

Analysis of the Objects: Plato's Epistemology in *Republic V*

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0. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the argument presented in *Republic V*, 476e–480a. This part of the argument has provoked a great deal of controversy with respect not only to the validity of its inference itself but also to Plato's epistemology on the whole. In 477c1–478d12, Plato defines knowledge and belief as different faculties and then draws a conclusion that they are set over (*epi*) different sets of objects: knowledge is set over 'what is' (*to on*) and belief over 'what both is and is not' (*to on kai me on*). Though there has been much scholarly dispute about the precise meaning of 'to be,' many traditional interpreters¹ regarded the former as Forms and the latter as particulars. Based on their view, it follows that no one can have a knowledge of particulars and a belief about Forms because each faculty is exclusively set over its own set of objects. This is the so-called "two worlds theory." However, this theory is, at a glance, inconsistent not only with Plato's other texts² but also with his own program for the philosopher-rulers of the *Republic*³. Therefore, several studies have been made on the objects of knowledge and belief from various points of view.

The first scholar to offer an alternative interpretation was Fine. Her point is that the faculties of knowledge and belief are set over not their objects but their contents. According to her, 'what is' signifies a set of true propositions and 'what both is and is not' signifies a set of true and false propositions. It does not follow from this view that Plato follows the two worlds theory because the faculties can be distinguished by their cognitive contents, being concerned with both Forms and particulars. However, Fine's contents analysis was thoroughly examined by Gonzalez and convincingly confuted with some inconsistencies with Plato's text. As space is limited, his criticism can be given little consideration, but Gonzalez clearly demonstrated that the faculties are not set over contents as Fine thought but bear direct cognitive relations to objects, being analogous to perception. One may say that his interpretation is the most comprehensive and influential one at this time. However, I cannot bring myself to accept his essential point about the relationship between the faculties and their objects. Therefore, in this article, I would like to investigate Gonzalez's interpretation in detail and then explore a little further Plato's conception of the objects here, including the issue of the two worlds theory.

1. Gonzalez's interpretation

The point of Gonzalez's interpretation is the following⁴. According to him, the type of knowledge and belief in question is the nonpropositional perception of 'what a property (F) is' through enjoying a direct acquaintance with Forms or particulars. Therefore, the recognition and judgment that an object is F (e.g. that a pencil is long, that an action is just, and so on) are irrelevant to Plato's conception of knowledge and belief here. Consequently, the faculties are set not over the objects of the propositional recognitions and judgments but over the objects of the perception of 'what F is' as a *basis* or criterion for all such kinds of true or false statement. Therefore, we can understand the particulars on the basis of the clear perception of 'what F is' through an acquaintance with Forms, and can hold beliefs about Forms on the basis of the obscure perception of 'what F is' through making an acquaintance with particulars, as a consequence of which, the two worlds theory does not apply to Plato⁵.

However, three objections can be raised against his claim. First, though Gonzalez observes that the faculties of knowledge and belief are analogous to perception and make a direct connection with their objects, it is not easy to

¹ For reasons of space, I cannot provide the list. In recent times, Sedley (pp. 257-261) accepts this view.

² *Men.* 97a-98a, *Thaet.* 201a-c.

³ *Rep.* 520c4. Cf. 506c-e.

⁴ Gonzalez (pp. 252-3, 256-8, 271-4).

⁵ Similarly, Smith says that it is necessary to distinguish the objects of the faculties of knowledge and belief from the objects of their cognitions. Moreover, Rowe also regards what knowledge and belief are set over as the authorities about beauty (etc.) which we consult when we conceive and judge something to be beautiful.

regard what the faculties of perception are set over as a basis for various sensory recognition processes. For, taking the case of sight, it is reasonable to suppose that, through a direct acquaintance with what the faculty is set over—that is to say colour⁶ (e.g. red)—we perceive it to be red. What the faculty of vision grasps directly in the connection with its object is the recognition and judgment that something in the world is red, but not the perception of ‘what red is’ as a basis for bringing about such a cognitive state.

