

PLATO'S CONCEPTION OF EPISTĒMĒ

AMANO Masayuki

*Epistēmē*¹⁾ is the main theme of the *Theaetetus*, one of Plato's late dialogues. It is not, however, the purpose of this paper to examine or to elucidate Plato's concept of *epistēmē* in that dialogue. In this paper, an attempt will be made (1) to show a way of understanding Plato's philosophy as a whole, with his development taken into consideration, on the assumption that his conception of *epistēmē* played a leading role, lying at the basis of his philosophy and guiding his philosophical development, and (2) to confirm this assumption at the same time, partly by showing how Plato developed his own theory of *epistēmē* on the basis of the Socratic conception of Wisdom (*sophia*), which he inherited in all probability from historical Socrates, partly by showing how this assumption provides us with a way of understanding Plato's philosophical development as a consistent one in principle.

1. The role of *epistēmē* in Plato's philosophy

It has traditionally been a matter of general agreement that Plato's philosophy is characterized by the theory of Forms. To be sure, the theory of Forms constitutes a conspicuous feature of Plato's philosophy, which is, on that account, famous for the theory, but, needless to say, it is not the whole of his philosophy.²⁾ If one fixes one's eyes solely on a conspicuous feature, one may well be misled. Hence, if we want to understand Plato's philosophy correctly, we should try to understand the theory of Forms, not by itself, but within the framework of the whole of his philosophy. And the key to understanding his philosophy as a whole, I think, is his own peculiar conception of *epistēmē*, which is more fundamental in Plato's philosophy (for the reason I will explain shortly) than the theory of Forms.

But there may be an objection: since, someone may say, *epistēmē* is specified by Plato as knowledge of Forms,³⁾ isn't it more natural to think that the theory of Forms and Plato's conception of *epistēmē* depend upon each other, than it is to think the latter is more fundamental than the former? No, it isn't. I will explain briefly, to begin with, the reason why.

Plato's primary concern in his early dialogues was ethical problems, especially a question as to how to 'live well' (*eu zēn*), i.e. how to lead a morally good life, and he seems to have thought the key to the question was the so-called Socratic thesis: 'virtue is *epistēmē*'.⁴⁾ Virtue and *epistēmē* therefore were two main themes of his early philosophical investigation. And it is in the course of this investigation that he introduced Forms (esp. of virtues) as the objects of *epistēmē*;⁵⁾ he distinguished, in the middle dialogues, *epistēmē* from *doxa*,⁶⁾ thought that, while the objects of *doxa* were sensible 'many things' (*ta polla*), those of *epistēmē* were not⁷⁾, and called the latter 'Forms' (*eidē* or *ideai*). Besides, while

the doctrine of Recollection (*anamnēsis*) had been introduced in the *Meno* to explain how it is possible to acquire *epistēmē*, without introducing the theory of Forms at the same time, the same doctrine was introduced in the *Phaedo*, which is generally thought to have been written after the *Meno*, with Forms as the objects of *epistēmē*. Since Forms were introduced in this way, it is quite natural to think that Plato's conception of Forms is dependent upon his conception of *epistēmē*. Moreover, after having presented critical arguments in the *Parmenides* against Forms, the first thing Plato did — i.e. in the *Theaetetus*, which is now generally thought to have been written next to the *Parmenides* — was to re-examine the concept of *epistēmē* without any explicit reference to the theory of Forms. This fact also seems to suggest that his conception of *epistēmē* is more fundamental than the theory of Forms.

2. The influence of Socrates

Plato's conception of *epistēmē*, in the first place, seems to be, in its essence, what he inherited from Socrates right at the beginning of his philosophical career. If this interpretation is right, and if, as I argued in the last section, Plato's conception of Forms is dependent upon his conception of *epistēmē*, then it will be reasonable to assume, in the second place, that Plato's conception of *epistēmē* guided or regulated the whole course of his philosophical development from the very beginning, lying at the basis of the framework of his philosophy, within which the theory of Forms was introduced in the middle dialogues. As a matter of fact, even in the early dialogues, i.e. before the introduction of the theory of Forms, his investigation seems to have been fundamentally regulated by that conception. What is it, then, that I claim Socrates bequeathed to Plato? It is his conception of Wisdom (*sophia*), which is set forth by the Socrates in the *Apology of Socrates* (hereafter, *Apology*). In this dialogue, an episode is told concerning Socrates' Wisdom (cf. 20e-23c).

Once Chaerephon, a friend and enthusiastic admirer of Socrates, visited Delphi and consulted an oracle. He asked if there was anyone wiser than Socrates, and received an oracle that there wasn't. When Socrates heard this story, he couldn't make out the meaning of the oracle, because he did not think he was wise at all. After due deliberation, however, it occurred to him that he could possibly refute the oracle by proving that there was someone wiser than himself. He consequently visited and examined, one after another, those who were thought by people, and thought themselves as well, to be wise. Socrates thought, as the result of his examination, that none of them was wise, because they all proved to be ignorant of *kalon kagathon* (literally 'what is beautiful and good', conventionally 'human excellence' or 'virtue'). For that matter, Socrates was no more wise than they. But, while they were not aware of not knowing *kalon kagathon*, he was well aware of not knowing it. He concluded from this fact that he was wiser than anyone else in that he alone was aware of not knowing *kalon kagathon*, thought that no one but the God

was absolutely wise, and understood the point of the oracle was that the wisdom of a human being was of little or no worth.⁸⁾ And thereafter, thinking it was the divine will that he was to examine anyone who thought himself to be wise and, if he proved not to be wise, to prove and make him realize that he was not wise, Socrates did so in deference to the divine will and never ceased to do.

