

Introduction

Tarrying on the Path to Knowledge

In Plato's *Meno*, the attempt to figure out what virtue is gives way to the question of whether inquiry is even possible. There is also disagreement about whether it would be better to inquire about virtue's teachability before or after inquiring about what virtue is. In the *Theaetetus*, after Socrates and his interlocutors ask what knowledge is, they then berate themselves for trying to figure that out before attempting to understand true belief. They next decide that they cannot know what true belief is without figuring out what false belief is. Finally, they chastise themselves for trying to analyze false belief before they know what knowledge is.

I approach this project in a similar state of *aporia*: How much can we discern about Plato's understanding of knowledge without first clarifying his notions of inquiry, learning, opinion (or belief), reasoned belief, true belief, false belief, and ignorance? Can we really understand what Plato surmised about knowledge without first coming to terms with those epistemic states that fall short of it? Is it not especially difficult when some of these states are thought to be either pathways to, prerequisites for, or constitutive of knowledge? For example, inquiry is more primitive than, and prior to, knowledge without being a constituent of it. It is a doorway to knowledge. In contrast, our ability to refer to that which our knowledge is about seems like a prerequisite for knowledge. Many contemporary epistemologists think that belief—particularly true belief—falls short of knowledge but is either a pathway to, or a constituent of knowledge. Among Plato scholars there is considerable disagreement concerning the relationship between belief and knowledge.

My project in this book is to clarify how Plato conceptualizes the epistemic states that fall short of knowledge. A major step in this clarifica-

tion will be to show that Plato takes all of them—including ignorance—to be *of* or *about* the same objects that knowledge is *about*. In other words, inquiry, learning, belief (or “opinion”), reasoned belief, true belief, false belief, and ignorance are all *of* or *about* the same objects as knowledge is *about*. I do not use *about* and *aboutness* as philosophical terms with a history in the philosophical lexicon. Rather, I use them colloquially and generically: whatever it is for any x to be about any y . For example, the relationship between my thoughts and my bed that allows my memories of making my bed this morning to be more or less accurate.

Thus, all of what Plato calls *doxa* is made true or false—or more or less accurate—by the same objects (the same truth-value-makers) that make knowledge true. I shall take the liberty of calling the objects that all of these states are equally about, “truth-makers.” These truth-makers are things such as the diagonal itself, equality itself, and beauty itself, which are eventually associated with Plato’s Forms. As my title suggests: Plato thinks that we opine beauty itself; belief—or opinion—is *of* (or *about*) the Form of Beauty. Plato demonstrates that these incorporeal truth-makers and their relationships to this wide variety of epistemic states make our belief-type states true or false and make our inquiries answerable. Wherever in the above paragraphs I have used terms such as *belief* or *opinion*, I am speaking about whatever it is to which Plato uses the Greek word *doxa* to refer.

Often, while on the road to saying something about what Plato says about knowledge, studies of Plato’s epistemology are too quick to make assumptions about the many states that fall short of knowledge. Overlooking the possibility that Plato uses *doxa* to refer to something different from that which often gets associated with terms like *belief* today, scholars are quick to make claims about what Plato takes “belief” or “true belief” to be. Plato’s contemporary readers assimilate his notion of *doxa* to contemporary epistemology’s notions of belief.

Further confusion comes from the fact that Plato has Socrates speak about true *doxa* and knowledge at *Meno* 98a and *Theaetetus* 201d in a manner that, to the contemporary, analytically trained philosopher, evokes the thesis that knowledge is justified true belief. As a result, some scholars have assimilated Plato’s views about both knowledge and true belief to that contemporary notion and moved on from there. This includes making several metaphysical assumptions about *doxa* and the objects of knowledge. However, these assumptions prove to be controversial when one looks at them in the light of other textual evidence in the dialogues.

For example, assimilation to the justified true belief theory carries with it the assumption that the content of *doxa* is propositional for Plato and that even the object of knowledge is a proposition. However, Plato appears to give us at least as many reasons to think that he takes the objects of knowledge to be abstract objects like his *Ideas* or Forms. I side with many others, particularly those who wrote before these more contemporary innovations in the theory of knowledge were developed, in arguing that Plato holds this latter view.

Anyone who has tried to sort out what Plato has to say about belief or opinion (*doxa*)—let alone true belief—in such dialogues as the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Republic* V–VII, *Phaedrus*, and *Theaetetus*, knows that this is no easy task. Many parts of these texts appear to contradict many of the assumptions that we make in our contemporary discussions of propositional belief and justified true belief even if textual evidence seems to resonate with these assumptions in other places.

This book contributes to the study of Plato's epistemology by examining texts where Plato's characters discuss the epistemological states that fall short of knowledge. Plato viewed the states that fall short of knowledge as pathways toward, prerequisites for, or components of, knowledge. Importantly, however, he always juxtaposes these variations of *doxa* with knowledge. I focus on texts that reveal Plato's thinking about these lesser kinds of epistemological states for two reasons. First, they are the kinds of epistemological states that Plato thinks *all* people entertain. Thus, to the extent that he thinks that ordinary people can inquire, learn, and improve their understanding of the world, they are important to his discussion of inquiry, learning, and the process of becoming a philosopher, or at least becoming as close to a philosopher as a human being can. I am making the—I think reasonable—assumption that Plato thought that most of his readers would fall into the category of those who entertain *doxa*. So, his efforts to communicate with his readers and manipulate their *doxa* (or *doxai*)¹ in order to improve it is also of interest. Second, I think that understanding these sorts of epistemological states will ultimately be instrumental to understanding how Plato thought about knowledge itself.

