

1 Knowledge and Belief: Plato

Two Theories of Knowledge and Belief

Ever since Plato proposed them, there have been two main theories of knowledge and belief. One of them, presented in his *Republic*, is that knowledge and belief are two different and opposite states of mind, similar in some formal respects, but with knowledge in no way being definable in terms of belief. The second view, suggested already in the *Meno* but explored in detail later in the *Theaetetus*, is that the difference between knowledge and belief is not so absolute, that knowledge is actually a form of belief, so that it must be defined in terms of belief. In this view, knowledge is *true* belief accompanied by an *account*, as Plato puts it, or, in the language of contemporary philosophers, knowledge is *justified true belief*.

The two views are incompatible with each other, for in the former, knowledge is not only not definable in terms of belief; it is not definable at all. Instead, in this view, knowledge is like some ultimate notions such as being, space, and time or like some elemental sensations such as the sense of pain, the taste of salt, and the sight of the color red— notions and sensations that are primitive and ultimate and therefore not definable in terms of anything else. Like them, knowledge is *sui generis*, in a class all by itself. We can call this first view the *indefinabilist* view of knowledge. By contrast, the second view is a *definabilist* view; according to it, not only can knowledge be defined, but it must be defined, if we are to understand its nature at all. It must be defined in terms of truth, belief, and the ability to give an account.

In this chapter I will develop an outline of my own view of knowledge as true belief with the ability to give an account—justified true belief. In pursuing this aim, however, I will emphasize a very important point in the alternative view, *viz.*, its focus on a unique component in one *kind* of human knowledge. This component is commonly called *experience*, although I shall usually call it *acquaintance*. Knowledge by acquaintance may even be the ultimate source of everything we know, and thus, in that way, too, it may be *sui generis*, in a class by itself. Even if this is so, it does not follow that knowledge by acquaintance is, as the indefinabilist approach affirms, the only

kind of knowledge we possess. I hope to show instead that human knowledge, in religion as in all of life, includes also those many things we learn by testimony and by inference. Indeed, it will become evident that knowledge by acquaintance even presupposes testimony and inference, in such a way that we cannot even account for knowledge by acquaintance as the ultimate origin of all our knowledge without considering its dependence upon them. In short, I will defend a theory of knowledge on which acquaintance is to be incorporated, along with testimony and inference, in an analysis of knowledge as justified true belief. Being acquainted with something, though in itself something ultimate and undefinable, is just one of three main ways—the others being testimony and inference—by which we *come* to know and, thus, by which we can *justify* our true beliefs. Not only is the justification of belief thus inseparable from considering the origin of belief, but the definition of knowledge is also inseparable from understanding how it originates.

Beginning with Plato. I begin my study with Plato, not only because he is the first philosopher to elaborate the two views but also because he discusses knowledge and belief in a way that makes it both interesting and relatively easy to discover the issues that need to be addressed. Furthermore, Plato is important for his enormous influence on the entire history of the topic. The history of philosophy, as Alfred North Whitehead reminds us in his *Process and Reality*, “consists of a series of footnotes to Plato” (63); we do well then to begin with the original text: the Platonic dialogues. If one thing is clear in the footnotes to these dialogues that constitute the history of philosophy, it is that these notes elaborate one or the other of the two main views of knowledge that are to be found in the original text. This will become evident in the chapters that follow. St. Augustine insists, as we shall see, on the *difference* between knowledge and belief, and he quite ignores the possibility that knowledge can be defined in terms of belief; hence he perpetuates the indefinabilist view. The view has been revived in recent times by such philosophers as John Cook Wilson (*Statement and Inference*, 1926) and H. H. Prichard (*Knowledge and Perception*, 1950). Alvin Plantinga, on the other hand, has developed a specific theory of knowledge as justified true belief in the context of a plethora of justified true belief theories that have dominated the epistemology of the last several decades. And so Plato’s quest for knowledge as justified true belief is still very much alive; indeed, at the moment it occupies center stage.

Which of the two views is Plato’s own view? We can hardly accept the thought that he meant to teach two incompatible views of

knowledge at the same time. It may look as if he did, and even that he leaves them unreconciled; but that would be a strange conclusion to reach about the thinker who, inspired by the great Socrates before him, took pains to find the truth on any topic by first clearing away the inconsistencies in the thinking of those who claimed to have already found it. I shall argue that Plato does not really embrace both views, that his more settled view is that knowledge is true belief accompanied by an account, even though he never explicitly rejects what he says about knowledge being quite opposed to belief. But I am less concerned to discover what Plato really thought—a very complicated question—than to show that the indefinabilist approach to knowledge is mistaken and that knowledge correctly understood is defined as justified true belief.