This episode provides us with two important points concerning the Wisdom conceived of by Socrates. In the first place, it is a kind of knowledge, i.e. knowledge of *kalon kagathon*, in other words, knowledge of virtue. Secondly, the conditions of it must be far more stringent than those of the wisdom in the usual sense, since Socrates did not give credit for Wisdom to those who were regarded by people to be wise; moreover, there is no one, according to Socrates, who has Wisdom.

I claim this Socratic conception of Wisdom underlies Plato's conception of *epistēmē*,⁹⁾ for Plato seems to have thought about his *epistēmē* that hardly anybody had one (cf. e.g. *Phd.*76b; see also n.13). I'm going to clarify, in this paper, Plato's conception of *epistēmē*, principally with regard to the second point above.

But there may be an objection that *epistēmē* and Wisdom are not the same thing. This objection can be met, in a way, by adducing an argument in the very dialogue whose main theme is *epistēmē* (i.e. in the *Theaetetus*), by which argument it is proved that Wisdom and *epistēmē* are the same thing (145d-e). But there remains a question. If Plato inherited Socratic conception of Wisdom, why didn't he also use the word '*sophia*' itself instead of '*epistēmē*'? This is a difficult question to answer. I'd like to propose one possible interpretation.

Socrates used the word '*sophia*' in the traditional sense of 'practical wisdom for living well (*eu zēn*)' on the one hand, but he seems to have imposed restrictions on the *sophia* in the traditional sense on the other. He seems to have thought that *sophia* should be theoretically well-grounded. For his method of refutation (*elenchus*) presupposes that one who has *sophia* must be able to answer any relevant questions correctly. This ability is specified by Plato, in his middle and late dialogues, as an ability to 'give an account' (*dounai logon*), or as an ability to 'give and receive an account' (*dounai te kai dexasthai logon*), i.e. to 'exchange questions and answers' (cf. *Rep.*VII 534d), in other words, to 'discuss dialectically'. Thus, Plato thought that Socratic *sophia* must be grounded on *logos*,¹⁰⁾ that is to say, in our language, theoretically well-grounded. I suppose Plato used the word '*epistēmē*' to designate the Socratic *sophia* so as to distinguish it from the *sophia* in the traditional sense.¹¹⁾

There may be another objection that seeing that the Socrates in Plato's early dialogues pursued definitions of virtues (e.g. courage, moderation, piety), *epistēmē* must be knowledge of definitions after all, which must be different from Socratic Wisdom. Perhaps such an interpretation results from the influence of Aristotle's evidence, on the one hand, that Socrates was engaged exclusively in ethical matters and kept his mind on definitions (cf. *Metaph.*A6, 987b1-4),¹²⁾ and from our own prejudice, on the other hand, concerning the

concept of *epistēmē*.¹³⁾ If Socrates in Plato's early dialogues (or Plato himself) did pursue definitions of virtues, we cannot but say that all his attempts resulted in failure. Such an interpretation is not entirely implausible, though. For, according to the concluding remarks of the Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, even if an investigation has resulted in failure, it does not necessarily follow that it has been made to no purpose (cf. *Tht.*210b-c). Nevertheless, the Socrates in the early dialogues seems, not to pursue definitions of virtues in collaboration with his interlocutor, but to examine and refute him, especially when we take Socrates' mission, mentioned in the passage of the *Apology* quoted above, into consideration. So it is far more reasonable to interpret the discussions in the early dialogues as a process of examining and refuting those who appear to, but in reality do not, have Wisdom,¹⁴⁾ than as that of pursuing definitions of virtues.

3. Logos

Plato says that one who has *epistēmē* of anything should be able to *dounai logon* ('give an account') about it (cf. *Phd.*76b, *Sym.*202a, *Rep.*VII 534b). '*Logos*' in this phrase is now generally interpreted as definition. If this interpretation is appropriate, then *epistēmē* will be what we call 'knowledge'. But, such an interpretation is untenable.

In the first place, as I said above, Plato also says of one who has *epistēmē* of anything that one should be able to *dounai te kai dexasthai logon* ('give and receive an account' or 'exchange questions and answers' or 'discuss in a dialectical manner') about it (cf. *Rep.*VII 531e, *Tht.*202c). It is obvious that '*logos*' in this phrase does not mean 'definition'.

In the second place, the requirement indicates a dynamic *ability* to answer any relevant questions, rather than static knowledge stored in the memory.¹⁵⁾

What kind of ability is it, then? There is no instance, in Plato's dialogues, in which this ability is exhibited by any character, but negative instances are given abundantly in which lack of the ability is revealed; these instances are provided by those who are refuted by Socrates. We are hence obliged to try to get a clue as to what the ability is and, eventually, as to what *epistēmē* is, from the method of the Socratic refutation (*elenchus*).

4. The method of the Socratic *elenchus*

It is not because he knows the truth that Socrates is successful in refuting his interlocutor (cf. *Apol.*23a, *Charm.*165b-c). His method of refutation consists, in short, in bringing out his interlocutor's inconsistency. Socrates asks his interlocutor, in the first place, a question concerning a matter of ethics and gets an answer from him. Then he asks him several other questions, which seem irrelevant at first sight, and elicits his answer to each question. And, in the end, he indicates the inconsistency of the answers.

Socrates examines in this manner, not whether a certain statement (i.e. the interlocutor's answer to the initial question) is true or not, but whether the interlocutor's opinions are consistent or not. If they were consistent, Socrates would give him credit for *sophia* or

epistēmē. We learn from this method, first, that *epistēmē* is not a single piece of knowledge but a complex of pieces of knowledge, and, secondly, that consistency is a necessary condition of *epistēmē*. Consistency, however, is not necessarily the sufficient condition of *epistēmē* as well. What is the sufficient condition, then? This question will be considered below, in section 7.