1. *Doxai* is the plural of *doxa* in Greek, as *beliefs* is the plural of *belief* in English. Throughout this book, I mostly use the terms *doxa* and *belief* in the singular as I use them largely to denote the abstract noun *belief*. I also argue (see the Introduction, 6, and chapter 5, 116–124) that in both Greek and English the term can serve as a “mass noun” even though it readily admits of a plural in ordinary speech and writing.

While this is a book about Plato's epistemology, it is not an examination of Plato's conception of knowledge. It lays important groundwork to aid in the exploration of how he conceived of knowledge, but does not discuss knowledge itself. I identify a "lowest common denominator" that it would behoove all interpreters of Plato's epistemology to bear in mind as they go on to develop their views of what knowledge is according to Plato. Understanding Plato's epistemology is a project of such complexity that it cannot reasonably be done in one book. I assume and hope that what I say here will be useful to others who go on to give divergent accounts of how Plato conceptualized knowledge. What I say here constrains some of what we can go on to say about Plato's understanding of knowledge; however, it does not determine exactly what he concludes about knowledge.

This study has two focal components. The first is an examination of what I think can best be characterized as generic *aboutness* and the role that it plays in inquiry, learning, and all manner of what Plato calls *doxa*. This part of the study revolves around two groups of texts. I first look at those passages in which Plato discusses the theory of recollection. Discussions of the theory of recollection let the word *knowledge* fly freely: for example, proposing that we have prenatal knowledge and even current knowledge of that which we recollect at the time when we recollect it.² There are those who argue that only prenatal knowledge, and not current (postnatal) knowledge, is needed for recollection.³ However, even some of those who argue that knowledge itself is not necessary for recollection argue that either true belief is necessary or that some (unspecified) familiarity with that which is being recollected is necessary for recollection. Those who say that some kind of foreknowledge or current knowledge is necessary are making some foundational assumptions concerning what Plato thought knowledge was. Those who argue that only true belief is necessary must already have some views about what Plato thought true belief is like.

Even further, despite arguing for something weaker than knowledge or true belief as a prerequisite to recollection, at least one influential commentator has argued that Plato requires something weaker than

2. Grjic 1999, 24; Scott 2006, 84; White 1976, 139; Moravcsik 1971, 63; Matthews 1999, ch. 5; Dancy 2004, 228–36.

3. Fine 2003; 2014. Weiss (2001) is unusual in that she argues that there is no knowledge at any time (prenatal, current, or recollected) in the *Men*.

knowledge because of how she understands Plato to define knowledge at *Meno* 98a.⁴ So even in this case, where we have found a commentator who analyzes recollection and inquiry without assuming that knowledge is present, her conclusion remains dependent on what she has already surmised or assumed about what knowledge and true belief are for Plato.⁵ In attempting to analyze something as opaque as the theory of recollection, it behooves us to make as few assumptions as possible about what prenatal or current *knowledge* are, according to Plato. When we employ theory-laden notions of knowledge in analyzing Plato's discussions of recollection, we increase our risk of misunderstanding what he thought enabled us to inquire and learn.⁶

Plato uses recollection to solve a problem: the point of inquiry is to discover something we don't know. How can we begin an inquiry unless our inquiry is already *about* that into which we are inquiring? Further, how do we "point" our inquiry at something we do not know so that it can be about that thing that we do not know? My key finding in this case is one that continues to serve as a foundation for Plato's epistemology even after he ceases to write about recollection. Thus, the second group of texts that we look at with respect to aboutness are ones that show Plato assuming that all people are able to refer precisely to the things concerning which they take themselves to be inquiring or entertaining *doxai* about. Plato assumes that this reference succeeds even when a person is not entertaining any beliefs that are at all relevant to the object of their inquiry and even if their doxastic state contains misguided and false beliefs about its supposed object.

The second focal component of my project is an examination of *doxa* (often translated as *belief* or *opinion*) described in numerous places

4. Fine (2014) takes this moment in the *Men.* as a place where Plato defines knowledge as true belief that is tied down with reasoning. She then goes on to show that what Meno and the slave have at the beginning of their relevant inquiries does not amount to that. Thus, she concludes, Plato must not think that knowledge is a prerequisite for inquiry. Fine (2014, 16) claims that, in the *Men.*, Plato defines knowledge as true belief that is tied down with reasoning about its truth: one knows that *p* if and only if one believes that *p*, *p* is true, and one can explain why *p* is true.

5. And, in Fine's case, those assumptions are based upon prior assumptions about the propositional nature of belief and of knowledge.

6. Fine (2014, 33 n. 12, 33, 36 n. 19, 52, 130–31) herself provides evidence that knowledge in the *Men.* is more complicated than her simple gloss would suggest.

in the dialogues. While Plato, at times, appears to compare knowledge to ignorance (*agnoia* or *amathia* in Greek), I will show that *doxa* is most frequently contrasted with knowledge. In fact, I will argue that while it could be that *doxa* and knowledge are mutually exclusive, ignorance and *doxa* are not. Ignorance is composed of *doxa*—very low quality *doxa*. Thus, while I will not talk about Plato’s conception of knowledge *per se* in this book, I will have something to say about how he conceived of ignorance.