How Each View Arises. Before turning to Plato, it will be useful to indicate how each view arises and makes some sense. I will do this by considering briefly the discussion of one recent influential writer, H. H. Price, who seems quite consciously torn between the two views. Actually, Price moves from an indefinabilist view, under the acknowledged influence of Cook Wilson, to a definabilist view, observing that the latter view prevails among contemporary epistemologists. Still, in making this move, Price does not quite give up his penchant for indefinabilism. Thus in an early essay, "Some Considerations about Belief" (originally published in 1934), Price asserts that "knowledge is something ultimate and not further analysable. It is simply the situation in which some entity or some fact is directly present to consciousness" (1973, 41). Two considerations lead Price to this conclusion. First, knowledge is (as it seems to him in this essay) identical with direct acquaintance with an object, whereas "when I believe truly, there is a fact which makes my belief true. But this fact is not itself present to my mind" (42). Second, "knowledge is by definition infallible" whereas "belief on the other hand is always fallible" (41). Later, however, he recognizes two further points: first, that in this view, "we know very little indeed" (51); and second, that we can be "reasonably assured" by evidence of many of our beliefs, even though this does not alter their essential fallibility (52). These two further points lead him to distinguish a "strict" sense of knowledge in which it signifies both direct acquaintance with an object and infallibility from "a wider sense, a sense in which it is *not* contrasted with belief" and with its connotation of fallibility (51). Still, in this essay Price stops short of developing a theory of *knowledge* based on all these points. He is content to develop only a theory of "proper belief": "Belief proper, the theory says, is reasoned assent to an entertained proposition; acceptance is unreasoned

absence of dissent" (50). Here, then, he proposes only a theory of *rational belief*, as that is opposed to "acceptance" or "mere belief."

Decades later, however, in his book *Belief* (1969) Price develops this earlier theory of rational belief into a theory of knowledge, admitting "that there are some sorts of knowledge . . . which can be defined, with suitable precautions, in terms of belief" (91). These "precautions" actually yield a version of the justified true belief theory of knowledge: "(a) that the proposition believed is true, (b) that the believer has conclusive reasons for it, (c) that he believes it with full conviction" (91). Still, Price maintains that any knowledge so defined is "completely different" from knowledge as direct acquaintance with an object present to the mind, because "it makes no sense to ask for reasons" for the latter (90–91). Thus Price appears to offer two theories of knowledge, one in which it is identical with acquaintance and infallible and another in which it is justified true belief. This ambivalence about the nature of knowledge appears already in Plato, as we shall see. I will argue that we must, of course, recognize the difference between knowing by acquaintance and knowing in other ways, but that it does not follow from this that we need a theory of knowledge for each one. Price suggests that we do, as Plato did before him, because of an alleged connection between acquaintance and infallibility—an issue to which we will return.

If the two theories are thus defended side by side today by an important philosopher who seems consciously torn between them, and each one originated side by side in Plato himself, the first great philosopher to theorize about knowledge and belief, there must be some lessons to learn. One of these is that the two views reflect what Price, in his early essay, calls a "muddle" deeply embedded in our language itself, in our everyday use of the terms *knowledge* and *belief*:

Thus common usage seems to be simply muddled. . . . On the one hand it includes under the head of knowing the firm belief in a reasonably certain proposition; on the other, it refuses to admit that knowing can be mistaken. And yet if the proposition is only reasonably certain, there is the possibility that we may be mistaken in believing it. (50–51)

Let us elaborate upon this muddle. For it does seem clear that everyday use leads us in two opposite directions: that knowledge is not belief, and that it is.

Knowledge Is Not Belief. First, it is clear that knowledge implies truth whereas belief does not. If I know that my desk is brown, it can-

not turn out that my desk is a different color. If, however, it is the case that my desk is different color, then I cannot know that it is brown; and if I think it is, I am mistaken. What I am mistaken in, however, is not some knowledge I have, but a belief. People once believed that the earth is flat; indeed, some may even have claimed to know it. Now that we know it is not flat but round, we do not deny that people once believed it to be flat; rather what we say is that those who claimed to know it is flat were mistaken. What they had was a belief about the shape of the earth, and it was a mistaken belief. No one can know what is not so.

In view of this, it can be said—and Plato was the first to say it—that knowledge is infallible whereas belief is not. To be infallible is to be incapable of being mistaken. So knowledge is incapable of being mistaken, but belief can be mistaken. And from this it seems to follow that knowledge and belief must be two different and incompatible states of mind, the one irreducible to the other. For if knowledge cannot err, and belief can err, how can knowledge be a form of belief? And thus we are led to the first approach: knowledge is not a form of belief, but something unique and in a class by itself, not to be confused with or thought of in terms of belief.

Knowledge Is Belief. On the other hand, it also clearly seems absurd for me to know that my desk is brown but then to tell myself or someone else that I do not believe it. Most people today know that the earth is round; but if one of them were asked, not whether he knows it but whether he believes it, he would normally reply that he did. "Normally," I say, for there are special circumstances in which a person might deny that he believes it. For example, if a member of the Flat Earth Society has just asked me, "Do you really believe it?" I might well respond, with the appropriate emphasis, "I don't believe it; I know it." But with that reply I would be invoking the *difference* between knowledge and belief we noted earlier to convey to the Flat Earther that I am *not* mistaken; this consequence is clearly implied by my saying I know it, but not by my saying I believe it. Or again, I might sensibly say to a friend who visits me following a long absence: "Here you are; I can't believe it!" But then I am not really denying that I believe something I also know; I am only expressing my surprise and excitement over our meeting again, and what I mean is that the long absence of my friend hinders my calm acceptance of the pleasant turn of events. Therefore, unless there is some special point to be made that reflects the difference between knowledge and belief, I can quite correctly say that I believe the things that I know. I know that twice two is four. Do I believe it? Of course, I do. I can even say

that if I did not believe it, I could *not* know it. Thus to know something is also to believe it. No one can know what he does not believe.