5. The stages leading to *epistēmē*

Let us see what *epistēmē* is from another viewpoint, i.e. from that of the stages by which we attain to *epistēmē*.

In the *Meno*, as I said above, the doctrine of Recollection is introduced to explain how it is possible to acquire *epistēmē*, and, since Meno, the interlocutor of Socrates, is not convinced of the doctrine, Socrates takes it upon himself to demonstrate how a boy, ignorant of geometry, finds out a geometrical truth by Recollection.

Socrates draws a square with sides two feet long on the ground, and asks the boy what the length of the sides will be of a square with twice the area of that of the given one. The boy gives a ready answer that it is twice the length of the sides of the given square (i.e. four feet). He is confident that he knows the correct answer, although he does not know it in reality. Now, Socrates adds lines to the figure on the ground to construct another square with sides twice as long as those of the given one, tells the boy that the second square has four times the area of that of the given one, and gives him a hint that the sides of the square in question are longer than two feet and shorter than four. Then the boy gives a second answer that the length in question is three feet. Now, Socrates adds lines again to construct a third square with sides three feet long and tells the boy that while the area of the square in question is eight square feet, that of the third one is nine square feet. The boy is at a loss and cannot give an answer any more. Now, Socrates gives a hint again by drawing additional lines. Thereby the boy finds out at last that the length in question is that of the diagonal of the given square. (cf.82b-85b)

Has the boy acquired *epistēmē*, then? No, he hasn't. For Socrates says that the boy has only had his own true *doxa* awakened, and that if someone asks him the same question over and over again and in various ways, then he will acquire *epistēmē*. (cf.85c-d)

According to this demonstration, there are four stages by which one attains to *epistēmē*.

- (1) One thinks that one knows truth about something while one doesn't.
- (2) One is at a loss finding that one doesn't know the truth.
- (3) One finds out the truth.
- (4) One acquires *epistēmē*.

The stages leading to *epistēmē* is expounded again in the seventh book of the *Republic* using a simile (i.e. the simile of the Cave), but it is not clear if the stages in the *Meno* listed above exactly correspond to those in the *Republic*.

It may be said in this connection that Socrates' arguments in the early dialogues always cease at the second stage, the significance of which stage is explained in the *Meno* as follows: at first the boy had no mind to make an effort to find out or to learn the truth because he thought he knew it while in reality he didn't, but after having fallen into perplexity (*aporia*) and having realized he didn't know, he began to desire to know the truth, and thus he was profited by falling into perplexity (cf.84c). This explanation seems to tell us how to read Plato's early dialogues.

It is noteworthy that the stage of finding out — and, as the result, of knowing — the truth and that of acquiring *epistēmē* are distinguished.¹⁶⁾ This means that *epistēmē* ought to be distinguished from (what we call) knowledge. What will be necessary, then, for the boy to acquire *epistēmē*? Socrates does not explain what it is. The boy may be able to repeat what Socrates told him, but if someone requires him a strictly geometrical demonstration, he will be unable to give one. What he lacks is an ability to give a strictly geometrical demonstration, which ability is to be obtained by mastering the basic knowledge of geometry and the method of geometrical demonstration. In other words, what he lacks is the knowledge of geometry as a system of demonstration or a systematic understanding of geometrical demonstration.¹⁷⁾

Concerning philosophical investigation, a hypothetical method is proposed in the *Phaedo*, and is made use of to prove immortality of souls. In this method too, systematicity seems to be postulated. To show this, I will take up the method next.

6. The hypothetical theory of Forms

In the *Phaedo*, the so-called 'theory of Forms' is introduced, in one passage, in conjunction with the doctrine of Recollection. It is proved on the basis of this doctrine that our souls had known Forms and had hence existed before we were born (cf. 73c ff.). The doctrine of Recollection therefore entails that Forms *really* exist in the same world as that in which our souls had existed before we were born (cf. *Phdr.*246a-250c); otherwise, it does not follow that our souls had *really* existed before we were born.¹⁸⁾ Thus the doctrine of Recollection is mystical and dogmatic. So I will call the 'theory of Forms' connected with the doctrine of Recollection 'the dogmatic doctrine (rather than theory) of Forms'. In the same dialogue, the 'theory of Forms' of apparently different type is introduced, in another passage, to give a final proof of immortality of souls. According to this 'theory', the existence of Forms is nothing but a hypothesis (cf.99d ff.)¹⁹⁾. I will call it 'the hypothetical theory of Forms'. These two types of theory of Forms seem to be fundamentally different, because, while the dogmatic doctrine of Forms entails *real* existence of Forms, the hypothetical theory of Forms doesn't. Of these two, the hypothetical theory of Forms is presented as a *theory* in the proper sense of the word, because, in the first place, it is

proposed as a better method of explaining causes which is to replace physical method (*peri physeōs historia* [*Phd.*96a]), and because, in the second place, as I will explain shortly, (1) it is declared to be a method based on hypothesis (in this respect, it can be compared to modern scientific theory), (2) criterion of truth is given, and (3) how to verify, or rather justify, the hypothesis is explained. Such an explanation of the 'theory of Forms' isn't given anywhere else in all of Plato's dialogues.

Now, since the hypothetical theory of Forms is presented as a *theory*, it is reasonable to suppose that Plato must have *philosophically* committed himself to it (while he may well have *morally* or *ethically* committed himself to the dogmatic doctrine of Forms).²⁰⁾ And, since, not only are Forms unintelligible objects for us, but also there is no evidence, either in the *Phaedo* (the first dialogue in which the 'theory of Forms' was introduced) or in any other dialogues, that the author himself had knowledge or *epistēmē* of/about Forms, it is quite plausible to suppose that the theory of Forms as a *philosophical* theory is not only hypothetical in its origin, but also essentially so. I therefore think it will be of use for our purpose to examine in detail the hypothetical theory of Forms in the *Phaedo*. (The relation of the two types of 'theory of Forms' will be dealt with in the next section.)