I will show that Plato treats *doxa* as a bunch or mass of cognitive activity (what we would, generically, call “thinking”). Though our thinking contains many elements that can or cannot be mapped onto “what-is” to different degrees, it is always *about* “what-is,” nonetheless (which, as I have already said, ultimately amounts to it being about the Forms). Plato shows that these doxastic states are as messy as they are rich. He also suggests that we can, through deliberation, individuate them into “judgments.” He thinks of this individuation as artificial and context dependent, but still, it is only when we dissect these judgments out from our cloud or mass of thinking that we can start to see them as “true” or “false” or “well reasoned.” I will argue that Plato does not find it as useful to deem individual judgments true and justified as he does to deem entire doxastic systems better or worse for deployment in a particular context. The expert sailor and the expert plumber have doxastic systems that are well suited to very different projects. If either had knowledge, we might be able to say that one is absolutely more knowledgeable than the other. However, if we imagine that they each have *doxa*—albeit very high quality *doxa* when it comes to performing specific tasks—we will only rank them with respect to one another with regard to how well each of their doxastic systems captures what-is regarding safety and navigation on bodies of water, or with respect to delivering water to a given location in a convenient and safe manner. Presumably, the sailor will rank higher than the plumber in the first case, but the reverse will be true for the second case.

Some aspects of my project involve some methodological practices that are worth mentioning. I will not focus on what we might think of as *arguments* made by characters in the dialogues who are trying to secure the definition of *reference*, *aboutness*, or *doxa*. I will, for the most part, examine some of Plato’s dialogues in order to uncover the presuppositions that their author appears to make regarding aboutness and *doxa* in what are, at face value, discussions of recollection, inquiry, discovery,

belief, true belief, true belief that is reasoned, and true belief that is not reasoned. I will also look at how Plato has his characters use terms such as *doxa* and *ignorance*. In some cases, I will even look at what is said about knowledge, but only in order to uncover presuppositions regarding aboutness and *doxa*.

Key to my conclusions is that we can understand all the epistemic states that fall short of knowledge in Plato's dialogues by understanding two distinct sets of Plato's assumptions concerning two distinct things and how they are related to one another. First, we need to understand Plato's assumptions about a type of referential connection that can be unwitting but is still cognitive in nature. Second, we need to understand the rich and varied way in which he makes use of (for lack of a sufficiently general English translation) *doxa*. Further, we must understand how these two mutually exclusive cognitive capacities are related: the first is a prerequisite for the second. I regard this specific type of reference (which I am also calling "aboutness") as the most primitive "epistemic" state that is evident in Plato's epistemology. Let me be clear that I do not think that Plato ever uses any Greek word that can be translated or understood as "reference." I am talking about something that I take Plato to be struggling to gesture toward in his theory of inquiry and recollection and that I think he assumes, with varying degrees of recognition, throughout his discussions of *doxa*.

These very specific theses regarding the referent of inquiry and the nature of what falls short of knowledge as theorized by Plato also offer up larger and more general conclusions for our overall understanding of Plato's epistemology. Interpreters often ponder the relationship between nonphilosophers and the Forms. There is a further concern that Plato is pessimistic about, or even dismissive of, the epistemological abilities of nonphilosophers. The focal theses of this book allow us to be optimistic. Nonphilosophers may never achieve what Plato deems knowledge, but they can investigate that which *is* rather than how things merely or deceptively appear. Further, *doxa* is an epistemological currency that can be improved and can make progress with respect to capturing what *is*. My conclusions support the notion that Plato thinks everyone can place realistic faith in inquiry and in the rewards of inquiry that is done well. Appropriate inquiry includes humility with respect to what human inquiry can accomplish combined with acknowledgment of, and respect for, its true object.

Reference as Unwitting Cognitive Contact

In the next chapter, I approach this specific notion of aboutness by engaging with Meno's paradox and isolating the "beginning problem."⁷ This is the problem of how we focus an inquiry regarding something we do not know, since we do not know it. Plato is highlighting a problem with inquiry and reference that many philosophers since have also noted and endeavored to solve. A recent example is Michael Strevens (2019).⁸ Both Strevens and Plato are describing a subject who is trying to refer to whatever x actually is, but, as that subject has perhaps either never conceived of x or misconceives of x , she can be clueless as to where her reference actually lands because she is clueless as to what x actually is (she is "unwitting," in my parlance). Strevens describes the referential problem that he and Plato are both trying to solve in several places:

To be wrong about a category⁹ we must be able to think about it—our concept must refer to the category . . . [in] a scenario in which we are abundantly wrong about the class of things to which we can successfully refer. (150)¹⁰

7. Following Benson 2015. I will expand on this in chapter 1.

8. Strevens's goal (2019, 153) is different from Plato's and those of the other, twentieth-century philosophers that he follows. He is developing a dispositional theory of reference that works for "inductive conceptual categories." Plato is interested in an objective truth that overrides any *conceptual* categories. Folks such as Kripke (1980) and Devitt (1981)—upon whom Strevens models his theory—were striving for this more objective target as well.