From this it follows that knowledge and belief are not different states of mind; quite the contrary, it looks very much as if knowledge is a form of belief itself. Instead of being a unique and indefinable state of mind, knowledge appears to be definable as a form of belief. Of course, it must be *true* belief, for we just saw that no one can know what is not so. But if knowledge is true belief, it is *belief*, and we have come out with just the opposite conclusion from the one we reached a moment ago. Then we concluded that knowledge is not belief, now we conclude that it is.

One of these conclusions must be wrong, and we should try to discover which one it is. Knowledge cannot be mistaken, belief can. But belief *need not* be mistaken, and so when it is not, there is nothing to prevent it from being at least a *component* of knowledge, which cannot be mistaken. When a true belief is also justified, the combination may produce the knowledge that cannot be mistaken. It may be difficult to locate in this combination just what creates its "infallibility"; but it could be there somewhere. A bulletproof vest is impenetrable by a bullet, but such a vest may consist of three different materials, none of which by itself makes it so, though all working together do. So it may be with belief. When belief is combined with truth and justification, something is created that makes the resulting state of mind infallible, even though belief by itself is not. With this sketch of a recent discussion of knowledge and belief in hand we are ready to turn our inquiry to Plato.

The Republic Approach

In Book V of the *Republic* Plato contrasts the infallibility of knowledge with the fallibility of belief, and from that contrast he derives his account of knowledge and belief as two essentially different states of mind (477). He reaches this conclusion in a curious way that, though not in vogue today, is instructive nevertheless. He holds that the *objects* in the universe come in two fundamental, mutually exclusive, and jointly exhaustive kinds. One kind of object is indivisible, eternal, unchanging, and ultimate; these he called the *Forms*. The other kind is divisible, temporal, always changing, and not ultimate; these are the physical objects in the material world about us. Furthermore, he held that we are in touch with both kinds of object, but that, unless we are philosophers, we are much more aware, by means of our senses, of physical objects that exist in space and time than we are aware, by

means of reason, of the Forms. Now belief, in the *Republic* account, is the state of mind that results from our contact with physical objects, whereas knowledge is the state of mind that results from our contact with the Forms.

Plato's view here is that the infallibility of knowledge (its unchangeable relationship to truth) arises from the unchanging character of its objects (the Forms), whereas the fallibility of belief (its changeable character with respect to the truth) arises from the changing character of its objects (individual, physical things). Just as these latter objects constitute an intermediate reality between the Forms and nothingness, so belief is an intermediate cognitive state between knowledge and ignorance (478c-d). The key point is that each cognitive state, knowledge and belief, is caused by a certain kind of relationship of the mind to its object. The nature of this relationship is suggested by the terms we have already used: the mind is *in touch with* an object; it has *contact* with it. These terms are metaphors, of course, drawn from a relationship that can exist between physical objects.

It will be useful, perhaps, to use a different, more literal term. The term I will use is *acquaintance*. In *Plato's Republic*, R. C. Cross and A. D. Woozley observe:

When [Plato] is talking of knowledge and belief the model of seeing or touching does seem to be prominent. Now, of course, in the case of sight and touch, the notions of acquaintance . . . , of objects, of the reality of the objects, all have a place. If I am seeing or touching something, then I am immediately aware of, directly acquainted with, a thing or object, and it must be a real thing or object—there must be something there that I am seeing or touching. (176)

In *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, F. M. Cornford translates a parallel passage in the *Sophist* as follows: "We have intercourse with Becoming by means of the body through sense, whereas we have intercourse with Real being by means of the soul through reflection" (248a). He comments on the term *koinonein*, "have intercourse with," as follows:

Koinonein ('are in touch with,' Taylor) is chosen as a neutral word covering all forms of cognition, the usual words (*eidenai*, *gignoskein*, *epistasthai*, *aisthanesthia*, etc.) being too much specialized and associated either with knowledge to the exclusion of sensation and perception or *vice versa*. It is used of social and business intercourse, and also of sexual intercourse. (239)

The idea behind Plato's language is clearly the intimacy that characterizes the knowledge of something by direct experience of it.

The term *acquaintance* is derived from the Latin *ad* (intensive) and *cognoscere* (to know), which in turn is derived from the Greek *gignoskein*, mentioned earlier. The special kind of knowledge suggested is just that which results from direct experience of an object. This directness also connotes intimacy, closeness, especially as it pertains to the knowledge of other persons. The *American Heritage Dictionary* offers as the first meaning for *acquaint* v.: "to make familiar"; and *familiar* is derived from *familial*. Plato's view, then, is that when I am acquainted with a physical object which changes, either slowly or rapidly over a period of time, my mental state about that object (belief) must change just as it changes, with the consequence that there is no fixed truth in my mind; whereas when I am acquainted with an unchanging Form, my mental state (knowledge of that Form) will remain fixed and unchanged in truth, just as that Form remains fixed and unchanged in reality.

It is easy for us to think of some of our beliefs as being formed by a direct acquaintance with sensible objects, but not so easy to think of belief as a constantly changing "intermediate state" that has no fixity, or at least no fixed truth. This is because we think in terms of *particular beliefs*, each of which is true or false, depending on whether or not some object truly is *at the time* what we believe it to be at that time (or at any other time). But this view introduces a complexity into the nature of belief that is absent from the *Republic* account. This complexity becomes evident when Plato begins to explore his second approach to knowledge, viz., knowledge as true belief accompanied by an account.