In the first place, the hypothetical method is introduced which is characterized as an investigation in (sc. by means of) *logoi* (logical and theoretical arguments), and is explained as follows: hypothesizing in each case the *logos* (i.e. the hypothesis) that I judge to be the strongest, I count as true whatever seems to me to accord with it, and whatever doesn't seem to accord with it, I do not count as true (100a).²¹⁾

Next, the strongest hypothesis is presented: there exist Forms, the Beautiful, the Good, the Large, and so on (100b).²²⁾

Then, a concomitant hypothesis is added: if anything other than the Beautiful,²³⁾ for example, is beautiful, it is because it participates in the Beautiful (100c). Socrates comments on this hypothesis as follows.

If anyone tells me of anything, explaining why it is beautiful, that it has a blooming color or such and such a shape or something else like that, I will disregard such an explanation. And the only thing I have to say is — may it be simple, artless and perhaps naive — that what makes it beautiful is nothing else but the presence of, or its communion with, or some other relation — whatever it may be — to, the Beautiful. I have no mind to insist on any particular relationship.²⁴⁾ But I do insist that it is *by the Beautiful* (dative in Greek) that all beautiful things are beautiful. (100c-d)

We must take note of two points of importance involved in these words of Socrates. First, he avoids defining what it is to be beautiful or, in other words, what the Beautiful is. Secondly, with regard to the notorious relation of 'participation', he avoids committing himself to any specification of the relation.²⁵⁾

Now, how is the hypothesis itself to be justified? Or is it simply to be accepted? As for this problem, Socrates explains as follows (101d-e).

(a) If anyone fastens upon the hypothesis itself, you should disregard him and not answer him until you have examined if the consequences of it accord with each other or not. (b) And when you have to give an account of the hypothesis itself, you should do so in the same way, that is, by hypothesizing another hypothesis which seems best among hypotheses of a higher level, until you arrive at something sufficient. On that occasion, you should not jumble, as the eristics do, the argument about the principle (*archē*) and one about the consequences of it.²⁶⁾

(a) suggests a procedure of testing validity of the hypothesis by examining if the consequences of the hypothesis are consistent. This procedure requires, for the hypothesis to prove to be valid, that you examine about all the consequences of it if they are consistent. How is such an examination possible without systematicity of examination? It reminds me of the arguments in the Second Part of the *Parmenides*, although Plato may not have had such a concrete and detailed idea when he wrote the *Phaedo*. (b) explains a procedure of justifying the hypothesis by another hypothesis of a higher level.

Now, according to these explanations, the hypothetical theory of Forms may be summarized as follows.

- (1) Each of the Forms is hypothesized to exist without being defined what it is.²⁷⁾
- (2) On the basis of the hypothesis a consistent system is to be constructed.
- (3) The hypothesis itself is to be justified by another hypothesis of a higher level.

Here I want to raise two questions. First, what kind of system is to be constructed on the basis of the hypothesis that Forms exist? Is it a deductive system like that of mathematics? But what significant consequences could be deduced from the hypothesis alone that Forms exist? As a matter of fact, the final proof of immortality of souls, which is based on the hypothetical theory of Forms, makes use of a lot of premises besides the hypothesis itself. Are these premises also hypotheses? If so, the whole system may be a deductive one. But it is quite unlikely that Plato thought they were hypotheses, because he doesn't call them 'hypotheses' and, moreover, the examples of hypotheses of mathematics in the simile of the Line in the *Republic VI* are obviously not premises of mathematics (see n.22). What is the difference, then, between hypothesis and premise? It is a difficult question to answer. I'd like to propose my interpretation with the help of the simile of the Line in the *Republic*. Since Plato says in the simile that mathematicians do not 'give account' (*logon didonai*) about their hypotheses (510c-d), these are to be construed as the base of the structure of mathematics, not as a part of it. I think, therefore, that we should distinguish our *basic framework of thinking* (see n.22) from the premises of proofs, and that hypotheses do not yield premises but constitute our *basic framework of thinking* (e.g. hypotheses of mathematics, which are not premises of mathematical proofs, constitute our basic framework of *mathematical thinking*). Then the hypothesis that Forms exist does not yield premises of proofs but constitutes our basic framework of *philosophical thinking*. And a

system of Forms is to be constructed — although it was not actually constructed in the *Phaedo*, and I doubt if Plato had a clear idea of the system when he wrote the *Phaedo*, but if we take his later theory of Forms into consideration, it *is* to be constructed²⁸⁾ — by ascending, as it were, from hypothesis to hypothesis (see (3) of the summary above of the hypothetical theory of Forms), while a system of mathematics is to be constructed by descending from hypotheses²⁹⁾. Such a system of Forms would provide us with *epistēmē* of them, which, I think, is a matter of Plato's fundamental concern throughout his career as a philosopher. As a matter of fact, such a system will come to play more and more important part, in the late dialogues, in relation to the theory of *epistēmē*. A more detailed explanation of the system will be given in the concluding section.

Secondly, does Plato think that consistency is not only the necessary but also the sufficient condition of truth? The method of ascending from hypothesis to hypothesis seems to suggest that the theory pursues something beyond hypothesis. As a matter of fact, the method of 'ascending' from hypothesis is contrasted, in the simile of the Line in the *Republic*, with the mathematical method of 'descending' from its hypothesis, i.e. of constructing a deductive system, and the ultimate principle (*archē*) we would arrive at by ascending is qualified as '*anypothetos* (not-hypothesized)'. Moreover, there is a good reason to believe Plato knows that consistency is not the sufficient condition of truth. For he says in the *Cratylus* that it is possible to construct a consistent system on the basis of false principles (436c-d). In what, then, does the truth of the ultimate principle, which itself is not a hypothesis, consist? This is the problem to be argued in the next section.