9. For Plato, the proper word would not be *category*, but *property*. In other words, something like virtue or triangularity.

10. Strevens speaks of the "reflexivity" of reference and identifies it as when "some of our beliefs about a category help to determine which category the beliefs are about" (2019, 143). He goes on to say,

What is wanted is a variety of reflexivity [of reference] that allows for falsehood of any or all ordinary beliefs, while nevertheless establishing those same beliefs as a reliable starting point for philosophical analysis. (147)

This statement seems to imply that it is the *content* of the belief about the category that determines what the belief is about. This is a result of Strevens's goal of isolating inductive *conceptual* categories. It is important to note that, in this way, he diverges from Plato. Since I am advocating for Plato's concern that we refer to objective kinds

It is for this reason that Strevens celebrates the “causal historical” account (Kripke 1980; Devitt 1981) in which,

[Reference] is fixed by the intention of the coiner that a term refer to a category exemplified by some baptismal specimen . . . whether or not [his] beliefs about that specimen are at that time or at any later time correct. (153)

Strevens notes:

The great advantage of the causal-historical account, for the seeker of objective categories, is that it permits us to make profound and sweeping errors about the objects of our thought¹¹—and in so doing it frees our categories to home in on objective worldly structure without running afoul of self-imposed semantic constraints. . . .

Indeed, it has seemed to philosophers that the best theory of reference for basic natural kind concepts is *the least reflexive*: it is the theory that when determining the reference of a term or concept puts as little weight as possible—perhaps none at all?—on our beliefs, now or later, about the corresponding category. (153; emphasis added)

I have added emphasis in the above two quotations to underline the sympathy between what Strevens strives to provide and what I believe Plato is struggling to come up with: the ability to successfully refer to something just because we are trying to refer to it and because we want our reference to succeed in landing on whatever it actually is, notwithstanding any mistakes or misconceptions contained in our thoughts as we endeavor to make this reference. I use the term *unwitting cognitive contact* to get at the same referential phenomenon that Strevens says he

or Forms that are independent of our conceptual constructions of them, I will not use the term *reflexive* in my own voice and want to make clear that the notion of unwitting cognitive connection that I attribute to Plato is not a reflexive notion of reference. However, there is a great deal of resonance: looking forward to my final quotation from Strevens (from his page 153, below), it is worth noting that he is also trying to rely on content as little as possible and make it as “unreflexive” as possible.

11. I would add “inquiry” to “thought” on Plato’s behalf.

and Kripke are trying to capture. However, I think Plato would disagree with Kripke on a number of critical points. I will discuss these after I have discussed the relevant similarities.

Like the Kripkean view, Plato attempts to solve the beginning problem by granting us an ability to refer that is successful regardless of any content contained in our beliefs about that to which we intend to refer, whenever we believe, think, speak, or inquire. That is why I will generally call it “unwitting,” even though it can be “witting” on the part of the person making the contact. I will use the term *unwitting* generally because the important point is that it *can be unwitting*, and it usually is, in the cases that demand that we acknowledge the existence of this sort of reference. I call it “cognitive” because, just as Kripke assumes, it must be actualized by *thinking* on the part of the subject of this connection. It is referential contact with a truth-maker that is grounded in the *intentions of the subject of that referential cognition*.

It sounds awfully strange to say that someone is referring in a way that is both intentional and unwitting at the same time. Allow me to clarify the phrase “unwitting cognitive contact,” which I will use frequently, especially in the next four chapters. I am describing a subject who is trying (which engages intention and, therefore, cognition) to refer to whatever *x* actually is, but, as that subject has perhaps either never conceived of *x* or misconceives of *x*, she can be clueless (thus unwitting) as to where her reference actually lands because she is clueless as to what *x* actually is.¹²

It might be that this kind of contact does not rise to the level of an epistemic state and it would be better to think of it as pre-epistemic, proto-epistemic, or a condition for possession of an epistemic state. Perhaps *cognitive* is not the best term to use; I use it to distinguish my view from the views of other scholars who claim that Plato thought that non-philosophers can have only an ontological—and not a cognitive—relationship with the sort of abstract object that is, for Plato, a Form.¹³

12. This mode of reference is not unfamiliar in Plato. He also uses it in a parallel manner regarding desire for the actual good, where agents do not know what the actual good is and, therefore, do not know what they actually desire even though they desire it. This thesis is common in much of the literature on Socratic moral psychology, which has sometimes been referred to as the “dominance” theory of desire. See Penner 1991, and those who follow that line of interpretation especially regarding *Gorgias* 466a–468c: Devereux 1995; Penner and Rowe 1994; Anagnostopoulos 2003; Berman 2003; Reshotko 2006, 24–56; 2011; Brickhouse and Smith 2010, 43–48.