The Meno. Actually, Plato first takes this approach already in the *Meno*, which was written before the *Republic*. Although he mentions it at several points in the *Republic* (see 427–428, 506, 538), he does not elaborate on it; hence I do not take this approach as distinctive of the *Republic*. In this approach, Plato distinguishes knowledge, not from *belief*, but from *true belief*. This difference in starting point makes all the difference between the two accounts. Knowledge is still the more excellent mental state, but here it is more excellent than *true belief*, not belief as a general, changing state of the mind. Plato states the difference between knowledge and true belief: "And this is why knowledge is more honorable and excellent than true opinion, because fastened by a chain" (*Meno*, 98a, Jowett). So knowledge, on this account, has something that *true belief* ("opinion") does not have: it is "fastened by a chain."

Notice two critical differences between this account and that of the *Republic*. First, truth now enters the picture as a characteristic of belief, and without any special attention either to the question of the *object* of that belief or to the *relationship* of the belief to that object; this relationship was, according to the *Republic*, one of acquaintance with it. In *Plato on Knowledge and Reality*, Nicholas P. White comments on *Theaetetus* 201e, which picks up this account of knowledge. Observes White: "This passage, like the rest of *Theaetetus* 200–210, is plainly an attempt to say what knowledge is, quite apart from the question of what sort of objects it may be concerned with" (176). Here, then, Plato analyzes mind in its state of belief quite apart from the changing nature of the real object of that belief.

Second, the *Meno* account focuses not upon belief as a general mental state of mind that changes over a period of time, but upon a *single* belief as a *particular* mental state that is *true*. This new focus implies, significantly, a fixity about belief that was lacking in belief as a changing mental state. A *true* belief does not change its truth status, although, of course, the true belief about the weather in Athens today may have to be *replaced* by a different true belief about the weather in Athens tomorrow. But this way of changing our *particular* beliefs was as commonplace to Plato as it is to us. By changing our belief about the weather as it changes we do not think the truth of any one of the beliefs we have along the way changes. The truth of a given belief about a temporal state of affairs is as fixed and eternal as the truth of the knowledge of any of the eternal Forms. Truth is fixed and eternal, even when it refers to noneternal things.

The question now arises, Why are these true beliefs about temporal things not *knowledge*, solely in virtue of their being true? In the *Meno*, Plato suggests the answer in a simile. A true belief is like an image of Daedalus: it is "beautiful and fruitful," but there is the problem of making it *stay put*. According to the myth, Daedalus was so skillful an artisan that he could make images of living things that moved. So, too, true belief is "beautiful and fruitful," for it is as good as knowledge as a guide to life. Unlike knowledge, however, and like an image of Daedalus, it can get away from us, it can be lost. So true belief, even though in one sense fixed by truth, is not fixed in some other sense. It is not fixed, it seems, *in our minds*, although knowledge is. The reason for this is, says Plato, that these true beliefs, like the images of Daedalus, are not "fastened by a chain." Here the Jowett translation gives us a metaphor. The Grube translation says that "true beliefs are not worth much until one ties them down by [giving] an account of the reason why" (98a). The Greek is *deō aitia logismos*; the idea is that a true belief will be knowledge, will be *fixed in our minds*,

whenever it is “bound” (in our minds, presumably) by an “account or reasoning out of the cause or origin” of the belief.

The *Theaetetus* Approach

Plato elaborates this approach to knowledge in the *Theaetetus*. In this dialogue, he first argues that knowledge is not to be identified with the appearances of sensation because these, though they are like knowledge in being infallible, are unlike knowledge in always changing; thus they are like belief in the *Republic* account. He next argues that knowledge is not just true belief because, although true belief is true like knowledge, it is unlike knowledge in that it is acquired by persuasion and hearsay, not by instruction or eyewitness experience. Plato had earlier made this contrast in the *Republic* when he distinguished between lower education, which inculcates true belief by the persuasion of good examples, and higher education, which aims at knowledge by reason and reasoning.

Finally, Plato explores the proposal that knowledge is true belief “tied down” with an *account* (201d–210a). In contemporary terms, I know something whenever I believe it, it is true, and I am justified in (or can give a justification for) my belief. In “Concepts of Epistemic Justification,” W. P. Alston observes that this distinction between *being justified* and *being able to give a justification* has been neglected in many recent accounts of justification. He argues that the former is the fundamental one for the sake of a justified true belief approach to knowledge, because the latter presupposes abilities on the part of the knower that the knower may not and even need not possess (58). Plato does not make the distinction, but his discussion in *Theaetetus* 206d–210b clearly implies that the knower must be able to give the account.

In the last section of the *Theaetetus*, Plato examines three possible interpretations of “giving an account,” only to reject each one. He thereby gives the impression that he is not very committed to, or even that he is abandoning, the whole approach; we may therefore be tempted to conclude that his settled view is that of the *Republic* approach. Against that conclusion, however, are two pieces of evidence. First, the *Theaetetus* definition of knowledge as “true belief with an account” appears at too many critical points in Plato’s dialogues for us to dismiss it simply because he fails in the *Theaetetus* to elaborate it to his satisfaction. I quote some of the most important of these:

Socrates. If a man knows certain things, will he be able to give an account of them, or will he not?