7. The criterion of truth and two kinds of Forms

According to the hypothetical theory of Forms, the criterion of truth seems to be consistency. But consistency must be merely a provisional criterion, since Socrates claims that the hypothesis itself should be justified. What, then, is the criterion of truth of the hypothesis? Socrates says, in the passage quoted above, that the hypothesis itself will be explained by hypothesizing another hypothesis of a higher level, and that in this way we are to ascend from hypothesis to hypothesis. But however high we may ascend, so long as hypotheses are justified by another hypothesis, the criterion of truth remains consistency. Plato says in the *Republic*, however, that we are to arrive, in the end, at the ultimate principle which is *not* a hypothesis (*archē anypothetos*). If he is right, the truth of the ultimate principle and, consequently, that of the whole system would consist in something other than consistency. In what, then, would the truth of the ultimate principle consist in the final analysis?

If we could actually arrive at the ultimate principle which is not a hypothesis, or, at least, if Plato thinks we could, then it would be significant for us to grapple with the problem of what the ultimate principle is and of what its truth consists in. But the ultimate principle seems to be an unattainable goal for us (and for Plato as well), in other words, an *ideal* goal rather than a *real* one, because Plato thinks, as I said above (see n.8), that only the God is a *sophos* and a

human being can at best be a philosophos,³⁰ which implies that we only can strive after, but would never attain to, the ultimate principle. Hence it is not so important a problem for us human beings what the ultimate principle is and in what its truth consists.

But if the ultimate principle is an unattainable ideal goal *for us*, is it of any significance *for us*? Moreover, is the hypothetical theory of Forms itself of any use at all, which ought to be, but cannot actually be, sustained by the ultimate principle? To be sure, this theory does not guarantee us *epistēmē*, since, according to this theory which does not guarantee us the ultimate principle, *epistēmē* itself would also be an unattainable ideal goal. But setting an ideal goal of investigation is not necessarily useless.³¹ From a practical point of view, in the first place, it serves, in Plato's view, to make us live a moral life, since he regards it as the morally best way of life to lead a life of investigation striving to get nearer and nearer to the ideal *epistēmē* of ethical Forms, especially of the Good.³² From a theoretical point of view, in the second place, if, having set an ideal goal for our philosophical investigation, we persevere in investigating so as to get nearer and nearer to it, we would not fall into dogmatism or agnosticism, and this way of investigation, I think, is 'philosophical' in the true sense of the word.³³ After all, the significance of the hypothetical theory of Forms consists in presenting us an ideal method of philosophical investigation.

We have to distinguish, according to this theory, two kinds of Forms, the one known, in a sense, to us, the other in no sense known. When Plato, hypothesizing that a certain Form (e.g. the Beautiful) exists, says something about it (e.g. 'The Beautiful is beautiful' or 'The Beautiful is in no way ugly'), he must be talking about what he knows in a sense. We may say that he thinks of the Form, or that he has a thought or an idea or a concept of the Form. It is, as it were, a direct object of his thought or concept³⁴ and known, in a sense, to him (because he must have known what he was talking about) with its definition unknown. This is the first kind of Form [hereafter, 'Form₁']. When, on the other hand, Plato says about somebody that he or she does not have *epistēmē* of a certain Form, he is talking about a Form which is in no sense known to him or her (for he or she doesn't even know whether such a thing exists or not) and therefore is not an object of his or her thought or concept. It is, as it were, a transcendental Form that would be known by us if we acquired *epistēmē* of it. This is the second kind of Form [hereafter, 'Form₂']. Now, although we have no choice, in our philosophical investigation, but to concern ourselves with Forms₁, the aim of Platonic investigation is not to know them as such, but to know Forms₂, which must really exist and are supposed to be objects of Recollection, i.e. Forms of the 'dogmatic doctrine of Forms'. In this sense, Forms₂ are ideal goal of our investigation.³⁵ If, confusing these two kinds of Forms or (it might be better to say) not distinguishing them clearly, as some scholars doesn't, we think that Plato's Forms are only of one kind, i.e. Forms₂, then his theory of Forms as a whole must appear to be something mystical.³⁶

8. Plato's conception of *epistēmē* in his late dialogues

In his middle dialogues, Plato specified *epistēmē* principally from the viewpoint of its objects,

as knowledge (in a sense) of Forms. But, as stated above, just after having criticized the theory of Forms in the *Parmenides*, he re-examined the concept of *epistēmē* in the *Theaetetus*. I think Plato introduced a new point of view in specifying *epistēmē* in this dialogue (cf. n.11); that is to say, he began to try to specify it from the viewpoint of how to acquire it.³⁷⁾

In the *Theaetetus*, three tentative definitions of *epistēmē* are propounded by Theaetetus, the interlocutor of Socrates, and are examined and refuted one after another. If I list only the definienda of the three definitions, they are: (1) *aisthēsis* (sensation/perception), (2) true *doxa*, (3) true *doxa* with *logos*. I think, with most interpreters, that the last definition is the most promising of the three. As for this definition, three senses of 'logos' are given by Socrates and the definition is refuted with regard to each of them. The three senses of 'logos' are: (1) statement, (2) enumeration of elements, (3) account of the difference of the thing in question from every other thing. I think the most promising sense of the three is again the last one.³⁸⁾

Now, according to the most promising definition of *epistēmē* with the most promising sense of 'logos', having *epistēmē* of X is analyzed into (a) having true *doxa* of X, and (b) being able to tell the difference of X from every other thing. This definition is refuted as follows. Since anyone who has *doxa* of X can tell the difference of X from every other thing (otherwise, he would not even have *doxa* of X), (b) must mean, not 'having *doxa* about the difference of X from every other thing', but 'having *epistēmē* about it'. Then, the definiendum being contained in the definiens, the definition would be circular.