Second, Plato defines the criteria for finding out whether or not faculties are the same as just their work (functions or products) (*erga*) and their objects (477d1-5). Thereupon, it follows from Gonzalez’s interpretation that the perception of ‘what F is’ corresponds to the former of the two criteria. Furthermore, according to him, this kind of perception is different from universal definitions (e.g. that justice is to give back what you owe) and from all types of propositional statement (e.g. that an action is just). In consequence, these perceptions of ‘what F is’ are incompatible with Plato’s text because Plato confirms that the work of the faculties, that is the cognitive states which they produce, are respectively infallible and fallible (477e7-8) but the perceptions of ‘what F is’, as Gonzalez says, do not seem to be able to make any distinction between truth and falsehood.

Third, Plato says that “the multifarious opinions (*nomima*) of beauty and all the rest to which most people subscribe, roll around in a no-man’s-land between ‘what is not’ and ‘what purely is’” (479d2-4). What Plato means by this statement is, given that it occurs in the passage just before the comment that what ordinary people consider beautiful appears both beautiful and non-beautiful (479a5-d1), it is not the principle of ‘what beauty is’ but the opinion that some things are beautiful that rolls around. Therefore, as a first step, the word “*nomima*” here indicates propositional recognitions and judgments like that, though Gonzalez also accepts this point⁷. Next, Plato says that “if any such thing (as the opinions) were to emerge, it ought to be called an object of belief (*doxaston*) but not of knowledge (*gnoston*)” (479d6-7). These objects of belief (*doxaston*) and knowledge (*gnoston*) had the same meaning as the objects of the verbs, believing (*doxazein*) and knowing (*gignoskein*) and as what the faculties are set over (*epi*) in 477c1-478d12. Hence, these two points make it clear that the faculties are set over, against the objects as a basis, the objects of the propositional recognition and judgment. However, while some scholars regard the word “*nomima*” as principles (rules, formulae, notions etc.), it would be untrue to interpret this word as such principles because Plato takes, for example, not only many individual instances of beauty (etc.) but also of double (etc.). There is no reason to suppose that many people have the principles of the latter cases rolling around. Therefore, the point is not that their perception of ‘what double is’ as a basis rolls around but that the same thing seems to be both double and half.

2. Predication and identification: the meaning of ‘to be’

Having clarified the central problem of Gonzalez’s interpretation, I will now explore Plato’s conception of the objects. First of all, an important point to emphasize is that we should not equate ‘what is’ with Forms and not ‘what both is and is not’ with particulars in this argument, even if such an equation seems to be plausible in the rest of the *Republic* (especially in books VI and VII) and in other dialogues. For the setting of this passage is that Glaucon engages in a discussion with Socrates on behalf of the lovers of sight (etc.), who never believe in things themselves; that is, Forms. Therefore, it is an argument without the theory of Forms that such lovers of sight can accept.

Before we turn to a further exploration of the objects, it will be useful to clarify the meaning of ‘to be’ here. It seems that ‘to be’ means ‘to exist’ in the initial part of the argument⁸ (476e7-477b3) and it means ‘to be F’ in the latter part (479a5-480a13). Especially in 479b8-c9, Plato seems to equate ‘what both is F and is not F’ with ‘what both exists and does not exist.’ Regarding this problem, Gonzalez says, “Plato does not appear to distinguish a thing’s “substance” from its “properties” or its existence from its essence,” and therefore concludes that the existential reading is compatible with the predicative reading because, according to Gonzalez, the degree of a thing’s existence closely correlates with the degree of its F-ness⁹. However, the properties that Plato mentioned here belong to what is called incomplete predicates (beauty, etc.), but not complete predicates (flower, etc.). What particular thing on earth is the

⁶ Cf. *Chrm.* 168d-e.

⁷ Gonzalez (p. 256).

⁸ Even if ‘to be’ in this part means ‘to be true’ (the veridical reading) as some interpreters think, it is difficult to understand Plato’s sudden switch to the predicative reading.

