

Judging Strives to be Knowing
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There is a vexing oversight at the end of Book V of the *Republic*. Socrates engages in a discussion ‘with’ or about the Lovers of Sights and Sounds, in order distinguish philosophers from the seekers of any new experience whatsoever. He’ll do this by showing that there is a difference between knowing, knowledge (γινώσκειν, γνῶσις, ἐπιστήμη) and judging or belief (δοξάζειν, δόξα). This argument involves showing in turn that the *objects of knowledge* are distinct from the *objects of judgement*. But this is absurd. For genuine distinctness of objects would entail (I) there is no knowing of sensibles – perhaps more a problem for us moderns; and worse, (II) there is no judgement of Forms – which would seem a serious problem for Plato’s rationalist reformist agenda in ethics.

Ingenious readings have therefore sought to avoid this intolerable conclusion, by rejecting the mutual exclusivity of the domains of the objects of knowing and objects of judging. I aim to show, on the contrary, that we cannot escape this; we *ought* not escape it; and that attention to this reveals interesting contours in the structure of Plato’s epistemology. This paper will focus on the first Intolerable Conclusion, there is no knowing of sensibles.

The Vexing Oversight

In order to distinguish knowledge and belief, Socrates argues that capacities are differentiated according to what they do *and* according to what they do it *to*: “in the case of a capacity, I use only what it is set over and what it does, and by reference to these I call each the power it is: What is set over the same things and does the same I call the same power; what is set over something different and does something different I call a different one.” (477c9-d4).

We have two criteria for distinguishing capacities. Clearly, when jointly satisfied, we have distinct capacities; when jointly *not* satisfied, we have the same capacity. But what of cases where one but not the other criterion is satisfied? Do we say we have the same capacity, or different, or sometimes the same and sometimes a different capacity? This is the ‘vexing oversight’, which risks leading to (I) and (II) above.

But if it is an oversight, Plato must be very short-sighted indeed. For Socrates argues only a few lines later *from* the agreement that each of knowledge and belief do different things *to* the claim that they are ‘set over’ different objects: from the agreed ‘infallibility’ of knowledge and fallibility of judging, Socrates concludes “Each of these two is by its nature directed to a different object and achieves a different result” (478a2-4). Either this argument is tendentious, or the original criteria were actually *meant* to be understood as *only* jointly satisfiable all along. There is no indication about what we should think if they are separately satisfied, because they *cannot be* separately satisfied: a power *set over* different objects *does* something different to its objects. What a power does, and what it does it to, are inseparable.

Consider the example Socrates gives of distinct powers: “Sight, for example, and hearing are among the powers, if you understand the kind of thing I’m referring to” (477c2-4). Of course, on the one hand, it is perfectly obvious that we can see and hear the same things: I can see the sparrow I hear chirping in the tree. On the other, more precise and philosophical hand, it is equally obvious that we cannot see and hear the same things: we see colours, but we hear sounds. Colour is that with respect to which the power of sight is active; sound just is the object grasped by hearing. Whether one gives a realist or an idealist account of the metaphysics underlying the phenomenon, there is a non-accidental connection between what a power *does*, and what its proper objects are. This invariant connection is apparent from the strict philosophical perspective, which carefully specifies precisely what the ‘seen thing’ is, and what the ‘heard thing’ is; for on that account our two criteria are two different ways of describing the same thing.

The *Theaetetus* articulates such a strict, philosophical account of the ‘object seen’ is.¹ And in the immediate context, we should be expecting Socrates to be speaking philosophically rather than colloquially. He has just told Glaucon that the account he is about to give is not one he would try to share with others, but he thinks Glaucon will be able to understand it (475e6-7). Only a little later, in the simile of the sun, it is colours that are the proper objects of sight (VI.508d). Finally, presuming Socrates intends the stricter rather than the looser account of the objects of a capacity makes his argument a good one, rather than one so obviously flawed that even Glaucon could not have let it pass.