This refutation, however, confines itself to indicating a formal defect in the definition; in other words, the point that *epistēmē* is concerned with the difference of its object from every other thing is not refuted. Besides, Plato seems to be skeptical about the possibility of impeccable definitions, and not to think that *epistēmē* is knowledge of definitions (see n.13). Hence we need not, and should not, conclude that there is nothing sound in the final definition simply because it has a formal defect. Moreover, the method of 'division and collection', which Plato invented and attached great importance to in his late dialogues, is nothing but a method of systematically explaining the difference of a thing from every other thing, and this very method is made an experimental application of in the *Sophist* and in the *Politicus*, which are written as the sequel to the *Theaetetus*. Thus we may conclude that the final definition of *epistēmē* in the *Theaetetus* is the first step toward Plato's conception of it in the late dialogues.

Now, *epistēmē* is to be acquired, according to Plato's conception of it in the late dialogues, by means of 'division and collection', that is to say, by constructing, as it were, a consistent system of Forms which are mutually related. It is a system in which Forms are, as it were, arranged in such a way as to represent their mutual relations, and, consequently, each Form will be known as to what it is by being, so to speak, located in the system.³⁹⁾

In conclusion, I would like to summarize Plato's final conception of *epistēmē* from the viewpoint of the method of acquiring (or, speaking more exactly, of trying to acquire) it.

- (1) *epistēmē* is to be acquired by constructing a system of Forms₁ which are mutually related, and by understanding each Forms₁ by its location, as it were, within the

- system, in other words, by grasping its relations to other relevant Forms.
 (2) The method of constructing the system is that of ‘division and collection’.

Notes

- 1) ‘*Epistēmē*’ is usually translated as ‘knowledge’, but Plato’s *epistēmē* is not the same thing as what we call ‘knowledge’ (I therefore will use the Greek word in this paper). M.F. Burnyeat saw the difference and proposed an interpretation that ‘*epistēmē*’ of Plato and of Aristotle means ‘understanding’ rather than what we call ‘knowledge’, i.e. ‘justified true belief’ (cf. ‘Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge’, in E. Berti (ed.), *Aristotle on Science: ‘The Posterior Analytics’*, Padua 1981, 97-139). I admire Burnyeat’s attitude of trying to understand Plato and Aristotle in their shoes, but I do not agree with his interpretation of ‘*epistēmē*’ of Plato. I wonder if any kind of understanding (or knowledge or knowledge plus understanding) would be admitted by Plato as *epistēmē* in the philosophical sense of his own. What Plato thinks of when he argues about *epistēmē* in philosophical contexts is that of Forms (which we may understand, at least provisionally, as concepts), which is not necessarily knowledge of definitions of Forms nor acquaintance (or intuition) of Forms. It seems to me that, generally speaking, a deep-rooted tendency of contemporary interpreters of assimilating *epistēmē* to knowledge which, in the first place, is propositional and, in the second place, covers not only necessary truths but also empirical contingent facts (from which tendency even Burnyeat doesn’t seem to me to be free after all) is a serious obstacle to understanding of Plato’s conception of *epistēmē*. ‘*Epistēmē*’ also means ‘scientific knowledge’, which meaning may underlie Plato’s conception of *epistēmē*.
- 2) Not all the dialogues are concerned with the theory of Forms. Moreover, even the dialogues famous for the theory of Forms (e.g. *Phaedo*, *Republic*) do not deal with it thematically (the main theme of the *Phaedo* being immortality of souls, and that of the *Republic* justice).
- 3) This is the specification of *epistēmē* in the middle dialogues, especially in the last part of the *Republic* V (i.e. 476d-479d), and, I think, it comes to be re-examined later, i.e. in the *Theaetetus*.
- 4) Plato seems to have had accepted this thesis as absolutely true until he got involved, in the *Meno*, in the question of whether virtue can be taught.
- 5) Cf. e.g. *Phd.* 65a-66a, 74a-d, 75c-d.
- 6) ‘*Doxa*’ is usually translated as ‘belief’ or ‘opinion’ in distinction from knowledge. But I think this translation is inappropriate, because what we call ‘knowledge’ is, in many cases, especially when it is acquired by means of perception, being short of Platonic *epistēmē*, to be counted as *doxa*.
- 7) See the last part of the *Republic* V, referred to in n.3.
- 8) Plato often says that only the God really is a *sophos* (i.e. one who has *sophia*), and a human being can at best be a *philosophos* (i.e. one who pursues *sophia*) [cf. *Phdr.* 278d].
- 9) This assertion does not necessarily entail that the *Apology* is the earliest work of Plato’s, because it is quite possible that Plato was not aware, at first, of having inherited his conception of *epistēmē* from Socrates, or that, although he was aware of it, he did not think it necessary to mention the inheritance in his first work.
- 10) Historical Socrates himself may have recognized the value of *logos*, since the Socrates in the *Crito* — which is one of the early dialogues and, judging from its dramatic situation, seems to represent historical Socrates more or less — says he is such a man as not to obey anything else but the *logos* which appears to him the best as the result of a logical/theoretical consideration (*logizesthai*) [cf. 46b].
- 11) There’s a remarkable difference, however, between Plato and Socrates with regard to the attitude towards *sophia* or *epistēmē*. While Socrates says nothing positive — as far as we know from Plato’s dialogues — as to what *sophia* is, Plato evidently concentrated his energies, in some of his middle and late dialogues, on specifying what *epistēmē* is; in the middle dialogues, he tried to specify it principally from the viewpoint of what its objects are (i.e. Forms), but from the *Theaetetus* onward, he seems to have tried to specify it from the viewpoint of how to acquire it (The argument about the Form of the Good in the *Republic* VI-VII may seem to explain how to acquire *epistēmē* of Forms; but, in fact, it only tells us what subjects [i.e. arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, harmonics] we should learn before, and in order that, we are engaged in dialectical arguments about Forms, and as to what and how we should argue in dialectical arguments, it tells us hardly anything). He established and made use of a method of acquiring it in the Sophist, which is the method of ‘*diairesis*

