

Knowledge and Certainty

Introduction

Philosophy has always aimed to go beyond our ordinary, unreflective awareness of things. The philosopher typically subjects our everyday convictions to careful logical scrutiny, exposing inconsistencies and misconceptions, and attempting to arrive at a critical standpoint which will enable us to discard what is confused, and to supply a solid rational justification for what is retained. Using the tools of reason, of logical analysis and conceptual clarification, philosophy tries to replace what is doubtful and uncertain with something more coherent and stable. The goal, in short, is to move beyond mere belief, towards systematic knowledge and understanding.

We all realize, in our reflective moments, that many of our beliefs are liable to be mistaken. And even when our beliefs happen to be true, we can often appreciate that this is not much more than a lucky accident – we could equally well have been wrong. But what is the difference between mere belief, and the more stable and reliable kind of cognition that is entitled to be called knowledge, or true understanding? What do we mean by such understanding: how can it be defined, what are its origins, and how is it to be achieved? This fundamental set of questions forms the subject matter of that branch of philosophy known as the theory of knowledge, or *epistemology* (from the Greek word *episteme*, meaning ‘knowledge’ or ‘understanding’). From the seventeenth century onwards, epistemology has been at or near the centre of philosophical inquiry. But, as with so many other areas of philosophy, much of the framework for subsequent developments comes from the ideas of the classical Greek thinkers, and of Plato in particular.

1 Innate Knowledge: Plato, *Meno**

Our first extract, from the *Meno* (c.385 BC), begins with Meno taunting Socrates for his role as a stingray or ‘torpedo-fish’, paralysing his victims by relentlessly attacking their confused and inconsistent beliefs. But it ends showing Socrates in a more positive role, more like that of the ‘midwife’,¹ using careful and systematic questioning to draw out, from the minds of his pupils, the seeds of true and reliable knowledge. From its own inner resources, the mind, suitably guided, can reach a genuine understanding of the truth. We have within us ‘true thoughts which only need to be awakened into knowledge by putting questions’. This notion is graphically expressed in terms of the poetic idea of the soul’s immortality: it ‘remembers’ or ‘recollects’ truths it knew in a previous existence. The point is made through a detailed mathematical example. By careful questioning Socrates is able to get the slave boy to recognize that the way to construct a square double in area to a given square is to use the diagonal of the given square as a base.

Though readers may feel that Socrates is ‘leading’ the boy in the direction he wants, it should be clear that the result of the exchange is quite different from what happens in ‘spoon-feeding’, where the learner simply accepts what the teacher imparts. For after his exchange with Socrates, once the areas have been drawn in, and various attempted solutions discarded as wrong, the boy is able to ‘see for himself’ that the square drawn on the diagonal does, and indeed must, produce the right answer. The choice of a mathematical example to illustrate the theory of the mind’s innate cognitive powers is no accident. For Plato, mathematical understanding is an example of the kind of reliable cognition which takes us beyond the unsatisfactory world of everyday appearances towards a realm of more permanent and secure truths. As will become apparent, this notion, together with the doctrine of innate knowledge, plays a key role in the subsequent development of the philosophy of knowledge.

MENO: Socrates, I used to be told, before I knew you, that you were always doubting yourself and making others doubt; and now you are casting your spells over me, and I am simply getting bewitched and enchanted, and am at my wits’ end. And if I may venture to make a jest upon you, you seem to me both in your appearance and in your power over others to be very like the flat torpedo fish, who torpifies those who come near him and touch him, as you have now torpified me, I think. For my soul and my tongue are really torpid, and I do not know how to answer you; and though I have been delivered of an infinite variety of speeches about virtue before now, and to many persons – and very good ones they were, as I thought – at this moment I cannot even say what virtue is. And I think that you are very wise in not voyaging and going away from home, for if you did in other places as you do in Athens, you would be cast into prison as a magician.

SOCRATES: You are a rogue, Meno, and had all but caught me.

MENO: What do you mean, Socrates?

SOCRATES: I can tell why you made a simile about me.

MENO: Why?