13. Scott 1995, 68–69. We will look at this comparison view in the next chapter.

Plato would depart from Kripke's view that there needs to be a "coiner" of a specific "term" to whom, and a "baptism" to which, the person who makes the reference that overcomes the beginning problem must be historically connected. When Socrates asks, "What is virtue?" he is referring to whatever makes beliefs about virtue true (or renders them false)—it doesn't matter how the term came into being. Even less does it matter whether the earliest use of the term involved pointing to something, much less to something that was actually an instance of virtue. If Euthyphro and Socrates are trying to figure out what piety is and Euthyphro says, "It is what I am doing now," their inquiry is about piety even if what Euthyphro is doing now is far from pious (5d8) and even if no one has ever used the term to indicate an action (or any other perceptible thing) that is actually pious. Or even if they don't use the term *pious* (maybe neither notices that Socrates actually misspoke, saying "impious" where he meant to say "pious"—as so many of us often do).¹⁴

I argue that, whatever (else) he appears to hope to gain through his theory of recollection, Plato does presuppose unwitting *cognitive* contact with a truth-maker that is grounded in the *intentions* of the subject of that cognition in order to resolve the beginning problem. While I argue that the content of that cognition is independent of the object to which the cognizer becomes related, it is the fact that it is cognitive and intentional that I assume raises it to the level of an epistemic state. This notion of reference, however, is distinct from *doxa* (belief) and all other epistemic states. It is a non-doxastic subject/object relationship. It is a precondition of *doxa*: a pre-doxastic condition. All other epistemic states that fall short of knowledge are constituted by *doxa*. I find that belief/opinion and ignorance are all constituted by *doxa* (even if Plato at times seems to say that

14. There is another place where I would argue that Plato departs from Kripke, however, it is not relevant to my project in this book. It is a controversial claim for me to make concerning Plato's metaphysics and needs support. I will not be making any argument for it here, as none of the arguments that I am making require this issue to be settled one way or another. Kripke assumes that we are somehow pointing to the essence of a natural kind when we point to whatever gold is and name it. Plato would agree that gold has a "nature" (*Crat.*, 383a–390e) but not that it has the type of "essence" that Kripke (or Aristotle, see Berman 2020, 105, 130–33) assumes it does. In other words, Plato does not think that gold is characterized by a definition that consists of necessary and sufficient properties for what it takes to be gold. For a bit of an introduction to this controversial claim see Reshotko 2021. Others who argue for this kind of view are Penner (1987, 209–31) and Berman (1996; 2020, 105–22).

doxa and ignorance are mutually exclusive).¹⁵ Reference—constituted in this case by a cognitive but unwitting connection to a truth-maker—is a prerequisite for these doxastic states and is also the prerequisite for inquiry and learning. Thus, contrary to most interpretations of recollection, which find some sort of knowledge or some sort of belief to be the prerequisite for inquiry, learning, and discovery, I find that only this contact, and not knowledge or *doxa*, is the prerequisite for inquiry and learning. In fact, as it is a prerequisite for all doxastic states, unwitting cognitive contact is a prerequisite for *doxa* (whether true or false) and (I assume) for knowledge as well.

Thus, our most minimal conclusion can be that Plato needed recollection to supply only this unwitting cognitive contact or content-independent reference. Without this contact, the theory of recollection is insufficient. Moreover, anything that Plato supplies through recollection that goes beyond this contact (like each soul having possessed all knowledge prior to birth only to forget it at the moment of birth) is implausible overkill with respect to solving the beginning problem. I argue that Plato appears to have gone beyond this “sweet spot” in articulating what exactly he needed from the theory of recollection in order to respond to Meno’s paradox. This is probably attributable to his simultaneous and nonepistemological agenda of arguing for the immortality of the soul. Still, I find ample evidence that he is committed to this contact and that it is what is doing the work in allowing for inquiry and *doxa*. This unwitting cognitive contact can be the sole initiator of inquiry, learning, and discovery and is the most plausible candidate for this initiation. Thus, it is due to this unwitting cognitive contact that we can develop *doxai* that can be decomposed into true and false beliefs. I also show that Plato maintains a commitment to this sort of content-independent cognitive contact in many dialogues in which he does not discuss, and is probably no longer committed to, recollection. Plato needs this pre-doxastic theory of reference because more than one abstract object lends its character to the perceptible world. This reference is needed for inquiry and *doxa* so that the various candidate targets for inquiry, and objects of *doxa*, can be individuated and re-identified as we make and test our hypotheses concerning them.

15. Plato appears to say this at *Symp.* 200–12 and *Rep.* 475–79, but I shall argue otherwise in chapters 5 and 7–9.

Recollection versus *Doxa*

Most other treatments of recollection and inquiry find that whatever recollection provides that makes inquiry possible lies somewhere along a spectrum of epistemic states. This spectrum has knowledge, however construed, at one extreme and proceeds through partial knowledge,¹⁶ various qualities of true belief (reasoned or not reasoned), and all the way to some kind of familiarity that is meant to reside on the weakest extreme.¹⁷ In contrast, I find that recollection—if it is to solve the problem it is invoked to solve—must first supply an ability to refer that does not lie on this spectrum, but rather is a prerequisite to the formation of any of the epistemic states included on this spectrum. Our ability to refer is other than *doxa*, and is not reducible, even in part, to *doxa*. Furthermore, reference initiates the same spectrum of epistemic states mentioned above; ranging from full-blown knowledge all the way to the weakest epistemic state, which I shall say Plato regards as ignorance. I argue that Plato thinks that *all* epistemic states that fall short of knowledge are composed of *doxa*.¹⁸

Reference or Aboutness: A Prerequisite for any Epistemic State that Is a Stepping Stone

In *The Possibility of Inquiry* (2014: 12–15), Gail Fine, in addition to classifying the various views on what recollection supplies with respect to the strength of epistemic states (i.e., does it supply knowledge or something weaker?), examines whether it supplies a “matching” or “stepping-stone”

16. If there is such a thing (*cf.* Fine 2014, 90). Again, I leave this to those who form conclusions about knowledge but much of what I conclude regarding *doxa* militates against Plato recognizing such a thing in any rigorous treatment of knowledge.