So if knowledge and belief are ‘powers’ just as sight and hearing are then, to draw the parallel exactly, we should say: knowing knows what is knowable; judging judges what is judgeable. If there are complex objects with both knowable and judgeable aspects – such as we suppose there to be objects like a bird, which is both visible and audible – this must be a further, and quite different argument. But the question should not distract us from the strict separation of proper objects which remains: in knowing an object, what we know is its knowable aspect, or whatever

¹ “Are you also willing to admit that what you perceive through one power, you can’t perceive through another? For instance, what you perceive through hearing, you couldn’t perceive through sight, and similarly what you perceive through sight you couldn’t perceive through hearing?” (*Th.* 185a5-10). Also the *Meno*’s ‘Gorgianic’ account of colour isolates ‘colour’ from the coloured thing in just the way the philosophical account of the proper objects of the different sense-modalities would require: “... colour is an effluvium from shapes which fits the sight and is perceived” (*Meno* 76d5).

is knowable about it; in judging it, we judge its judgeable aspect. One can no more know what one judges than one can see what one hears.

This strict separation of ‘judgeables’ and ‘knowables’ is often regarded as an epistemological monstrosity. But it should not be so regarded. By thus delineating judgement and its proper objects, Plato is establishing a distinct space for a distinct sort of cognitive achievement, namely knowledge. But one could as well put the point the other way round: Plato, by so restricting the domain of the knowable, is clearing room for judgement as a distinct phenomenon. He restricts knowledge to make room for belief.

Knowables and Judgeables

What are these ‘knowable aspects’ and ‘judgeable aspects’? Or, to put it neutrally, if ungrammatically: What are knowables and judgeables, respectively, like? Given our previous discussion, this is the same as to ask, “What is the difference between knowledge and judgement?” Our passage here gives us an answer in terms of the *objects* of judgement, and the *activity* of knowing.

The mark of the judgeable Socrates first appeals to, and continually returns to, is *multiplicity*, which is occasionally opposed to the unity or singularity of knowables. “Now that these points have been established, I want to address a question to our friend who doesn’t believe in the beautiful itself or any form of the beautiful itself that remains always the same in all respects but who does believe in the many beautiful things.” (478e12-479a3)²

This multiplicity is closely related to a liability to ambiguity – where the ‘ambiguity’ is a metaphysical phenomenon, not a linguistic one. ‘Of all the many beautifuls’ (479a5), Glaucon agrees, of all the many pious and just things, there is none that does not also appear in a way (πως) ugly, unjust and impious respectively. The same is true of ‘the many doubles’ (479b3); ‘the many bigs...’ (479b6); of ‘any one of the manys’ (479b9). Multiplicity is heavily emphasised throughout,³ and is directly associated with the key question: “Do not all of the many F-things also appear somehow not-F?” (There is, by contrast, almost no mention of motion or change until the curious and provocative image of objects of judgement ‘rolling around as intermediates between what is not and what purely is’ (478d4-5); and no mention of their being sensible.)

The purely mathematical example (“What about the many doubles?” Socrates asks. “Do they appear any the less halves than doubles?”) makes clear that change of shape, quantity, position or quality over time is not required for the problematic complexity that makes an object judgeable. Whatever is double is also half, without anything changing, and whether or not the objects considered are perceptible. It is the variety inherent in multiplicity that is distinctive of objects of judgement. This is why the examples offered notoriously leave us wondering whether we are talking about a beautiful sculpture, a just deed, for instance; or whether we are talking about properties and classes, for instance, ‘bright colour’ and ‘returning what was lent’. Plato is not being careless or unclear, I suggest. For his point, the distinction does not matter. It is the indeterminacy such multiple things are liable to – making them able to be as much one things as the other – which fits an object to be a judgeable one.

The memorable “children’s riddle about the eunuch who threw something at a bat” (479b12) illustrates this criterion. The ‘manys’ are “like the ambiguities [ἐπαμφοτερίζουσιν] one is entertained with at dinner parties or like the children’s riddle about the eunuch who threw something at a bat – the one about what he threw at it and what it was in, for they are ambiguous [ἐπαμφοτερίζειν], and one cannot understand them as fixedly being or not being or as both or as neither” (479b11-c5).