SOCRATES: In order that I might make another simile about you. For I know that all pretty young gentlemen like to have pretty similes made about them – as well they may – but I shall not return the compliment. As to my being a torpedo, if the



* Plato, *Meno* [*Menon*, c.380 BC], 79e–86c. Trans. B. Jowett, in *The Dialogues of Plato* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1892), vol. II, pp. 39–47; diagrams added for this anthology.

¹ The comparison is found in a later Platonic dialogue, the *Theaetetus*.

torpedo is torpid as well as the cause of torpidity in others, then indeed I am a torpedo, but not otherwise; for I perplex others, not because I am clear, but because I am utterly perplexed myself. And now I know not what virtue is, and you seem to be in the same case, although you did once perhaps know before you touched me. However, I have no objection to join with you in the enquiry.

MENO: And how will you enquire, Socrates, into that which you do not know? What will you put forth as the subject of enquiry? And if you find what you want, how will you ever know that this is the thing which you did not know?

SOCRATES: I know, Meno, what you mean; but just see what a tiresome dispute you are introducing. You argue that a man cannot enquire either about that which he knows, or about that which he does not know; for if he knows, he has no need to enquire; and if not, he cannot; for he does not know the very subject about which he is to enquire?

MENO: Well, Socrates, and is not the argument sound?

SOCRATES: I think not.

MENO: Why not?

SOCRATES: I will tell you why: I have heard from certain wise men and women who spoke of things divine that –

MENO: What did they say?

SOCRATES: They spoke of a glorious truth, as I conceive.

MENO: What was it? and who were they?

SOCRATES: Some of them were priests and priestesses, who had studied how they might be able to give a reason of their profession: there have been poets also, who spoke of these things by inspiration, like Pindar, and many others who were inspired. And they say – mark, now, and see whether their words are true – they say that the soul of man is immortal, and at one time has an end, which is termed dying, and at another time is born again, but is never destroyed. And the moral is, that a man ought to live always in perfect holiness. 'For in the ninth year Persephone sends the souls of those from whom she has received the penalty of ancient crimes back again from beneath into the light of the sun above, and these are they who become noble kings and mighty men and great in wisdom and are called saintly heroes in after ages.' The soul, then, as being immortal, and having been born again many times, and having seen all things that exist, whether in this world or in the world below, has knowledge of them all; and it is no wonder that she should be able to call to remembrance all that she ever knew about virtue, and about everything; for as all nature is akin, and the soul has learned all things, there is no difficulty in her eliciting or as men say learning, out of a single recollection all the rest, if a man is strenuous and does not faint; for all enquiry and all learning is but recollection. And therefore we ought not to listen to this sophistical argument about the impossibility of enquiry for it will make us idle, and is sweet only to the sluggard; but the other saying will make us active and inquisitive. In that confiding, I will gladly enquire with you, into the nature of virtue.

MENO: Yes, Socrates; but what do you mean by saying that we do not learn, and that what we call learning is only a process of recollection? Can you teach me how this is?

SOCRATES: I told you, Meno, just now that you were a rogue, and now you ask whether I can teach you, when I am saying that there is no teaching, but only recollection; and thus you imagine that you will involve me in a contradiction.

MENO: Indeed, Socrates, I protest that I had no such intention. I only asked the question from habit; but if you can prove to me that what you say is true, I wish that you would.

SOCRATES: It will be no easy matter, but I will try to please you to the utmost of my power. Suppose that you call one of your numerous attendants, that I may demonstrate on him.

MENO: Certainly. Come hither, boy.

SOCRATES: He is Greek, and speaks Greek, does he not?

MENO: Yes, indeed; he was born in the house.

SOCRATES: Attend now to the questions which I ask him, and observe whether he learns of me or only remembers.

MENO: I will.

SOCRATES: Tell me, boy, do you know that a figure like this is a square [figure 1]?

BOY: I do.

SOCRATES: And you know that a square figure has these four lines equal?

BOY: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And these lines which I have drawn through the middle of the square are also equal?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: A square may be any size?

BOY: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And if one side of the figure be of two feet, and the other side be of two feet, how much will the whole be? Let me explain: if in one direction the space was of two feet, and in the other direction of one foot, the whole would be of two feet taken once?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: But since this side is also of two feet, there are twice two feet?

BOY: There are.