17. Fine (2014, 70 n. 6) suggests this as something weaker than true belief, but it is hard to make sense of how she thinks about it if it does not amount to some combination of true and false beliefs (albeit unreasoned ones), given how closely she adheres to a propositional analysis of anything in the epistemic realm. However, she does refer to perceptions as non-doxastic appearances about virtue. She also refers to propositional beliefs about how virtue is misrepresented.

18. It makes sense to think that knowledge, if it is in any way “composed” of *doxa*, is *doxa* that has undergone some sort of essential transformation so that it is now knowledge and not “mere” *doxa*. See my comments on these sorts of views below (n. 23, chapter 9, n. 2, and Conclusion, 229).

version of that prerequisite.¹⁹ Although Fine and Brown (2008a) cash these out with respect to knowledge (which I will not), I think these contrasting conceptualizations can still be helpful here. A “matching” prerequisite provides something like a template, or a blank, that must be filled in by *the thing about which* one is inquiring. Thus, matching requires that one put one’s finger directly upon the object of inquiry.²⁰ On the other hand, a stepping-stone prerequisite is an “almost there” approach that can home in on and circle the object of inquiry; it can involve acquiring something that is relevant to, but indirectly connected with, the object of inquiry. If I need to catch Jesse’s dog, I might not count myself as having made progress until I am holding that very dog (matching). Or, I might consider myself to have made progress if I manage to discover that the dog was last seen in the Jeffersons’s yard and answers to the name “Saffron” (stepping-stone).

I believe it is informative to characterize my own findings by saying that Plato thinks that some sort of reference that fulfills, or replaces, the need for matching is a prerequisite to the acquisition of any epistemic state that can be used as a stepping stone. Reference provides this “matching” component and, in turn, allows for *doxa* that can be a stepping stone. The first thing any inquiry must have in order to have the potential for success is a relationship to an appropriate truth-maker that establishes when something is relevant to its target and when it is not. So, reference to the object of inquiry is the direct connection that allows the things related to the object of inquiry to get one closer to it. I might have trouble getting my arms around a particular dog, but if I manage to get hold of a leash that is already connected to the dog, that increases my likelihood of getting hold of the dog in a way that knowing the dog’s name or where it was last seen cannot. Holding the leash is more akin to holding the dog than is having those other pieces of information. That is why this sort of connection fulfills or replaces the matching requirement. Still, the leash is not the dog, nor is it anything like the dog, whereas the dog’s name and location might seem to have some important content, but only if that content is actually true of the thing on the end of the leash. A leash that is connected to the actual dog cannot lead me astray in the way that false content can. Once I establish that this sort of connection is part of Plato’s pre-doxastic epistemology, I will go on to further examine the range of

19. Fine credits this terminology to Brown (2008a).

20. Although “matching” might not be the best name for it: see chapter 2, 64 n. 22, below.

doxastic states that fall short of knowledge and will figure out in what these states consist.

Reference as Unwitting Cognitive Contact without Recollection

I begin this book by showing how Plato employs recollection as a solution to the beginning problem as voiced by Meno's paradox. However, I go on to show that Plato's investment in unwitting cognitive contact and its necessity for any kind of inquiry or *doxa* goes way beyond, and is independent of, any investment that Plato has in the theory of recollection. I see the theory of recollection as Plato's attempt to come up with an explanation for this mysterious contact in a way that also fulfills another clear agenda that he has in the dialogues that contain it: arguing for the immortality of the soul.

Plato does not refer to recollection outside of the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Phaedrus*. Furthermore, many have argued that there is no evidence that he commits himself to such a doctrine in any of the other dialogues. Some even cite evidence to the contrary.²¹ For these reasons, I am more than content to say that my view is consistent with the view that Plato has dispensed with recollection in the rest of the dialogues. I will argue, however, that he has maintained a commitment to unwitting cognitive contact as a prerequisite for *doxa* throughout his epistemology.

It is helpful to think of the three dialogues that mention recollection as treating it the way Marco Nathan (2021) has recently identified as "Black Boxing." A black box is what allows a theorist to move forward without filling in every detail of an elusive part of their theory. Scientists such as Mendel and Darwin were able to make great strides in their contributions to the theories of genetics and natural selection without knowing what mechanisms accounted for the heredity of traits from one generation to the next.²² According to Nathan, we can see them use black boxes to iso-

21. In fact, I believe that Plato offers arguments that contradict the theory of recollection and the assumptions behind his arguments for the immortality of the soul in the *Theaet.* and the *Tim.* However, I will not argue for these views here, as they are irrelevant to the thesis of this book. Everything I say is consistent with Plato abandoning recollection throughout the remaining dialogues.