⁹ Gonzalez (pp. 258-262).

former predicated of as essence? The essence of flower cannot be beauty. Moreover, even if a thing's property in question here is confined to its essence, we encounter difficulties when we consider how a thing's existence is influenced by its property. Although Gonzalez rightly observes that "in the predication "x is F," what is primarily referred to and named is not the x, but the F (so that F is not really a "predicate" in the modern sense),"¹⁰ it is clear that he assumes the existence of Forms and particulars, as a consequence of which his explanation seems to be left insufficient.

On the basis of this consideration, I would like to say that Plato bears in mind not the existence of Forms and particulars and the predication of them but the identification of just the properties themselves (beauty etc.). Thus, the predicative 'to be' here should not be taken as the 'to be' of predication in general but as that of identity. From this viewpoint, it is proper for Plato to equate the existential reading with the predicative reading without reserve. This is because, to be concrete, it is quite likely that 'something beautiful exists' and 'something is beautiful' are the same as just explained in a different light as long as it is beauty itself that is focused on and the type of predication here is identification. Therefore, we need not make an assumption that is peculiar to Plato about 'to be'. We can say with fair certainty that when what we have just identified as beautiful does not appear to us as beautiful any more, the beautiful thing no longer exists.

3. Extensional objects and intensional objects

Let us now return to the issue of Plato's conception of the objects. As I said earlier, my first point is that the argument here goes without the theory of Forms and thus it is not Forms and particulars but the properties themselves that the faculties of knowledge and belief are set over (*epi*), though the properties can be nevertheless Forms themselves or connected with particulars. Therefore, the second point to emphasize is that the objects that the faculties are set over must not be *extensionally* understood; in other words, it does not matter with which Form or particular they are concerned. For example, even if the faculties are concerned with the Form of Beauty or a flower, the objects that the faculties are set over are different from such extensional objects. In contrast, the objects must be determined *intensionally*; namely, in response to their work (*erga*).

In order to make the meaning of the intension here clear, recall here our earlier discussion of the two criteria-objects and work-for sameness or difference in faculties. The most noteworthy point of the criteria is that, in 477c6-d2, Plato correlates the objects of the faculties with their work; that is to say, he does not take into consideration the other two possibilities that the same faculty accomplishes the same work upon different objects and vice versa. This correlation of the objects with their work (or the faculties themselves) is already noted in *Ion*. 537d4-e3, where crafts (*technai*) are defined as being correlated with their objects. This definition would be, from the extensional view of the objects, clearly invalid because, for example, both the arts of medicine and physical training are concerned with human bodies. However, the intensional interpretation of the objects gives a good account of Plato's definition because both arts can be differently set over illness and weakness in response to their work, being concerned with the same human body¹¹. To sum up, the intension of the objects here can be determined by the work that the faculties accomplish.

Then, what work do the faculties of knowledge and belief accomplish? I would like to say that it is to identify properties (beauty etc.)¹². What the faculties produce is not something like indirect cognition through the description of the properties either (e.g. beauty is such and such) but direct recognitions and judgments through the identification of them (e.g. something beautiful exists or something is beautiful). Plato says in 520c4 that those who have discovered the truth can know (*gnosethe*) what all the images in the cave are and of what they are images. This statement also shows that the mode of the cognitive process is a kind of identification. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that the work of the faculties of knowledge and belief are respectively the clear identification of F and the obscure identification of both F and non-F.

It follows from what has been said thus far that the intensional objects of the faculties of knowledge and belief are respectively what is identified as F and what is identified as both F and non-F. Based on this interpretation, the 'two

¹⁰ Gonzalez (p.254).

¹¹ Cf. *Grg.* 464b4-c3.

¹² Though I think that complete predicates also should be regarded as a kind of property in Plato's ontology, their relationship with incomplete predicates is too complicated to be examined in detail here.

worlds theory' is disproved because it is possible to have a knowledge of particulars by identifying them as F and to hold a belief about Forms by identifying them as both F and non-F. Though the faculties are surely concerned with Forms and particulars, they are set not over Forms and particulars themselves but over the properties themselves, which are identified as F or as both F and non-F.