- Simmius.** Unquestionably he will, Socrates. (*Phaedo* 76b, Hackforth)
- Diotima.** Do you not see that there is a mean between wisdom and ignorance?
- Socrates.** And what may that be?
- Diotima.** Right opinion, which, as you know, being incapable of giving a reason, is not knowledge (for how can knowledge be devoid of reason?) (*Symposium* 202a, Jowett)
- Timaeus.** Now we must affirm that they [intelligence (*noesis*, another word for knowledge) and belief] are two different things, for they are distinct in origin and unlike in nature. The one is produced in us by instruction, the other by persuasion; the one can always give a true account of itself, the other can give none; the one cannot be shaken by persuasion, whereas the other can be won over; and true belief, we must allow, is shared by all mankind, intelligence only by the gods and a small number of men. (*Timaeus* 51e, Cornford)

Second, we must add to these references some key passages in the *Republic* itself. Even though Plato in a critical passage there gives us the acquaintance theory of knowledge that I call the *Republic* account, at other points he describes one who has knowledge as being able to give an account. For example, "And have you not noticed that opinions not based on knowledge are ugly things? The best of them are blind; or do you think that those who express a true opinion without knowledge are any different from blind people who yet follow the right road?" (506c, Grube). Significantly, Socrates draws this contrast between knowledge and true belief in the context of his search for the highest knowledge of all, knowledge of the Good. True, presently, when Glaucon asks Socrates to give an account of the Good, Socrates begs off (506d). But it does not follow from this momentary refusal by Socrates that knowledge of the Good, when sought and found, does not consist of true belief with an account.

Even knowledge of the Good consists in being able to give an account, as Socrates later confirms after twice repeating that knowledge requires giving an account:

Further, I said, do those who cannot give an exact a reasoned account of what is said know anything at all of the things we say they must know? (53le, Grube)

And you also call a dialectician the man who can give a reasoned account of the reality of each thing? To the man who can give no such account, either to himself or another, you will to that extent deny knowledge of his subject? (534b, Grube)

Immediately upon this second repetition of the view, Socrates applies it to the knowledge of the Good itself, which he has just said is “beyond my powers to express”—presumably because of its transcendence. The passage is as clear as it is dramatic in its declaration that knowledge—even of the Good—requires an ability to give an account:

And the same applies to the Good. The man who cannot by reason distinguish the Form of the Good from all others, who does not, as in a battle, survive all refutations, eager to argue according to reality and not according to opinion, and who does not come through all the tests without faltering in reasoned discourse—such a man you will say does not know the Good itself, nor any kind of good. If he gets hold of some image of it, it is by opinion, not knowledge; he is dreaming and asleep throughout his present life, and, before he wakes up here, he will arrive in Hades and go to sleep forever. (534b–c, Grube)

I conclude, therefore, that it would be a mistake simply to regard Plato’s identification of knowledge with acquaintance—what I have called his *Republic* account—as his definitive theory of knowledge and belief. My own view is that we should do what Plato clearly did not do, that is, incorporate his acquaintance approach to knowledge into his more complex approach that knowledge is justified true belief.

The Meno, Again, on True Belief. I noted earlier that Plato introduces the notion of true belief in the *Meno* without any special attention the *object* of belief. Implicit in this approach, I said, was its attempt to discuss how true belief might be knowledge without connecting such true belief to a special kind of object. I need now to elaborate and clarify what this approach further implies. Just before making his claim that true belief must be accompanied by an account, Socrates gives an example of the difference between knowledge and true belief:

- S. ... A man who knew the way to Larissa, or anywhere else you like, and went there and guided others would surely lead them well and correctly?
—Certainly.

- S. What if someone had had a correct opinion as to which was the way but had not gone there nor indeed had knowledge of it, would he not also lead correctly?
—Certainly. (97a–b, Grube)

The example embodies the Platonic theme that true belief, no less than knowledge, can serve as a reliable guide in human life. Why is this so? The answer, of course, is because true belief, like knowledge, is *true*. How then do they differ? We have already seen that they differ, according to Plato, by knowledge staying *fixed in the mind* whereas true belief does not, because knowledge is, and true belief by itself is not, *accompanied by an account*. The function of the account, therefore, is to give the mind *control* over its true beliefs, so that they will stay fixed and not “run away” when challenged by opposing beliefs.

Acquaintance vs. Testimony. The example, however, points up a second difference. The person who knows the way to Larissa has taken the way himself, and so is acquainted with it; whereas the person who believes truly has not taken it, and so is not acquainted with what he believes. And so the *Meno* discussion involves the object of knowledge after all, but suggests by its example that the believer whose belief is true is *disconnected* from the object of his belief because he is not, like the knower, acquainted with it.

