simplest cases this grasp will require an articulate ability to do this relating, one which will explain why the different items play the roles they do in the system. (Think of teaching a language.) Such a grasp will typically be found in someone who has expertise (*techne*) in a subject.



Socrates never raises the question whether there is such a thing as wisdom or expertise. This would be silly, since there obviously are experts in some fields, such as crafts. Presumably, though, Apollo meant more than that Socrates had the kind of expertise to be found in weavers and potters, so Socrates' search is for expertise in matters of importance in human life. Hence he is particularly keen to question self-styled experts in virtue, or what is worthwhile in life, such as the sophists claimed to be. He questions them on the topics that they claim to be experts in, and always succeeds in showing that they lack understanding of these topics, since they fail to explain satisfactorily why they say what they do, and indeed often make inconsistent claims. Socrates' questions do not start from a

position of his own, since this would only weaken the point that it is the other person who is supposed to display understanding of what *he* claims to know. When Socrates deflates the self-styled experts by showing them, just from premisses that they accept, that they don't understand the subject they have been pontificating about, they cannot defend themselves by faulting his views, since these have not come into it.

## Differing views of Socrates

'Mankind can hardly be too often reminded, that there was once a man named Socrates, between whom and the legal authorities and public opinion of his time there took place a memorable collision . . . This acknowledged master of all the eminent thinkers who have since lived – whose fame, still growing after more than two thousand years, all but outweighs the whole remainder of the names which make his native city illustrious – was put to death by his countrymen . . . Socrates was put to death, but the Socratic philosophy rose like the sun in heaven, and spread its illumination over the whole intellectual firmament.'

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*

'Socrates – that clown from Athens!'

Zeno of Sidon, Epicurean philosopher, second century BC

'We shall ignore Chaerephon's story about the oracle, since it is an utterly sophistical and cheap trick.'

'Socrates, the arguments you worked out are bogus. The conversations you had with the people you met are one thing, and what you did was another.'

Colotes, early Epicurean philosopher, third century BC

5. The image of Socrates: physically ugly, intellectually an enchanter

## Understanding and what it involves

What would show that a person has wisdom and understanding comes to be referred to as 'giving an account', *logon didonai*. *Logos* is the ordinary Greek word for reason; what you say about the topic you are supposed to understand must give reasons in a way that explains the matter. Socrates' victims can produce plenty of words, but they fail to give a reasoned account of their subjects, and so are shown not to understand what they are talking about.

What are the standards for 'giving an account'? This is obviously crucial for the question of whether you really know, that is, understand something. Minimally, of course, you have to be able to keep your end up in an argument and show that your position is consistent. But something more positive than this seems required too. One major strand of ancient epistemology consists of exploring the requirements for 'giving an account', providing the reasoned basis necessary if you are to have understanding of a field of knowledge.



In many of Plato's dialogues Socrates suggests that you have to be able to provide a satisfactory answer to the questioner who wants to know what virtue is, or courage, or friendship, or the like. This is obviously not provided by trivially appealing to the meaning of words; it has to express the nature of virtue, or courage, in such a way that the person to whom it is successfully conveyed will be able not only to recognize examples of virtue, or courage, but to explain why they are examples of the virtue in question, relating them to its nature. This exploration is sometimes called a search for 'Socratic definitions', although 'definition' is an unhappy term here.

One standing puzzle about these dialogues is the following. Socrates is ambitiously searching for understanding of difficult concepts like virtue and courage. But his approach is always to question others, starting only from shared premisses. This kind of *ad hominem* arguing relies only on

what the opponent accepts and what it produces, time after time, are conclusions as to what virtue, courage, friendship and so on are *not*. Some self-styled expert makes a claim as to what virtue, etc. are, and Socrates shows that this cannot be the right answer. This does not, however, seem to move us towards understanding what virtue, courage and so on *are*. Socrates shows that others lack understanding, but not in a way that seems to be cumulative towards obtaining understanding of his own. There appears to be a mismatch between the goal and the methods. There are many ways of resolving this puzzle, and philosophers are divided over it.