- (division) and *synagōgē*(collection)'.
 12) Since Aristotle couldn't have directly known Socrates, he must have known him, in all probability, mainly through Plato's dialogues. We may accordingly regard the Socrates in this evidence as the Socrates in Plato's early, so-called 'Socratic' dialogues.
 13) Knowledge is now generally thought to be either propositional knowledge or knowledge by acquaintance. Accordingly it was discussed some time ago by scholars which kind of knowledge his *epistēmē* is, and it is now generally accepted that it is propositional knowledge, that is to say, knowledge of definitions. But *epistēmē* is not the same thing, as I said above (cf. n.1), as what we call 'knowledge'. And, since, while knowledge of definitions can be easily taught, *epistēmē* is thought by Plato to be impossible or extremely difficult to teach, it must be different from knowledge of definitions. See the penultimate paragraph of the section 5 below.
 14) Those who are refuted by Socrates in the early dialogues are sophists who profess to know everything or something (Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias, etc.), experts (Euthyphro, Laches, etc.), and those who claim to have *epistēmē* about *something* (Meno, Critias, etc.).
 15) '*Epistēmē*' is an abstract noun derived from the verb 'epistasthai', the primary sense of which is 'know how to' (cf. LSJ., s.v.).
 16) A similar distinction is made in the *Theaetetus*. Socrates argues that one who *always* spells the name of Theaetetus correctly but spells the name of Theodorus wrongly as 'Teodorus', doesn't have *epistēmē* of the syllable 'The' and, consequently, doesn't have *epistēmē* of the name 'Theaetetus' either (cf. 207e-208b). As for my interpretation of this argument, see the next note.
 17) In the *Meno*, *epistēmē* is said to be different from right *doxa* in that it is bound by *aitias logismos* (logical/theoretical consideration of the cause) [cf.98a]. In geometry, what can the *aitias logismos* that binds right *doxa* be but geometrical demonstrations. — In the case of spelling mentioned in the previous note, what Plato thinks is necessary for claiming to have *epistēmē* of the name 'Theaetetus' must be knowledge of phonology or a systematic understanding of phonemes (cf. Phil.18b-d).
 18) The existence of Forms and that of our souls before birth are said to be a matter of equal necessity (*isē anankē*) [cf.76e].
 19) It seems to me that the statement that the existence of Forms is a hypothesis has not been properly appreciated by most interpreters.
 20) The only dialogues, other than the *Phaedo*, that introduces the doctrine of Recollection are the *Meno* and the *Phaedrus*, and, in the *Meno*, Socrates says that he has no mind to insist on the doctrine (see n.32 below), and, in the *Phaedrus*, the doctrine is introduced in the context of a *mythos*. These facts seem to suggest that Plato was not *philosophically* committed to the dogmatic doctrine of Forms.
 21) 'Not to accord with' must mean 'to be inconsistent with', but 'to accord with' doesn't seem simply to mean 'to be consistent with'; otherwise, all that have nothing to do with the hypothesis would be true. What accords with the hypothesis, I think, must be that which is relevant to the hypothesis as well as consistent with it. Since the hypothesis is said to be hypothesized 'in each case', I suppose things belonging to different domains are thought to be explained by different hypotheses. See next note, too.
 22) What is hypothesized in this theory is not propositions which are to be premises of proofs, but the *existence* of Forms (cf. Rep. VI 510c, where Socrates says that the odd and the even, figures, three kinds of angles and so on [in effect, the existence of these things] are hypothesized in mathematics. Most of the people today may not think that mathematical objects must *exist* for mathematical truths to be demonstrated, but, since Aristotle seems to have thought, in the *Posterior Analytics*, that they must [e.g. A10], it is not unlikely that Plato also thought so). Hypotheses are therefore not premises of proofs (existential propositions are normally not premises of proofs), but what constitutes, as it were, our basic framework of thinking. What I mean by 'our basic framework of thinking' may be illustrated as follows: the difference between the basic framework of those who admit the existence of Forms and that of those who do not, can be compared to that between the basic framework of those who admit the existence of the God and that of those who do not.
 23) This proviso is very significant. It does not deny that the Beautiful is beautiful, but it implies that the Beautiful does not participate in itself. Perhaps Plato would not admit the Self-Predication of Forms, because, since participation is the Platonic way of explaining predication, the denial of self-participation implies denial of Self-Predication. Thus 'the Beautiful is beautiful' means, not that the Beautiful *has* a quality *beautiful*, but that it *is* a quality *beautiful*.

