

Shania Dolphin

PHI101: Introduction to Philosophy

Dr. Jeffery Dueck

October 18, 2020

Plato on Knowledge

One man's philosophy and ideologies have withstood the test of time from days of old to even now, that man is none other than Plato. Plato was an ancient Athenian philosopher of the Classical Period in Ancient Greece. He has left a legacy of impact of his own theories that have framed and founded philosophical thinking that our current world still holds fast to. With a plethora of theories and ideologies, Plato's theory of knowledge can be seen as most definitive in his overall work. Plato presents key terms when discussing his view on knowledge such as innateness, recollection, permanency, interrogation, questioning, willpower and the real vs. the imagined.

Within Plato's theory of knowledge, Plato very definitively demarcates knowledge and belief. This is best articulated in this definition, "Forms – eternal, unchanging, absolute realities, which are the true objects of knowledge. These absolute realities cannot be grasped via the senses, but are objects of pure understanding..." To Plato, knowledge has always been and is innate. It was very comparable to the analogy of having existing treasure buried deep within your soul. But, in order to discover this treasure, one has to go through a process known as recollection.

In Plato's Socratic play, 'Meno' he illustrates the process of recollection. To Meno Plato says, "True opinions are fine and useful as long as they stay with us but they do not stay, and they depart from the mind. So they're not of great value until you fasten them down by working out the reason why. This process, Meno, my friend, is recollection, as we agreed earlier. Once they are fastened, they become knowledge and then they are more permanent. Hence knowledge is a finer and better thing than true opinion, since it is secured by a chain." Here, Plato outlines the process in attaining knowledge: recollection is of utmost importance to this process. Opinions come and go, but as Plato explains, an individual has to recollect, has to go deeper beneath the surface, become introspective, in order to attain knowledge, and its permanency thereof. The analogy of recollection, introspection, being the "chain" that secures knowledge, is quite appropriate, especially in today's day and age. For example, in order for someone to fully understand the reasoning behind someone else's actions, they have to delve deeper, inquire about their actions, reflect and recollect on them and then glean from them a permanent sort of knowledge instead of merely basing knowledge and incoming information on opinions, this process of recollecting and reflecting helps an individual to fully understand something, and thus, become none the wiser.

In Meno we see another example of knowledge being manifested through the dialogue of Socrates and Meno plus Meno's servant boy. In the hypothetical sense of the play, Plato is seeking to portray the innate knowledge of geometry that would exist, given the correctness of his theory, in a servant boy who is presumably untaught and unschooled. In his presentation of the example, the mind of Socrates says this, "Attend to the questions which I ask him, and observe whether he learns of [Socrates] or only remembers." The dialogue continues with Socrates' undeniably, gentle interrogation of the servant boy that by Plato's definition will bring

about a recall of the information that was seemingly unbeknownst before the questioning. In this example though the servant boy was uneducated, the knowledge he possessed was inherent and bore fruition with the right amount of questioning. We see such knowledge acquisition in the minds of young children at an elementary stage of learning. Teachers are trained to “gently interrogate” students so that “the notions [of knowledge] stir up” inside of them since their “souls must have always possessed this knowledge.”

Perhaps the most famous of Plato’s interpretation of knowledge is in his allegory of the cave. In this allegory prisoners are confined to a cave where a fire burns behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners, puppets and other objects cast shadows on the wall that the prisoners perceive to be reality. It is not until one prisoner escapes from the cave and discovers the illusion that he was under and a whole new world outside waiting to be discovered. When this freed prisoner tries to get others to see what he has seen they refuse to, believing the cave to be their only sense of reality and security. Here in order for knowledge to be attained an individual has to rid themselves of the illusions surrounding them. In a scientific research, in order to gain true knowledge on a particular topic, researchers have to sift through a plethora of information and not be blinded by the fake ones. In order to do so, researchers like the prisoners have to break away and “see the light” of true knowledge.

While Plato’s theories were very convincing and evidence-based there are other philosophers that came after him that did not always agree with him. Aristotle is a prime example. He followed Plato’s work and is quite comparable to our philosopher at hand. Aristotle has not always fell in indirect alignment with the series and viewpoints most known and accredited by Plato but when it comes to the theory of knowledge Aristotle finds himself in agreement. As it is stated, “In [Aristotle’s] view on knowledge, Aristotle accepted the Platonic

idea that what is known must have a certain stability, and immunity from change and fluctuation.” In this world certain rules exist in order to maintain the stability of an economy or a country. Too much change can destabilize a country. In the same vein knowledge should not shift and change like tectonic plates but should remain in a relatively unchanging state. We can acknowledge that Aristotle’s agreement in such matters may not be a point of concrete evidence to solidify Plato’s view. But it shows that it is something worth considering since Aristotle, who is someone who highly disagrees with Plato on most things found agreement in this one thing.

Does the innateness of knowledge really exist, can it be tested on adults? Despite the strength of these theories, just how wide was Plato applying them? In my view there is an indirect correlation between age and innateness. As we get older so too do our instincts to just know something. As such, Plato’s theory on innateness can only be seen to apply to the young that is the young servant boy in ‘Meno’ and not necessarily to the adult and aging population. In today’s society knowledge and its acquisition thereof is of utmost importance given the amount of illusions, fake news, opinions, and propaganda. Plato posits that a strong sense of recollection, innateness, and willpower will go a far way in attaining true and everlasting knowledge.

Bibliography

Cottingham, John. *Western Philosophy: An Anthology*. Blackwell, 1996.