This difference between knowledge and true belief invites both a comparison with and a contrast to the *Republic* account. In line with that account, the guide in the *Meno* account who knows the way to Larissa knows it in virtue of his having taken that way; he is an eyewitness, who has seen the object on which he reports. Unlike the *Republic* account, however, the guide here who has only true belief, and no acquaintance with the way to Larissa, seems to have no object at all for his belief, even though his belief is true. But is that really so? No, and we can see that it is not so by asking how *this* guide—the guide who has only true belief—acquired his belief. Plato does not go into this question, but we can easily supply the answer. Either the believer was told the way to Larissa or he was not. If he was told, it was either by someone who *had* taken the way himself or by someone else who, like himself in his present state, possessed the true belief. If he was not told, he probably saw a sign or read a map. In all these cases, however, he acquired his belief by the *testimony* of someone else. Such testimony is the only other way to find anything out (except for inference, which we will discuss later), if one is not, or cannot become, acquainted with it for oneself.

We can now begin to see that true belief as well as knowledge

has an object and what that object must be like. If one who believes truly does so by having seen a sign or a map, it may look as if the object of his belief is that sign or that map, for either of these is a form of testimony and illustrates clearly something of the nature of the *object* of a true belief. A sign or a map that shows the way to Larissa, as an object of belief, is not the way to Larissa itself. It is rather a *substitute* for the way, and if the sign is a good one or the map is accurate, it *represents* the way. If, however, the sign is not a good one, or the map is inaccurate, it will mislead the believer and induce a *false* belief. Hence the object of a belief is a substitute for what the belief is about; and it can be a good substitute or a bad one. When it is a good substitute, it represents what it purports to represent; when it is a bad substitute, it fails to represent what it purports to represent.

Propositions

What then is a true, or a false, *belief*? A sign or a map that leads to a belief is not a belief nor are the words in which a belief can be expressed. There are many different possible signs, many different possible maps, and many different possible words and possible forms of words, in which the same belief can be expressed. No two signs need to be alike in shape, color, or how they reveal that they are signs; no two maps need to agree in the graphic symbols used to show the routes from city to city. Both signs and maps will likely use some language (though not necessarily: a sign or a map can portray a city with a nonlinguistic, graphic symbol that identifies it) and there need be no uniformity in just what language is used or how much. Likewise, no two Greeks will use precisely the same Greek words to describe the way to Larissa to a fellow Greek who asks; and a Persian may be able to describe the way only in Persian words. Yet there is only one shortest, direct way to Larissa from a given point on which all these users of signs, linguistic and nonlinguistic, agree. So there is also only one true belief that *represents* that way. There must be, therefore, some *one thing* amidst all the variety of signs and symbols that eliminates the accidental differences between these signs and symbols that purport to represent the reality, but that still purports to represent that reality. That thing must be the *proposition*.

It does not seem that Plato had the concept of a proposition as so defined. This fact leads to a number of difficulties in his theory of knowledge that he might otherwise have avoided (N. P. White 176, 204; Cornford 1957, 113, 264). In *Plato's Theory of Understanding*, Jon Moline argues that what Plato means by *epistēmē* "differed in funda-

mental ways from the concept of knowledge as it is now employed" and that we should therefore translate it as "understanding" (6). Moline suggests that contemporary epistemology is unduly restrictive in its preoccupation with propositional knowledge, with the result that "it has obscured some of Plato's more interesting philosophical aims, methods, assumptions, and contributions" (x-xi). His book makes a good case for the latter thesis; but I am not convinced by his suggestions that propositional knowledge is not a very important (albeit implicit) component of Plato's *epistēmē*. I agree with other scholars that the concept of a proposition is not only helpful but also essential for interpreting Plato's theory. The concept will not only help us to explain how beliefs can be true or false, as Plato claims they can be, but also to focus on the important similarities and differences between the *Republic* and the *Theaetetus* approaches to knowledge. Indeed, the concept of a proposition will help us to bring the two approaches together in a way that illuminates the importance of each.

To accomplish all this, I begin with an account of knowledge and belief by another contemporary philosopher. In his "Marks of Distinction between Belief and Knowledge," Kenneth Sayre takes us from Larissa in ancient Greece to Denver in modern Colorado. He asks us to consider two individuals, N who *believes*, because he has looked at a map, that Denver is the capital city of Colorado, and M who *knows* that Denver is the capital of Colorado, because he is a veteran of Colorado state politics. Now it looks from the grammar, says Sayre, as if the objects of N's belief and M's knowledge are one and the same object ("that Denver is the capital of Colorado"), until we discover that the similarity in grammar conceals an all important difference. For

if what N believes is identical with what M knows, then both the following should be true:

- (1) N believes what M knows
- (2) M knows what N believes.

But (1) as it stands is unintelligible (or incomplete—N might believe what M knows to be irrelevant, etc.); and (2) has M knowing quite a different thing—not that Denver is the capital of Colorado, but that N believes this of Denver. (1)

Having analyzed the different functions of noun clauses, Sayre argues that this difference can be explained only by acknowledging that the two cognitive attitudes, belief and knowledge, have different objects. The object of a belief is a *proposition*; the object of knowledge is a *state of affairs* (Sayre's term for fact or reality).