Knowables, we can infer, should not be ambiguous in this way; they are not many, or liable to multiplication through relativisation. Knowables are not as much one thing as their opposite. But this is not explicitly said. Indeed, very little *is* said about knowables and even about knowing. From this passage, all we learn that knowing is clearer (φανότερον, 478c9), is more perspicuous or distinct (σαφηνεία), and is unmistakable (ἀναμάρτητον, 477e7) while judgement is fallible. The criterion of infallibility, offered by Glaucon, drives the wedge between knowledge and belief (477e6).

What these too familiar tropes cover over, however, is the fact that knowledge and belief are illuminated with respect to one another. Although too familiar to notice, it should now strike us as distinctly odd. After all, if I wanted to understand *seeing* better, I would hardly suppose that a more exact study of *hearing* was going to help!

The powers of knowing and judging are not just illuminated by their differences, but even related as greater and lesser: Although as distinct as seeing and hearing, Socrates and Glaucon agree without further explanation that judgement is somehow ‘between’ knowledge and ignorance. It does not ‘exceed’ either. But just as blue is no more or less a colour than red, so seeing is neither more nor less a mode of perception than hearing. They are equally αἴσθησις. If knowing and judging are similarly distinct powers, how can they be compared as ‘greater and lesser’ on some common scale? Can we make sense of this, and yet preserve the distinctness of powers?

² Cf. 479d10-e4: “As for those who study the many beautiful things but do not see the beautiful itself and are incapable of following another who leads them to it, who see many just things but not the just itself, and so with everything – these people, we shall say, opine everything but have no knowledge of anything they opine.”

³ ‘many’ later: VI.484b5, 490b1

Consider seeing and hearing again: True, each is as much αἴσθησις as the other. Yet colloquial speech might allow that hearing and seeing *might* be related as more and less accurate, say. When we do that, however, we are regarding them as modes of ‘cognition’, for lack of a better word, not as the respective modes that they are. Hearing hears sounds; seeing sees visibles. But their distinct activities have a common aim: to perceive the physical environment here and now as it is – otherwise we have no basis for comparison. Similarly, if belief and knowledge can be put on the same scale (and Socrates and Glaucon agree they can), and if they can be evaluated by the same criteria, then they are being considered insofar as they aim at the same thing.

What is the common goal of judging and knowing? What does judging accomplish less well? The common basis for comparison that we are offered is clarity or ‘perspicuity’. “Is it outside of these, exceeding knowledge in clarity or ignorance in obscurity?” (478c10-11). This metaphor of clarity does not give us much. But its relation to precision and determinacy, as well as the relative fallibility of judgement – suggesting it is sometimes *not* mistaken – might allow us to state the common goal of judgement and knowledge as: to supply a clear, precise and unshakable relation to reality.

But a complete and firm grasp of reality is exactly what knowledge *is*. That is: insofar as they can be ranked hierarchically, knowing and judging *both* aim at *knowledge*. This is evident in the fact that the criteria used to evaluate them – clarity, precision, stability, having a reason – describe what it is to be *knowledge*. It may come as no surprise to hear (again) that the ways in which judgement is deficient are the very same ways in which it fails to be knowledge. Less remarked is the kind of authority this implies knowledge has over judgement: we look to knowledge to find out what judgement *ought* to be doing, and what features it *ought* to have, but fails to have. We might say, judgement *mimics* or *imitates* knowledge, as best it can, given what it and its proper objects are.

This means that there are two ways I can regard and evaluate δόξα or the activity of judging. I can consider it *as* judgement, the specific power exactly suited to its proper objects; or I can consider it as a mode of access to the truth – that is, as a (deficient) form of knowledge. Thus knowing and judging can be two quite distinct powers; and yet they are, in another way, of the same kind.

This may sound like a contradiction. But it is the structure familiar from the form-particular relation. Any likeness is in just this peculiar position – *qua* likeness it is of a different kind from its model, yet *qua* likeness-of-*X* its identity as the particular likeness it is is determined by *X*, that of which it is a likeness. This sort of difference establishes a pair related as inferior and superior, according to the criteria for ‘being what it is’ established by the model and used also to measure the likeness, just because it is a likeness. Indeed, that these two cognitive capacities should stand in this relation to each other is already suggested by the fact that their objects do, together with what it is for objects to be defined with respect to capacities. Socrates indeed draws this analogy at 533a2-4: “And as being is to becoming, so intellect to judgement; and as intellect is to judgement, so is knowledge to conviction and thought to imaging.” (533a2-4). So judging might remain a likeness of knowing, while reminding a distinct power.