SOCRATES: Then the square is of twice two feet?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: And how many are twice two feet? count and tell me.

BOY: Four, Socrates.

SOCRATES: And might there not be another square twice as large as this, and having like this the lines equal?

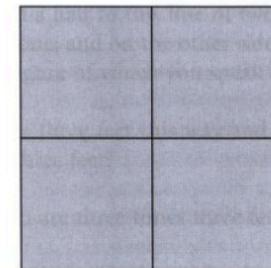


Figure 1

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: And of how many feet will that be?

BOY: Of eight feet.

SOCRATES: And now try and tell me the length of the line which forms the side of that double square: this is two feet – what will that be?

BOY: Clearly, Socrates, it will be double.

SOCRATES: Do you observe, Meno, that I am not teaching the boy anything, but only asking him questions; and now he fancies that he knows how long a line is necessary in order to produce a figure of eight square feet; does he not?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And does he really know?

MENO: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: He only guesses that because the square is double, the line is double.

MENO: True.

SOCRATES: Observe him while he recalls the steps in regular order. [To the Boy] Tell me, boy, do you assert that a double space comes from a double line? Remember that I am not speaking of an oblong, but of a figure equal every way, and twice the size of this – that is to say of eight feet; and I want to know whether you still say that a double square comes from a double line?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: But does not this line become doubled if we add another such line here [figure 2]?

BOY: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And four such lines will make a space containing eight feet?

BOY: Yes.

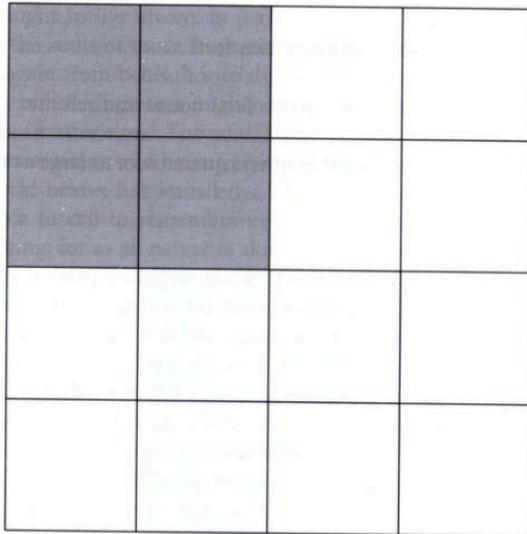


Figure 2

SOCRATES: Let us describe such a figure: Would you not say that this is the figure of eight feet?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: And are there not these four divisions in the figure, each of which is equal to the figure of four feet?

BOY: True.

SOCRATES: And is not that four times four?

BOY: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And four times is not double?

BOY: No, indeed.

SOCRATES: But how much?

BOY: Four times as much.

SOCRATES: Therefore the double line, boy, has given a space, not twice, but four times as much.

BOY: True.

SOCRATES: Four times four are sixteen – are they not?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: What line would give you a space of eight feet, as this gives one of sixteen feet; – do you see?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: And the space of four feet is made from this half line?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Good; and is not a space of eight feet twice the size of this, and half the size of the other?

BOY: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Such a space, then, will be made out of a line greater than this one, and less than that one?

BOY: Yes; I think so.

SOCRATES: Very good; I like to hear you say what you think. And now tell me, is not this a line of two feet and that of four?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then the line which forms the side of eight feet now ought to be more than this line of two feet, and less than the other of four feet?

BOY: It ought.

SOCRATES: Try and see if you can tell me how much it will be.

BOY: Three feet.

SOCRATES: Then if we add a half to this line of two, that will be the line of three. Here are two and there is one; and on the other side, here are two also and there is one: and that makes the figure of which you speak [figure 3]?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: But if there are three feet this way and three feet that way, the whole space will be three times three feet?

BOY: That is evident.

SOCRATES: And how much are three times three feet?

BOY: Nine.

SOCRATES: And how much is the double of four?

BOY: Eight.