22. Nathan (2021, 79) claims (controversially) that they postponed even trying to figure out what they were. This establishes an even greater parallel to my claim that

late the pattern of phenomena that they wanted to explain in a way that helped to isolate that pattern and hold it steady as it participated in the remainder of the theory (109). At some point, these thinkers themselves or others, who were working independently, focused in on the contents of the black box and tried to give a causal explanation that accounted for it as a “difference maker.” That is, they tried to provide a model that made the mechanism in the black box transparent. Sometimes this eliminated the need for the black box.

In my narrative, Plato does this as follows: In the *Meno*, he isolates the beginning problem. The slave manages to think about something with which he was previously unacquainted and about which he had no true beliefs (the diagonal). Realizing everyone must have this capacity, Plato frames this pattern of behavior, calling whatever it turns out to be “recollection.” In both the *Meno* and the *Phaedo* he attempts to produce a model that explains how it makes a difference—how it actually works. In both dialogues, he blends his explanatory model with his argument for the immortality of the soul. At times, he embellishes it with a view toward enhancing the argument for the soul’s immortality, rather than simply using it to answer Meno’s paradox.

Later, however, Plato no longer endorses recollection, but he still needs to frame whatever the solution to the beginning problem is. When he is not also thinking about the immortality of the soul, he does not think that recollection is necessary in order to account for the fact that everyone is able to overcome the beginning problem. There might be some other explanation. However, he is not going to spend more time on that explanation right now. He wants to assume that people can make this unwitting cognitive connection and move on to discuss *doxa* (and the rest of his epistemology). He frames unwitting cognitive contact with a “black box” and moves on.

When I discuss the *Theaetetus*, *Republic* V–VII, *Cratylus*, and *Phaedrus*, I aim to show that Plato is still committed to the thesis that everyone has unwitting cognitive contact with the Forms. He maintains this commitment even though he no longer explains how it comes about through recollection and, in fact, leaves how it happens unexplained in the rest of his work. While he might have given up on the plausibility and utility of recollection, he has not given up on the thesis that all human beings who can inquire and possess *doxa* have a mysterious and, as yet,

Plato eventually stops focusing on how this connection got established and simply makes use of it in his epistemology.

unexplained ability to make unwitting cognitive contact with the Forms. Based on this evidence, I conclude that Plato thought that everyone (his readers, lovers of sights and sounds, ordinary people, philosophers) have this sort of relation to his Forms and that everyone's inquiries, beliefs, and even their ignorance, are about the Forms.

Some Current Views on *Doxa* in Plato

In the twenty-first century, there has been a hum of argument in favor of Plato's "two world theory," where *doxa* and *epistêmê* have two different objects and are mutually exclusive.²³ These scholars complain about accounts of *doxa* in Plato that make it a component of knowledge. Some of these objections resonate with my own complaints about assumptions that are made regarding Plato's view of *doxa*. Some of the similarities between these views and mine will be hard to appreciate as I am reluctant to make positive claims about Plato's understanding of *epistêmê* or knowledge. I think it is plausible that Plato thought that one cannot have both *doxa* and *epistêmê* of the *same thing* at the *same time*, which is one way of summarizing the position of these proponents of a *doxa* that does not align with contemporary analytic uses of "belief";²⁴ whatever *doxa* is, it is overridden by, and is inferior to, *epistêmê*. If *epistêmê* is in any way *doxa*, then it is *doxa* transformed into *epistêmê*, it is not *doxa* and *epistêmê* at the same time.

However, in contrast to these views, the *doxa* that I find in Plato's dialogues must ultimately be *about* the Forms (which is also what knowledge and ignorance are about). *Doxa* might be inaccurate, misleading, confusing, and unclear. However, these properties would not make it inferior to knowledge unless it were inaccurate, misleading, confusing, and unclear *about* the *same* thing that knowledge is accurate and clear about, namely, what-is. So *doxa* must, somehow, be *about* the same thing that knowledge is *about*. This is contrary to Plato's so-called two world theory. Furthermore, I have no problem imagining that while knowledge will only be *about* perceptibles in a derivative way, knowledge of perceptibles will be unproblematic for one who knows the Forms and has time to adjust to the darkness upon returning to the cave (*Rep.* 516e3–6).

23. Gerson 2009; Vogt 2012; Moss and Schwab 2019; Moss 2021.

24. See Moss and Schwab 2019, 8.

Chronology

I take my project to make few if any assumptions about the chronology of Plato's dialogues. I assume that one can—and should—cross-reference textual evidence concerning Plato's use of *doxa* across dialogues more or less without regard to what others might say about their chronological relationships. The conjecture that Plato's views must have changed over the course of his writing makes sense to me. If I were analyzing Plato's view of knowledge itself, and, particularly, if I were discussing Plato's ontological theories concerning the truth-makers of beliefs and the objects of knowledge (which I—along with many others—would argue are what later came to be known as his *Ideas* or Forms), then I might have to take some hypotheses about Plato's development into account. However, here I focus on the presuppositions that Plato appears to have held (but leaves less than fully articulated) about *doxa* (belief or opinion) and what allows the *doxa* of the person who does not have knowledge to be true or false. Thus, I am treating the dialogues that I do mention as mutually reinforcing. That is, I am assuming that they contain similar assumptions about *doxa*, and that it makes sense to try to piece together a more complete and coherent view by taking their evidence to be mutually enhancing rather than isolated to an individual dialogue. I also assume that we should read different dialogues as consistent rather than contradictory whenever possible.