Consequences for epistemology in the Republic

But this is only half the story. I’d said that judgement *mimics* or *imitates* knowledge, as best it can, *given what it and its proper objects are*. Considered as a form of cognition, judgement tries but inevitably fails to be knowledge – because of the very nature of its objects, or, what is the same, because of the very nature of a power suited to grasping such objects as they are. But I’d also promised that this should not be considered an epistemological disaster. For unlike other imitations, judgement can *also* be considered as just that power it is – and as such, it is exactly suited to its objects. For there are ambiguous, complex and varying phenomena; and δόξαζεν is the mode through which the actual ambiguity, multiplicity, and inexplicable particularity of such phenomena is rightly recognized and respected.

That is to say, the very same aspects of judgement that make it fail as knowledge make it alone suitable for certain particulars, for whatever “because appearing (in/with) actions and bodies and each other, appears to be many” (476a4-7). These are paradigmatically sensible particulars – as we see later in the claim that the many beautifuls and goods (earlier, the objects of judgement) are to be seen, not intellected (507c10-11). Judgement is entitled to be considered something in its own right, and not *just* a faint imitation of knowledge, because there are realities that it is uniquely suited to grasp – things which trying to grasp them ‘as they are’ – one criterion of knowledge – *requires* falling short of knowledge in other ways.

Knowledge should be maximally clear and perspicuous. But for multi-faceted objects, there is no final determination of which of several categories they most correctly fall into. This is why meeting the criterion of ambiguity is centrally related to multiplicity. The child’s riddle trades mostly on ambiguities in perceptible things – a bat, which is neither a bird nor not a bird, for instance – where ambiguity is inevitable and ineradicable. To try to *know* here would be to try to assert more ‘fact of the matter’ – more definitiveness – than there is. Judgement, precisely because it is unconnected and uncommitted, can be flexible, able to be sensitive to the different concerns that warrant varying determinations under different circumstances. It does not fix things as ‘this’ or ‘that’ – and in the case of complex sensibles, rightly so. To ‘get it right about how things are’ here is to remain indefinite, inconclusive. The important thing only is to recognize judgement for what it is, and not mistake it for knowledge. Indeed, our

passage opens with emphasising the importance of not *confusing* knowing and judging – rather than emphasising the sheer superiority of knowing over judging (476c-d).

The ground for knowledge's unmistakableness becomes clear only later, especially in Books VI-VII. Knowledge is comprehensive, well-integrated, explanatory and exhaustive – and so it cannot but be infallible. But for ambiguous situations, shaped by practical considerations, that kind of comprehensive explanatory grasp is not possible. We need judgement here. For such atomistic bits of information, for matters not fully integrated into a comprehensive, rational order, judgement is *necessary*, for *only* judgement does justice to the intractable particularity and potential for inexplicable idiosyncrasy of sensible particulars.

Has the well-ordered Platonic universe space for such atomistic truths? They are all around us – above all, they are within us. Sensations and perceptions are by their nature singular, unsharable and to that extent 'irrational' – they cannot be expressed within an articulated public account which one could defend under all cross-examination. This is why sensibles are the paradigmatic objects of judgement.⁴ And this is why, returned to the cave and dwelling among sensibles, the philosopher will need judgement, as well as knowledge. The philosopher's judgement will be beautiful, however, and not ugly⁵ – for while it remains resolutely judgement, as it must do if it is to do its job, it is judgement informed by knowledge. It borrows its beauty from its original, just as a well-made statue of Helen borrows its beauty from Helen.

⁴ Though perhaps not the exclusive objects of judgement – 'whether justice is good' may be ambiguous in this way, and so might be an object of δόξα (at 491b7-c2): "...each of the things we praised in that nature tends to corrupt the soul that has it and to drag it away from philosophy. I mean courage, moderation, and the other things mentioned." I take up this, which concerns Intolerable Consequence II above, elsewhere.

⁵ Cf. VI.506c6: "Opinions not based on (ἄνευ) knowledge are ugly things" – implying that there can be judgements *with* knowledge, which may then have a share in beauty.