

Plato's Epistemology: Sample Topics for Papers and Discussion
(Philosophy 250/350, Boos)

1 What sort of mixture of experience and 'recollection' (or functional physiological or psychological equivalent) do **you** think may be involved in dispositionsto **learn** moderately complex things --aptitudes of the sort the slave-boy shows in the **Meno**, for example? If you believe (as most of you probably do) that Socrates' inference from the boy's ability to follow was wrong, is it nevertheless conceivable to you that you might have agreed in 5th century Greece that some kind of '**anamnesis** ('recollection'; I believe the word is sometimes applied, in modern psychology, to experiences of **déjà vu**) might underlie that ability? Do some of us **lack** it, in some (even many) areas of inquiry, but have it in others? Can you think of commonsensical as well as twentieth-century-scientific alternatives to Socrates' interpretation?

2 In 76b of the **Phaedo** (p. 67 of **Plato's Epistemology**), Socrates claims that people who know are able to "**give an account**" of what they know, and Simmias, his interlocutor, agrees . What do you think? Whichever position you take, can you support or illustrate it with recognizable examples and counterexamples? Are there alternative interpretations of **account** that would make the claim more or less plausible?

3 In **Phaedo** 97-99 (pp. 70-72 of **Plato's Epistemology**), Socrates expresses disappointment with the earlier philosopher Anaxagoras, because the latter (who believed that "**nous**" or "**mind**" somehow informs the physical universe) did not

tell me first whether the earth was flat or round, and when he told me that, . . . go on to give the explanation and why it must be so in terms of what is **better**, arguing that it is **better** to be like that. . . . For it never occurred to me that . . . he would bring in any other explanation of [physical phenomena] except that it is **best** for them to be as they are. . . . (the emphases are mine)

Do you think Socrates' desire is **understandable** or **appropriate**, even if science (as you were taught it in high school, say) does not (or is not supposed to) work that way? Was it (or is it) **natural** for people to want explanations to provide such assurances, even if such desires were (or are) misguided?

Or is it perhaps just a form of '**pathetic fallacy**' to seek **why**-accounts that appeal to forms of order and nature that are '**good**', or embody some (alleged) '**purpose**'?

Whether or not it is legitimate to do this, finally, do people sometimes do it without quite admitting it? Are people who assume the world '**must**' be amenable '**in principle**' to scientific explanation(s), for example -- or who believe firmly that there '**must**' be an underlying **simplicity** to its structure(s) -- implicitly making just such appeals?

4 What do **you** think are the most plausible metaphysical, epistemological and/or ethical implications (if any) of the **cave-parable** (**Republic** 514-519, **Plato's Epistemology**, pp. 101-106)?

Are there analogues you have encountered in your reading of anthropology, say? Or '**science fiction**'? Or anything else?

Does the parable implicitly postulate a kind of god's-eye-view, and if so, does this strike you as intellectually arrogant, or delusive? Or is it really a thinly disguised (if deeply moving) **ethical or religious** myth?

Or is it arguably an eloquent source of epistemological **skepticism**, rather than of the '**knowledge**' of unique higher-order 'forms' Plato which hoped to motivate and illustrate? If I **am** in such a cave, do you think you could **convince me that I am, without "dragging"** me "toward the (alleged) light"? If **not**, how could I -- benighted cave-dweller that I am -- distinguish you from L. Ron Hubbard? Or the Moonies? Would I ask you for ID?

5 At **Theatetus** 171a (**Plato's Epistemology**, p. 166), Socrates rebuts Protagoras with a claim that his **opponent's** "opinion about **his** opinion" (that the human being -- the **anthropos** -- is the 'measure' of all things) must be **true**, according to him (Protagoras), and that that enmeshes him in an involved kind of self-referential absurdity.

Is this a decisive refutation of Protagoras' conceptual relativism, as Socrates and others have asserted? If **not**, how might Protagoras reply?

Even if Socrates' argument is **not** conclusive, do you think it may suggest significant complexities and subtle difficulties that a prudent 'Protagorean', represented by the non-straw-figure in **Theatetus** 166-168 (**Plato's Epistemology**, pp. 160-162), ought to confront? Are there any passages in the monologue of **Theatetus** 166-168 which suggest lines of argument and/or compromise such a 'Protagorean' might use to confront them?