As it happens, apart from a few references to the *Apology* (a dialogue treated by developmentalists as “early” or “Socratic”), and the fact that the *Meno* is treated variously as “early,” “transitional,” and “middle,” it is generally regarded as safest not to make strong developmental and chronological claims about the relationships among the other dialogues from which I collect evidence (*Crat.*, *Phdo.*, *Phdr.*, *Rep.*, *Symp.*, *Theaet.*).²⁵ As a result, I venture that my exegetical project should be of interest to unitarians and developmentalists alike (and everyone in between) and also that these apparent assumptions that Plato makes about *doxa* need to be taken into account equally in any and all treatments of Plato's epistemology.

25. There are some individuals who make such cases for doctrinal reasons. One particular case has to do with in which dialogues Plato does or does not commit himself to the existence of Forms after criticizing the Theory of Forms in the *Parm.* See Cherniss 1957.

The Thread of Argument through the Chapters

Depending on the background with which a reader approaches this book, the various parts will hold different significance. The book falls into three parts: My two focal theses are argued for by the end of chapter 6, with my first thesis regarding reference or aboutness occupying chapters 1–4 and my thesis on *doxa* occupying chapters 5 and 6. Still, for some, chapter 7 will be the climax of the book, as it defends my conclusions in the first six chapters with a reading of *Republic* 475e4–479d5 that departs from both traditional and more recent interpretations of that passage. To most interpreters, in that part of the *Republic* Plato appears to be saying that neither ignorance nor *doxa* can be about “what-is.” Clearly, this is contrary to both of my focal theses. I spend chapter 7 explaining what I find wrong with that reading and supplying my own. Chapters 8 and 9 reinforce my conclusions in chapter 7.

Chapters 1 and 2 discuss the prerequisite to all epistemic states for which Plato appears to search in his discussion of recollection, what I have called “unwitting cognitive contact.” In these chapters, I focus on passages in the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*. This initial foray into recollection is not so much exegesis on my part as it is an attempt to look at the exegesis of others. I want to see if there is any way to move these debates forward in a manner that gives Plato that to which he appears to be committed regarding the brute evidence, from Socrates’s demonstration with the slave, that we do manage to inquire and make—and then correct—false hypotheses concerning our object of inquiry. Plato appears to say that we once knew—before birth—all that we will later learn. According to his story, we then forget it all at birth. Clearly, Plato is indicating that he thinks we need something other than a *tabula rasa* to explain inquiry and learning. However, he leaves a clear description of what he thinks we need wanting. What marks are in this nonvirgin *tabula*? Does it contain *everything* in some compartment that is inaccessible until each individual idea is triggered by sense experience? This seems simplistic and extreme—mystical to the point of implausibility. Furthermore, as many have argued, it is hard to see how it answers the question of how we can begin to inquire.

Yet, it is hard to disagree with Plato that a *tabula rasa* seems inadequate to explain his realist view that the target of knowledge is an existent and unchanging abstract object, like beauty itself or the diagonal itself, that cannot be accessed by our senses. In the chapters on recollection, I go out on a limb and propose something that clarifies, and then satisfies,

what I take to be Plato's intentions regarding recollection. I venture that our default should be to assume that what I propose is at least part of what he was seeking. It is what it behooves him to seek. Were he to venture only this modest assumption in order to solve the paradox of inquiry (the first—"the beginning"—question in Meno's paradox), he would succeed in resolving the beginning problem and allow inquiry to be about such things as the diagonal itself. Furthermore, I will argue exegetically in the remaining chapters that this is a supposition to which he is committed throughout the rest of his discussions of recollection and even in dialogues that feature hypothesizing and correcting hypotheses, without recollection.

Chapters 3 and 4 show that Plato assumes that all people (including ordinary people and his readers) are able to refer to, think about, and inquire into "what is" (such things as beauty itself and the diagonal itself) in the absence of any theory regarding why they are able to do so. In chapter 3, I use evidence from the *Meno* and from *Phaedo* 73c5–77b10 to establish that Plato believes that human beings can inquire because they are born with an ability to refer to the actual thing that will answer their inquiry, as opposed to their reference being restricted to what they presuppose will answer their inquiry. This is important because it shows that Plato thinks even those who start out believing that perceptibles are—and exhaust—what-is can be remediated through their inquiries, and can even come to have some appreciation for what he later comes to identify as his Forms.

I lay the groundwork for extending the thesis that this connection exists prior to inquiry and learning into the middle books of the *Republic* by examining Socrates's statement at *Phaedo* 72e3–77e5 that we come to see the inadequacy of particulars by comparing them to Forms. This passage was used by Scott (1995, 60–63) to justify his claim that Plato thought only philosophers could recollect. But Scott's claim has been challenged by Kelsey (2001), Williams (2002), Franklin (2005), and Harte (2006), and I use these latter interpretations (predominantly Harte's) to build the scaffolding upon which to develop my interpretation of both that particular claim and also of the general attitude that Plato displays concerning what relationship nonphilosophers hold to the Forms. In regard to the *Phaedo*, I argue against Scott's assessment of the intended audience for the sticks and stones argument (74b7–c5), showing that it is intended to make an impression on a more naive audience than Simmias and the others who are in Plato's inner circle and who already accept Forms into