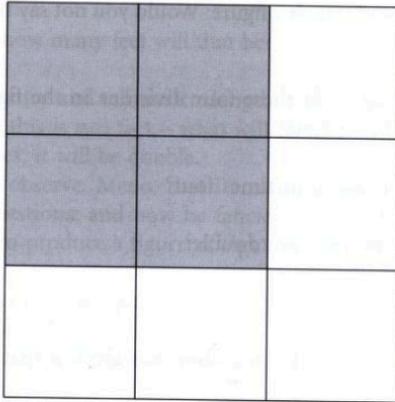


Figure 3

SOCRATES: Then the figure of eight is not made out of a line of three?

BOY: No.

SOCRATES: But from what line? – tell me exactly; and if you would rather not reckon, try and show me the line.

BOY: Indeed, Socrates, I do not know.

SOCRATES: Do you see, Meno, what advances he has made in his power of recollection? He did not know at first, and he does not know now, what is the side of a figure of eight feet: but then he thought that he knew, and answered confidently as if he knew, and had no difficulty; now he has a difficulty, and neither knows nor fancies that he knows.

MENO: True.

SOCRATES: Is he not better off in knowing his ignorance?

MENO: I think that he is.

SOCRATES: If we have made him doubt, and given him the 'torpedo's shock', have we done him any harm?

MENO: I think not.

SOCRATES: We have certainly, as would seem, assisted him in some degree to the discovery of the truth; and now he will wish to remedy his ignorance, but then he would have been ready to tell all the world again and again that the double space should have a double side.

MENO: True.

SOCRATES: But do you suppose that he would ever have enquired into or learned what he fancied that he knew, though he was really ignorant of it, until he had fallen into perplexity under the idea that he did not know, and had desired to know?

MENO: I think not, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then he was the better for the torpedo's touch?

MENO: I think so.

SOCRATES: Mark now the farther development. I shall only ask him, and not teach him, and he shall share the enquiry with me: and do you watch and see if you find me telling or explaining anything to him, instead of eliciting his opinion. Tell me, boy, is not this a square of four feet which I have drawn [figure 4]?

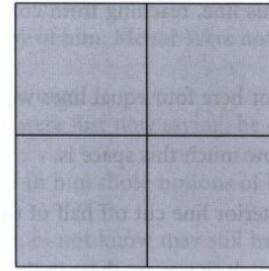


Figure 4

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: And now I add another square equal to the former one?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: And a third, which is equal to either of them?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: Suppose that we fill up the vacant corner?

BOY: Very good.

SOCRATES: Here, then, there are four equal spaces [figure 5]?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: And how many times larger is this space than this other?

BOY: Four times.

SOCRATES: But it ought to have been twice only, as you will remember.

BOY: True.

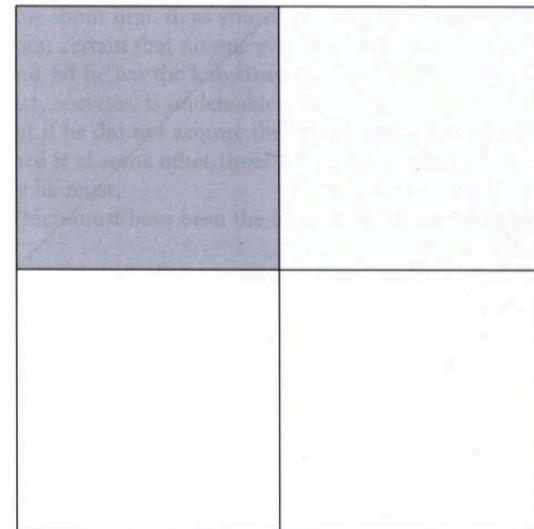


Figure 5

SOCRATES: And does not this line, reaching from corner to corner, bisect each of these spaces [figure 6]?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: And are there not here four equal lines which contain this space?

BOY: There are.

SOCRATES: Look and see how much this space is.

BOY: I do not understand.

SOCRATES: Has not each interior line cut off half of the four spaces?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: And how many such spaces are there in this section [the section marked out by the diagonal lines]?

BOY: Four.

SOCRATES: And how many in this? [the original shaded square]

BOY: Two.

SOCRATES: And four is how many times two?

BOY: Twice.

SOCRATES: And this space is of how many feet?

BOY: Of eight feet.

SOCRATES: And from what line do you get this figure?

BOY: From this.