Sayre's argument is less conclusive than it appears to be. He claims that the two "what" phrases in (1) and (2) *must* be taken differently in the way he points out. If this claim is true, then it follows that "what N believes" and "what M knows" are not identical as the antecedent states. But this claim is not true; what is true is only that the "what" phrases in (1) and (2) *can* be understood differently in the way Sayre points out. The strength of his argument, however, lies right here. In order to explain how the two phrases can be understood differently, there must be such things as propositions. To make the argument stronger than that is to put more weight on usage than usage by itself can bear. The ambiguities of usage suggest at best the need to develop a theoretical position; in the present instance, the position is that both belief and knowledge by acquaintance must have objects and that these objects must be different from each other. The ambiguities of usage do not by themselves dictate the correctness of a theory, however; that is a philosophical, not a linguistic matter. Earlier we saw the importance of this limitation on arguments from usage in our discussion of Price's analysis of knowledge and belief; it will come up again when we find Augustine making a distinction between the ordinary usage of the term *know* and what he wants to preserve as its "strict" sense.

We can now explain, in terms of propositions, how Plato's *Republic* approach differs from his approach in the *Theaetetus*. "What M knows in knowing that Denver is the capital is not a proposition but a SOA [state of affairs]" (4). What the believer believes, however, is not a state of affairs, but a *proposition*. Sayre suggests that the reason why many philosophers ignore this difference is precisely the "grip on our thinking" of the view that knowledge is justified true belief, going back as it does to the *Theaetetus*: "If we assume that the objects of beliefs are propositions (which seems correct), and think that belief becomes knowledge with the accumulation of evidence, then we may naturally (albeit incorrectly) assume that the object remains the same while the attitude changes" (4). Sayre reminds us (following Plato), that knowledge by acquaintance is acquired by "palpably experiencing" a state of affairs, whereas belief (in his example about Denver's being the capital of Colorado) is acquired by looking at maps or listening to what others tell us (2). So the *object* of the mind when it knows, for Plato in the *Republic*, is reality; the *object* of the mind when it believes, in the *Theaetetus*, has to be a proposition—a substitute for, a (purported) representation of reality.

The Ambiguity of Belief. Having introduced the concept of a proposition, we need now to point out an important ambiguity in the

term *belief*. For if a true belief is the same thing as a true proposition, then a belief is its own object; for propositions were introduced to show that *they* were the *objects* of beliefs, even though at first (on the *Meno-Theaetetus* account), it looked as if beliefs had no object. For recall that, in the *Republic* account, belief is a *mental attitude* which has a proper object, the concrete, individual, changing things in the sensible world around us, whereas in the *Theaetetus* account, we saw Plato concentrate on the *truth* of the belief, ignoring the question of its object. We shall have knowledge, he says there, when we have true belief *accompanied by an account*. In his search for an account to accompany true belief, Plato seems to say that true belief is the *object* of our thinking, in addition to which we need an account. But how can true belief be at once the *object* of a mental attitude and the *mental attitude* itself?

The answer is that it cannot, and we must dispel the paradoxical implication that it is. To do this, we need to distinguish belief in its new sense of *proposition* from belief in its original sense as a *mental state or attitude*. As a proposition, a belief is the *object* of a mental attitude; as a mental attitude, a belief is an attitude toward a proposition. Furthermore, this attitude is an affirmative attitude, "to think with assent," in the famous definition of Augustine (*On the Predestination of the Saints* v). Disbelief, thinking with dissent, is the opposite attitude. There is no good pair of terms with which to characterize these opposite mental attitudes. True and false they are not; but one is favorable (belief) and the other is unfavorable (disbelief). If I believe that Homer wrote the *Iliad* and you do not (you disbelieve it), I have a favorable attitude toward and you an unfavorable attitude toward the proposition that Homer wrote the *Iliad*. The proposition is one that comes to us from the testimony of scholars. Now that proposition is true or false quite independently of your and my opposite attitudes toward it; this fact shows how very important it is to distinguish between belief in its sense of being a proposition from belief in its sense of being a mental attitude.

We have thus found something (a true proposition) that will serve as the object of belief (as a mental state or attitude) in the *Theaetetus* account of knowledge and that does not need to be (and indeed *is not*, following Sayre's distinction) the object of knowledge on the *Republic* account. The price on its head, however, is that the proposition, even the true proposition, is not a *reality* but a *substitute* for reality. Plato, we noted, does not talk of propositions; and it is tantalizing to conjecture that he does not see any difficulty in his *Republic* approach to knowledge as *acquaintance* with reality precisely because he lacks the concept of a proposition. It seems obvious to him that, if

we are *acquainted* with reality, nothing comes between the mind and its object. Some may even wish to conjecture that he abandons his *Theaetetus* approach to knowledge because he suspects that belief, even *true* belief, is always an acquaintance with nothing more than a shadow, a copy, an image of reality—which is his view of it in the *Republic* account. Be that as it may, we can draw an analogy between the physical objects of the *Republic* and the true beliefs, that is, true propositions, as we are employing them here to interpret the *Theaetetus*. Just as physical objects are halfway between reality and nothingness, so true propositions are “abstract entities”—not full-blooded, concrete entities, but not simply nothing either.

Today, of course, we have a stronger sense of the reality of physical things than Plato did, and against this sense of reality, perhaps the reality of propositions pales. But it does not disappear entirely; the more we reflect, the more we see that propositions have *some* kind of reality, even though we may find it as difficult to give an account of that reality as Plato did of the reality of physical objects. Just as it helped Plato to see physical objects as intermediate realities, unreal in their coming to be and passing away but real in so far as they participate in the Forms, so it may help us to see true propositions as intermediate realities, unreal in that they are only substitutes for reality but real in so far as their elements are derived from reality and their truth or falsity is determined by reality.

