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Final Exam - Epistemology and Metaphysics

When I began planning this paper I asked myself, "What do I know about the theory of knowledge?" My response to myself was "Only what I have been taught, no more, no less". From a Platonic view, this could be seen as the same as knowing nothing about Epistemology, since my perception of what I know is simply what I have been taught. This is because I perceive all of my information about epistemology as being second-hand information. After further thought, I find my original response to be inaccurate. While the baseline of my knowing of epistemology is from what I have been told and what I have read, I have contemplated the topic myself, spoken to others about it and formed my own ideas about epistemology. Because I am human and have the ability of complex thought, what I know about epistemology is greater than the base information I was given about it.

Plato addresses Epistemology in the "Republic" and the "Theaetetus", but each dialog addresses it differently. "Theaetetus" is primarily concerned with perception on multiple levels, including pure belief. The "Republic" is focused on epistemology's relationship to the theory of forms. The "Meno" seeks to discover how we know what virtue is. The "Meno" and the "Republic" both contain Socrates' theory of recollection as a basis of certain fundamental knowledge, which is especially important to addressing morality and mathematics. Metaphysics is addressed in the "Parmenides", the "Sophist" and in the "Republic". The "Parmenides" is involved in the establishment of the sensibility of the Forms and their application. The "Sophist" concerns itself with the



nature of existence and evidence of existence and non-existence. The “Republic” remains the strong core of both epistemology and the theory of forms, providing bastioned examples to illustrate both concepts.

The opening account of epistemology in the “Theaetetus” involves Socrates and a young Theaetetus discussing the question “what is knowledge?” which is a very essential question for epistemology. Theaetetus initially responds with “perception”. Socrates compared that response with Protagoras’ “man is the measure of all things” statement. If knowledge (specifically, true knowledge) is perception, then everything that a man perceives is true, and that perception is infallible. With this definition of knowledge, problems can occur when a difference in perceptions occurs. It is possible for multiple people to perceive the same thing very differently. How do we actually define objects that we see? It has been long debated whether a tomato is a fruit or a vegetable, for some unintelligible reason, this question seems very important to scientists. Scientists use their senses like everyone else to perceive things, but they have a drive to find a universally true perception. Most people will interpret the word tomato and see a vision in their mind of this red, round and shiny thing. These are characteristics that most people would agree upon. Socrates might argue that while we agree on these characteristics, there is no way to know if we are envisioning the same red, the same shape of round. Perhaps the question of whether a tomato is a fruit or vegetable is so hard to answer because there is no universal image of what a fruit or a vegetable is. For the non-negotiated members of these groups there are sets of criteria that are met, but there is no way to perceive that something is a vegetable. A far more important question to ask is, does that tomato we envisioned actually exist? Are we



recalling the first tomato we were introduced to during our childhood, perhaps one we previously knew of, but then forgot about when we were born? My envisioned tomato is probably very different from yours; mine meets the before-mentioned characteristics, but is flawless. I don't believe I have ever perceived a perfect tomato like the one I see in my mind's eye. Most tomatoes have at least some flaw, whether growing an odd shape, or something more drastic as blossom-end-rot. If knowledge of something is the perception of it, then how can I possibly know what a tomato is if I have never seen the example that I mentally refer to? Perhaps the answer is in the fact that I am seeing Tomato in my mind, but not a tomato. This possibility would be consistent with the theory of forms, presented in the "Republic". In my imagination I see an ideal tomato, but my perceptions are of what I see as real tomatoes. As a member of the sensible world, this is a limitation, because it represents only my opinion. For me to go beyond my opinion I would have to discover a universally acceptable way to rationally and reasonably determine what is and what is not a tomato, once this universally acceptable system was established I would be able to further contemplate the evidence and perhaps arrive at an understanding of Tomato. In "Theaetetus" Socrates disputes knowledge is perception by arguing that without adding something to the perception, it can only be equal to perception, and can not equate with knowledge. This addition is most likely interpretation, which is fallible. Socrates also refutes knowledge is perception with his theory of becoming, with his statement that what was before cannot be afterwards without having become. The theory of becoming is fueled by the concept of everything being composed of motions. Since knowledge of something would only be of that something at that moment, it could be said that knowledge cannot be of material