SOCRATES: That is, from the line which extends from corner to corner of the figure of four feet?

BOY: Yes.

SOCRATES: And that is the line which the learned call the diagonal. And if this is the proper name, then you, Meno's slave, are prepared to affirm that the double space is the square of the diagonal?

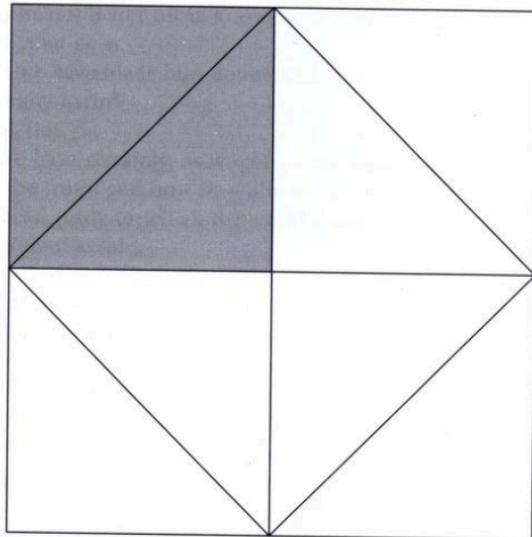


Figure 6

BOY: Certainly, Socrates.

SOCRATES: What do you say of him, Meno? Were not all these answers given out of his own head?

MENO: Yes, they were all his own.

SOCRATES: And yet, as we were just now saying, he did not know?

MENO: True.

SOCRATES: But still he had in him those notions of his – had he not?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then he who does not know may still have true notions of that which he does not know?

MENO: He has.

SOCRATES: And at present these notions have just been stirred up in him, as in a dream; but if he were frequently asked the same questions, in different forms, he would know as well as anyone at last?

MENO: I dare say.

SOCRATES: Without anyone teaching him he will recover his knowledge for himself if he is only asked questions?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And this spontaneous recovery of knowledge in him is recollection?

MENO: True.

SOCRATES: And this knowledge which he now has must he not either have acquired or always possessed?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: But if he always possessed this knowledge he would always have known; or if he has acquired the knowledge he could not have acquired it in this life, unless he has been taught geometry; for he may be made to do the same with all geometry and every other branch of knowledge? Now, has anyone ever taught him all this? You must know about him, if, as you say, he was born and bred in your house.

MENO: And I am certain that no one ever did teach him.

SOCRATES: And yet he has the knowledge?

MENO: The fact, Socrates, is undeniable.

SOCRATES: But if he did not acquire the knowledge in this life, then he must have had and learned it at some other time?

MENO: Clearly he must.

SOCRATES: Which must have been the time when he was not a man?

MENO: Yes.

SOCRATES: And if there have been always true thoughts in him, both at the time when he was and was not a man, which only need to be awakened into knowledge by putting questions to him, his soul must have always possessed this knowledge, for he always either was or was not a man?

MENO: Obviously.

SOCRATES: And if the truth of all things always existed in the soul, then the soul is immortal. Wherefore be of good cheer, and try to recollect what you do not know, or rather what you do not remember.

MENO: I feel, somehow, that I like what you are saying.

SOCRATES: And I, Meno, like what I am saying. Some things I have said of which I am not altogether confident. But that we shall be better and braver and less helpless

if we think that we ought to enquire, than we should have been if we indulged in the idle fancy that there was no knowing and no use in seeking to know what we do not know; – that is a theme upon which I am ready to fight, in word and deed, to the utmost of my power.

2 Knowledge versus Opinion: Plato, *Republic**

The distinction between knowledge and mere true belief (or opinion) has already emerged in the previous extract. Socrates there talked of 'true opinions which can be aroused by questioning and turned into knowledge'. But what is the difference between the two? As Socrates points out later in the *Meno*, it does not seem to lie in degree of usefulness, for the person who has a correct belief about the way to get to Larissa is just as good a guide as one who has knowledge. But knowledge, he goes on to explain, confers a plus: '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 are 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' (*Meno*, 98a 1–5). What is suggested here is that one who has knowledge is able to back up his opinion by providing a justification, or an explanatory account. Only when opinion is secured by a rational account, only when one can explain *why* a given belief is correct, is that belief entitled to the accolade 'knowledge'.