Plato has a variety of concerns with knowledge, to some of which we shall return. Some of his most famous passages, however, show the dominance of what we can call the expertise model for knowledge. What is taken to matter for knowledge is whether you can, as an expert can, grasp the relevant items in a way that relates them to one another and to the field as a whole, and can give a reasoned account of this, one which explains the particular judgements you make and relates them to your unified grasp of the whole. And in some places Plato rethinks the crucial idea of giving a reasoned account, taking mathematics as his model.



In the *Republic*, Plato develops possibly the most ambitious model for knowledge that any philosopher has put forward. Now the aspiring knower has to complete an apprenticeship of many years' mathematical studies. Mathematics – by which he is primarily thinking of the kind of systematized geometry of which we have a later example in Euclid – is remarkable for its rigour, system and clarity. It struck Plato as a perfect example of the kind of structured body of knowledge that had been presupposed all along by the expertise model. Moreover, all the features of the expertise model seem to fit mathematics in a clear and impressive way. Mathematics is not a heap of isolated results; particular theorems can clearly be seen to depend on other results which are proved in turn. The whole system begins from a clear and limited set of concepts and postulates. The way in which we get from these first principles to particular

results is also lucid and rigorous. It is easy to see why Plato might see in an earlier version of Euclid a splendid model of knowledge as a structured and unified system, one where it is absolutely clear what the knower knows and how she knows it, how the system holds together and what it is to give a reasoned account of what you know – namely, a proof.

Mathematics as a model for knowledge also introduces two new notes. One is that mathematical results are peculiarly unassailable; we do not waste time arguing that Pythagoras' theorem is wrong. We have seen that certainty and justification of what is known are not prominent in the cluster of issues that are the focus of the expertise model, where what matters is understanding that can be applied in practice. But Plato is clearly at some points attracted by the idea of a body of knowledge that is not open to serious questioning.



The other point flows from the fact that mathematics provides us with a body of firm knowledge which does not seem in any plausible way to have as its object the world that we experience, in an everyday way, through the senses. Pythagoras' theorem was not discovered by measuring actual drawn triangles and their angles, and irregularities in these are obviously irrelevant to it. Plato is attracted to the view that a body of knowledge can exist to which our access is solely by using our minds and reasoning. He is not the last philosopher to be tempted by the view that the powers of philosophical reason are more developed versions of our ability to reason mathematically.

In the *Republic*'s central books, we find that to have knowledge requires mastery of a systematic field whose contents are structured as rigorously as the axioms and theorems in Euclid, and linked by chains of proof. Moreover, Plato goes one better than the mathematicians in claiming that philosophy actually proves its own first principles – something which mathematicians fail to do – and so does not begin from assumptions, but shows how everything flows from a first principle which is proved and not assumed. (Here matters get obscure, particularly since Plato makes

everything depend on what he calls the Form of the Good.) As with mathematics, what is known is a formal system – what Plato famously regards as the world of Forms – and not the world of experience revealed to us by the senses; indeed, Plato goes out of his way to stress the extent to which the person thinking in abstract mathematical terms will come to conclusions at odds with experience.

This is, of course, an *ideal*, something emphasized by the way that the only people who, Plato thinks, have a chance of attaining it are those who are exceptionally talented by nature and have been brought up in ideal cultural circumstances. This warns us against thinking that we can find any actual example of knowledge. The expertise model on its own seemed to hold out the chance at least that knowledge was attainable. But when the requirements are made as formal and demanding as they become when mathematics is the model, the conditions for knowledge get set so high as to be unattainable by us.





## Understanding and the sciences

Aristotle, in this as in many matters Plato's greatest pupil, takes over the *Republic* model, but with important modifications which make it philosophically far more fruitful. He develops the idea in his work on the structure of a completed body of knowledge, the unfortunately titled *Posterior Analytics*. (It is so called because it follows his treatise on logic, the *Prior Analytics*.)



For Aristotle, Plato goes wrong in thinking that all knowledge hangs together in a unified structure. This makes the mistake of thinking that all the objects of knowledge together make up a single system, and can be known as such. But, Aristotle thinks, there is no such single system; different branches of knowledge employ fundamentally different methods, and do so because their subject-matters are fundamentally different. Aristotle does not disagree that something like Euclid's geometry is a reasonable model for knowledge; like Plato, he is willing to appeal to