things, but only of certain universals, such as virtues. There are arguments in multiple dialogs that form a continuing battle between whether knowledge is of physical things (materialism) or whether knowledge is of ideals, virtues and universal truths (idealism). In the “Meno” Socrates suggests that virtues are knowable because it is something that differs between humans, and no human ever knowingly desires what is bad, so differences in conduct must be the result of knowing different things. Socrates claims that knowing what is right will result in the desire to adhere to what is right. It is at this point that Socrates stumbles with himself, how can we ever seek the knowledge we do not know if we don’t know what we are looking for? It is at this point he begins to invoke his theory of recollection as part of Epistemology. Since we would not look for that which we already know, and wouldn’t recognize it if we did not know it, it would only be logical to assume that we already know it, but are being reminded of it when we come across it. The account of it in the “Meno” is presented with a short discussion of the square root of two with an “uneducated” boy. Through Socrates’ carefully selected questions and examples the boy is able to demonstrate his knowledge of geometry as he takes a square (X), but then an attempt to double it, arrives at a square 4 times the size of the original (4X) by doubling both length and width (the logical approach). This is of course an error and not the desired result, but through the boy’s own reasoning abilities he determines that cutting each square in half will result in the correctly sized figure (4X/2). This example of recollection is similar to the Allegory of the Cave in the “Republic”, as it shows the refinement of knowledge and the progression of understanding from an intellectual darkness to some type of enlightenment. The two theories would appear to be incompatible with each other though. If recollection occurs,



then wouldn't the prisoners in the cave be "reminded" of the real creatures they knew by the figures they were being constantly exposed to?

The Allegory of the Cave represents a progression of levels of epistemology, but it also addresses the theory of forms. While the prisoners are in the cave, watching the shadows on the wall, they may believe that they are seeing the real world, but are instead being deceived (perhaps the work of Sophists). These are images of sensible things, or a work of the imagination. Upon being able to turn around and see the figures that the shadows are being cast from, the prisoner is able to perceive the figures and see them as sensible things, more than merely shadows, but still not the actual objects they represent. Upon leaving the darkness of the cave and going out into the light the prisoner is blinded with the form of reality itself. This could still be classified as perception, but once out of the cave there is no where else to go to ascend further in knowledge, so what the prisoner is seeing must be real. This reasoning places a level of knowledge about reality in the prisoner. Upon interacting with the realm of reality, it becomes possible for the prisoner to contemplate all of the objects that he had previously seen only as shadows and possibly create some type of understanding and true knowledge of the objects. To progress any further in knowing of the objects, to a level where complete truth has been reached would place the prisoner's knowledge closer to the Form of the Good. One thing that should be observed about the cave is that not every prisoner escapes it, only one. The one prisoner alone is able to escape the darkness of the cave and walk outside the cave to the enlightenment of reality. In the "Parmenides" Socrates seeks to remove certain undignified objects, such as dirt, from having Forms. Parmenides believes that Socrates is incorrect and that everything



has Forms, and at some point in the future will realize this. If it is admitted that Socrates' idea of exclusion of Forms is incorrect, then it may be assumed that the "knowable thing" which is sought in the Platonic discussions of Epistemology is the Forms. The theories established from the allegory of the cave are in conflict with the "Meno", where Socrates states that there is no practical difference between knowledge and a correct opinion. Knowledge has also been equated with belief. If while in the cave it was believed that the shadows of the figures were real, then the prisoners knew of the figures.

For something to be known, it must exist. In the "Republic" knowledge is related to being, and not-being is considered an ignorance of necessity. The question is presented as to whether there is an intermediate between knowledge and ignorance and between being and not-being. When not-being is established to be nothing, it brings thoughts of a contrary statement made in the "Theaetetus". In the "Theaetetus" it is discussed that everything is in motion and is "becoming". It is possible to have knowledge of that which does not exist if it used to be and has now become something different.

In the "Republic" the establishment of the two worlds doctrine occurs, separating our world, the world of the sensible, from the world of the Forms. This separation suggests that the sensible can not have knowledge of the Forms and since the Forms are the only knowable thing, then we can not Know, only experience perception and opinion. As with all virtues, complete and true knowledge (Wisdom?) is unattainable to the sensible man. Because of this inability to attain knowledge in its purest form we may be inclined to agree with Socrates' statement that knowledge is a believed opinion. We



are limited beings in our time, mental capacity and ability to be truly representative of virtues. This limitation is encouragement to believe what we perceive, as long as it is never found to be in error; therefore we can take knowledge as our interpretation of perception. If we take all of these theories and concepts from across various dialogs we end up with something like this: We know what exists, and what is knowable is the Forms, the Forms are isolated in the world of the Forms, and are unintelligible to the world of the Sensible, therefore, nothing in the world of the Sensible truly exists, therefore there is no such thing as reality, because I am not here to perceive it.

While I know that my imagined tomato is not real, I can not prove that any of the other tomatoes I have ever witnessed in my life actually exist either, even if I could, they wouldn't be the same tomatoes. It is likely that the tomatoes of my past are now somewhere between decomposed goo and being used as raw nutrients, possibly by other plants or animals, which would mean that my tomatoes have changed form completely. If you have become what you are because of what you have eaten, then the things you have eaten have become you.