So far the Platonic account of knowledge seems straightforward enough. But elsewhere the distinction between knowledge and belief is explained in a way which seems to carry far more complex implications about the nature of reality. The most famous of these passages is in Plato's best-known work, the *Republic* (c.380 BC), where

he gives an account of the true philosophers, the lovers of knowledge and wisdom (who alone, Plato maintains, are fitted to rule the state). In the course of the argument, knowledge and opinion are said to be different powers or faculties, from which the (questionable) inference is drawn that they must have different objects. The ordinary everyday objects of opinion can be said to be what they are (beautiful, or large, or heavy or whatever) only in a qualified sense; Plato puts this by saying that such objects are somewhere in between what *is* and what *is not*. But true knowledge, being more stable and permanent, must relate to what really *is* – to objects that count as beautiful or large or heavy in an utterly unqualified and unrestricted way. Thus Plato introduces what have come to be known as the 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: the contrast throughout the following passage is between particular visible manifestations or examples of beauty (or justice or whatever), and the abstract notion of 'the Beautiful itself' which belongs to a higher order of reality and which is apprehended by the intellect alone. As Plato puts it, 'those who are able to see the many beautiful [objects], and who yet neither see absolute beauty... who see the many just [objects] and not absolute justice... may be said to have opinion but not knowledge'. As with all of the *Republic*, the argument is presented as a dialogue between Socrates and a sparring partner (in this case, Glaucon). Socrates, talking in the first person, speaks first.

I think we must explain whom we mean when we say that philosophers are to rule the State... Some natures ought to study philosophy and to be leaders in the State, and others who are not born to be philosophers are meant to be followers rather than leaders.

Then now for a definition, he said.

Follow me, I said, and I hope that I may in some way or other be able to give you a satisfactory explanation.

Proceed.

I dare say that you remember, and therefore I need not remind you, that a lover, if he is worthy of the name, ought to show his love not to some one part of that which he loves, but to the whole.

I really do not understand, and therefore beg of you to assist my memory.

Another person, I said, might fairly reply as you do; but a man of pleasure like yourself ought to know that all who are in the flower of youth do somehow or other raise a pang or emotion in a lover's breast, and are thought by him to be worthy of his affectionate regards. Is not this a way which you have with the fair: one has a snub nose, and you praise his charming face; the hook-nose of another has, you say, a royal look; while he who is neither snub nor hooked has the grace of regularity: the dark visage is manly, the fair are children of the gods; and as to the sweet 'honey pale', as they are called, what is the very name but the invention of a lover who talks in diminutives, and is not averse to paleness if appearing on the cheek of youth? In a word, there is no excuse which you will not make, and nothing which you will not say, in order not to lose a single flower that blooms in the spring-time of youth.

If you make me an authority in matters of love, for the sake of the argument, I assent.

And what do you say of lovers of wine? Do you not see them doing the same? They are glad of any pretext of drinking any wine.

Very good.

And the same is true of ambitious men; if they cannot command an army, they are willing to command a file; and if they cannot be honoured by really great and important persons, they are glad to be honoured by lesser and meaner people, – but honour of some kind they must have.

Exactly.

Once more let me ask: Does he who desires any class of goods, desire the whole class or a part only?

The whole.

And may we not say of the philosopher that he is a lover, not of a part of wisdom only, but of the whole?

Yes, of the whole.

And he who dislikes learning, especially in youth, when he has no power of judging what is good and what is not, such a one we maintain not to be a philosopher or a lover of knowledge, just as he who refuses his food is not hungry, and may be said to have a bad appetite and not a good one?

Very true, he said.

Whereas he who has a taste for every sort of knowledge, and who is curious to learn and is never satisfied, may be justly termed a philosopher? Am I not right?

Glaucon said: If curiosity makes a philosopher, you will find many a strange being will have a title to the name. All the lovers of sights have a delight in learning, and

* Plato, *Republic* [*Politeia*, c.380 BC], Bk V, 474b–483e. Trans. B. Jowett, in *The Dialogues of Plato* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1892), vol. III, pp. 171–9.