The question now may arise: can particulars be identified as F and Forms as both F and non-F? To be sure, what exists in this world does not maintain a fixed state because of continuous change. However, this does not mean that something in this world cannot be identified as F under a definite condition. It seems quite probable that, as mentioned in *Symp.* 211a, a flower and the like appear to someone to be fixedly beautiful on one occasion. Another illustration of the point is the analogy of the three fingers in 523e-524c: the third finger is larger than the fourth and smaller than the second. The faculty of sight (belief¹³) makes us perplexed to identify the third finger as both large and small. By contrast, our intellect (*noesis*) enables us to identify separately largeness and smallness. There is no doubt that these two properties are not Forms detached from the third finger. From this passage, we realize that the faculties of knowledge and belief are respectively set over what is differently identified, being concerned with the same finger. The difference between the faculties lies in the different ways of dividing this world. On the other hand, it is not impossible to identify Forms as both F and non-F. Consider the simile of the Sun for example. When Socrates talks about the Form of Good in the simile of the Sun (506c-e), he identifies the Good as the sun, which inevitably includes badness. Therefore, we may say that Socrates' belief is set over what is identified as both good and bad, being concerned with the Good.

4. Conclusion

In summary, my point is that knowledge and belief here are the faculties of identifying properties themselves and they are set over the intensional objects in response to their work. However, I do not intend to assimilate the objects of the faculties into their work: while the two criteria have a mutual relationship, they are different mutually. Take the senses of sight and hearing for example. They are respectively set over colour and sound in response to their work of seeing and hearing but, even when the senses are not exercised, the distinction between colour and sound exists in this world. Similarly, the work that the faculties of knowledge and belief accomplish is not to divide some indeterminate and neutral world into what is F and what both is F and is not F, but such a division itself exists in this world without their work. In the argument immediately before (475e-476d), Plato said that all of the things in this world share in the Form of Beauty, etc. Therefore, from his ontological viewpoint, it follows that beauty etc. surely exists outside our cognitive states.

There is another thing that is important. Fine and Gonzalez discussed whether knowledge and belief in question are disjunctively propositional and indirect contents or nonpropositional and direct acquaintance. However, my interpretation reveals that they are not disjunctive alternatives because the cognitive states which the faculties bring about by identifying their intensional objects have propositional contents and the cognitive processes are a kind of direct acquaintance. Therefore, such recognitions and judgments have naturally something to do with infallibility and fallibility.

Finally, I would like to deal with the objection which may be raised against my interpretation. The objection is that, even if the argument begins without the theory of Form, Plato concludes that the objects of knowledge and belief are respectively Forms and particulars in 479d10-e8. However, Plato means here that, while those who contemplate (*theomenous*) Forms have knowledge, those who do not do so have only belief, not that the objects of knowledge and belief are Forms and particulars. That is, it is necessary to have the experience of witnessing Forms to make a clear identification of something in this world. To be sure, Plato says in 479e9-480a13 that knowledge is set over (*epi*) beauty itself and belief over beautiful sounds, colours and so on. However, it has to be noted that, likewise, the latter does not extensionally signify sounds and colours themselves, but intensionally what is both beautiful and ugly. Moreover, though it is not to be denied that the former signifies the Form of Beauty, we may nevertheless say that the objects of knowledge are not only Forms because Plato seems to distinguish 'what is', which contains the world around us as well as Forms, from 'what *completely* is', which only signifies Forms. In consequence, the possibility can be never denied that we have knowledge of particulars and belief about Forms.

¹³ The sight and the intellect here can be replaced with belief and knowledge. Cf. 510a9.

As I have noted, turning to book VI and VII, it may seem that the two worlds theory is still plausible, as many scholars think: 'what both is and is not' is called what becomes and disappears in 485b2 and 508d7. Also, in the simile of Line, the objects of knowledge and belief seem to be distinguished as Forms and particulars. Moreover, in the Cave, our world inside the cave seems to have nothing to do with the world of Forms outside the cave. However, on the other hand, it is also true that the two worlds theory mainly derives from the interpretations of book V here. Therefore, I think that we must not forget to examine more carefully whether or not Plato's ontology surely ends up with the two worlds theory in his epistemology.

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