- 24) Socrates seems to suggest by this sentence that it is not necessary to argue the relation between Forms and the things which he says 'participate in' them. As a matter of fact, how can you tell the relation between things whose existence is hypothesized on the one hand, and things which really (not in Platonic but in our sense) exist on the other? It may be said in this connection that the instrumental dative is used in the next sentence to state the relation in the least definite way.
- 25) See the previous note. The expression 'participation (*methexis*)' therefore should not be understood in the literal sense, but, ironically enough, as Aristotle indicated with critical intention (cf. *Metaph.*A9, 991a 22), as a 'poetic metaphor'.
- 26) This sentence calls our attention to the difference of level or status between the principle and the consequences of it. The difference between the two kinds of argument is, to use the metaphorical expression of the simile of the Line in the *Republic* (511b,d), one between the argument 'ascending' from the hypothesis and one 'descending' from it.
- 27) Remember that the hypothetical method in the *Meno* was the method of investigating what kind of thing something is (*poion ti estin*: e.g. whether virtue is teachable) without knowing what it is (*ti estin*: e.g. what virtue is).
- 28) I agree with R.Kraut that the system had not been actually constructed when Plato wrote the *Republic* (cf. R.Kraut, 'Introduction to the study of Plato', in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, 13-14).
- 29) A system of mathematics is to be constructed deductively, but the expression 'descending from hypotheses' itself does not mean 'deduction', since, as I said above (see n.21), hypotheses are not premises of proofs.
- 30) Plato also makes his Socrates say, in the *Phaedo* (cf.66e-67b), that we are unable to know the truth as long as our soul is incarnated, that is to say, as long as we live in this world.
- 31) Needless to say, even if the goal is unattainable, it does not necessarily follow that it is impossible to get nearer to it. To get nearer to the ideal goal means, in the case of *epistēmē*, to come to have a better understanding. As a matter of fact, we know by experience that one can have a better understanding than another of the same thing, and that, even if we ourselves do not have a full understanding of it, we can judge which of the two persons has a better understanding of it, provided we have a better understanding than, or at least the same degree of understanding as, one who has a better understanding of the two.
- 32) Such a thought is expressed, for example, when Socrates explains, in the *Meno*, the significance of the doctrine of Recollection: 'I have no mind to insist on this doctrine in other respects, but in one respect — namely, that if we think we must investigate what we don't know, we will be better and braver and less sluggish than if we think it is impossible to find out, and we need not investigate, what we don't know — I will defend it to the last, if I can, both in words and in deeds.' (86b-c, cf.81d-e)
- 33) Sextus Empiricus calls such men '*skeptikoi*' (in the original sense of the word, i.e. 'those who devote themselves to investigation') in distinction from dogmatists and agnostics, and ranks them above the latter two (cf. S.E., P.H., I.1-2).
- 34) Plato distinguishes a concept (*noēma*) and its object (*nooumenon*) and call the latter 'Form' (cf. *Parm.*132b-c, only the word '*noēma*' is usually translated, not as 'concept', but as 'thought').
- 35) I can offer an alternative explanation. Seeing that Plato has his Socrates say in the *Republic* X that he is in the habit of positing one Form in connexion with each name (*onoma*)[596a], Plato seems to think that to know a Form, e.g. the Beautiful, is, as it were, to know the true meaning of the corresponding word (*epōnymia*) 'beautiful'. It does not mean, however, to know in what sense we usually use the word. For Plato does not seem to think the true meaning of a word can be known inductively by collecting examples of our use of it. He thinks, in the *Cratylus*, that the true meanings of names or words are determined, not by us human beings conventionally (see also *Pol.*262c-e), but by nature (*physis*), and, although they are not called 'Forms' in that dialogue, they must be the same thing with the Forms of the *Republic* X mentioned above. Now, if Forms are true meanings of words determined by nature, they are to exist objectively. So Plato calls them *ta onta* (what exist or what are real). But this does not necessarily imply that Plato saw them or knew that they existed, nor that we can find them out. Their existence is, as it were, postulated because of the assumption that the true meanings of words must be determined by nature. This is the significance of hypothesizing Forms. And we can but construct a system of Forms, not according to the true meanings of words which we do not know, but according to the meanings we understand, in other words, according to our concepts. But, Plato seems to think, when the system is completed, the true meanings are to be known.
- 36) I have no mind to maintain that mystical elements in Plato are of no value. My intention is to insist that

mystical elements and philosophy should be treated apart.

- 37) Plato's basic understanding about *epistēmē*, however, that its object is *to on* (what is real or, in other words, objective) and that it is infallible, remained the same (cf. *Thi* 152c & *Rep.*V 476e-477a, 477e).
- 38) The second sense is thought to be the most promising by some interpreters (e.g. M.F.Burnyeat). But, while the definition of *epistēmē* with the second sense of 'logos' is vulnerable to the criticism of what is now commonly called 'Dream Theory', which criticism seems hardly confutable, the definition with the third sense isn't. Moreover, as I will argue shortly, the final criticism of the definition with the third sense of 'logos' is concerned only with the formal defect, as it were, of the definition, not with its content, and the definition (though it has a defect as a definition) seems to be the first step toward Plato's later dialectical method of 'division and collection'.
- 39) The method of constructing a system of Forms seems to be like that of taxonomy, as is shown by its illustrative applications to the specification of the angler in the *Sophist* and to the classification of phonemes in the *Philebus*. As far as the explanation of the method goes, it seems a simple method easy to apply. But its applications to the specifications of the sophist in the *Sophist* and of the statesman in the *Politicus* show how difficult it is to apply it. As a matter of fact, Plato himself speaks of it in the *Philebus* as 'not so difficult to explain, but extremely difficult to apply'. (16c)

* The original version of this paper was written in Japanese and printed in *The Philosophy, Annual Review of the Philosophical Association of Japan*, No.41 (1991). This is, as it were, the second English version. The first English version was printed in *Philosophical Studies*, X (1991), a journal published by the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Letters, the University of Tokyo. Richard Mason and Noburu Notomi read the first English version and gave me helpful suggestions. I am really very grateful to them. Taking their suggestions into consideration, I have rewritten a good deal of the first version. I hope this version has been greatly improved, although the essential points are not altered.

The University of Tokyo