Logoi has been translated variously as “discussions” or “words” (Grube), “conceptions” (Church), “the world of mind” (Jowett), and even “propositions” (Hackforth). On one occasion Plato compares his *logoi* to images. The occasion occurs in the *Phaedo* (99d–100a), when Plato has Socrates describe his conversion from natural science to philosophy. Socrates turns from seeking the truth in *things* to seeking it in *logoi*. Just as the scientists protect their eyesight by looking at an image of the sun-eclipse, so Socrates will seek truth in *logoi*. Socrates questions the analogy, however: “For I certainly do not admit that one who investigates things by means of words is dealing with images, any more than one who is looking at facts” (100a). So *logoi* for Plato have a special connection to reality, even closer than the connection of images to their objects or (we may add) physical objects to the Forms.

Ambiguity of Truth. This a good place at which to point out another critical ambiguity that can confuse the effort to understand Plato’s two accounts of knowledge and belief. Truth comes into the mind of one who believes truly quite differently from the way in which it comes into the mind of the one one who knows by acquaint-

tance. Plato, we said, seems to think that nothing comes between the one who knows the way to Larissa, as the map (or the proposition) comes between one who believes what the map tells him about about the way and the way itself which he has never taken. That is because the knower is acquainted with the way itself, whereas the believer is acquainted only with a map (or, more precisely, with the proposition that the map signifies). Now to know the way to Larissa is to know the truth; however, to believe a true proposition of which an accurate map is a sign is to believe the truth. Therefore it seems as if the object of knowledge and the object of true belief is one and the same object, the truth.

But *truth* here is critically ambiguous. It can be used as a synonym for *reality*. In the *Republic*, for example, Plato has the philosopher seeking both truth and reality in the same breath, as it were (475–477, 485, 490), although he falls short of explicitly identifying them. At one point, where Plato says it is *reality* that knowledge seeks, Cornford (the paraphraser) translates the passage as follows: “And knowledge has for its natural object the real—to know the truth about reality,” even though the word for “truth” is not even in the Greek text (477a). We, too, still talk about reality and truth as if they were one and the same thing. *Truth*, however, can also signify a property of propositions. In *that* sense the term cannot be synonymous with *reality*, for as we have seen, the propositions it characterizes are themselves something less than full-blooded reality. Hence the believer who has only the proposition as the object of his or her mental state has truth all right, but only in the same substitute sense as the proposition that it qualifies is a substitute for reality.

The relationship between the two senses of truth seems to be this. When *truth* is synonymous with *reality*, it refers to the *standard* for *truth* when it denotes the characteristic of a proposition. A proposition is true when it correctly represents reality. Thus truth for the believer who believes truly is, like the proposition which is the object of that belief, a step away from the reality the believer seeks to know; and the believer will know that reality (on the *Republic* account) only upon getting *acquainted* with the reality itself.

In the light of these distinctions, we can now focus more clearly upon the difference between the *Republic* and *Theaetetus* accounts. In the former, one knows only when one is acquainted with reality; otherwise one has only belief. In the latter, one knows also when one can give an account of one's true belief about that reality. And the question is, Can these two apparently incompatible views of knowledge and belief be reconciled in a single approach that does justice to each? I believe they can, but some other points need to be explored first.

Acquaintance and Infallibility

We have now seen Plato give two different explanations for the fallibility of belief. In the *Republic* account, belief is fallible because, as a general mental attitude, it will *change* as its *objects*, physical things, change. In the *Theaetetus* account, belief is fallible because its object is a proposition, which is a *substitute* for the reality it purports to represent and, as such a substitute, it may *fail* to *represent* reality accurately; that is, the proposition may be false. Even "true belief" signifies only a "true proposition," and true propositions, although they correctly represent reality, are still less than fully real entities; they are a step away from the reality they represent. Because of this gap between true belief and the reality it represents, the seeker after knowledge must fix this belief in mind, presumably because it is not fixed there by the mind's own direct acquaintance with reality. As we have seen, that is the function of the account that the believer must give of the true belief.

Can a true belief with an *account* ever be as convincing to the mind as the mind's own direct acquaintance with an object itself? That is the question that emerges at the end of the *Theaetetus* when it is read against the background of the *Republic* approach. Even during the *Theaetetus* discussion, Plato expresses his preference for such direct acquaintance when he shows his prejudice against whatever is not an eyewitness account:

Socrates. And when a jury is rightly convinced of facts which can be known only by an eye-witness, then, judging by hearsay and accepting a true belief, they are judging without knowledge, although, if they find the right verdict, their conviction is correct?

Theaetetus. Certainly. (201c; cf. *Timaeus*, 51d–e)

Plato here suggests that the jury cannot *know* the facts of a case by weighing the testimony of witnesses; instead, even when the jury is persuaded to believe the truth, it acquires a mental state that falls short of the knowledge that "only" the eyewitness can possess. But a trial is an unusual situation, of course. The testimony of different witnesses may conflict, in which case some uncertainty, however slight, may accompany the jury's true belief. Thucydides, in *The Peloponnesian War*, had earlier noted that the historian, too, is faced with this fact: "Different eyewitnesses give different accounts of the same events, speaking out of partiality for one side or the other or else from imperfect memories" (I, 22). Still Plato's analysis does not go deep