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ΓΝΩΣΙΣ AND ΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΗ IN SOCRATES' DREAM IN THE *THEAETETUS*

It has been alleged by many commentators that Plato never developed a precise philosophical vocabulary, and this view is strengthened when one investigates the employment of many of Plato's key terms: *εἶδος*, *ἰδέα*, *αἴσθησις*, *δόξα*, to name but a few. In the early and middle dialogues, Plato uses these terms in a variety of contexts without giving the slightest indication of which of the many possible senses is to be understood. Indeed, in the *Euthydemus*, Socrates is represented as ridiculing those who attempt to draw precise distinctions for they '... would only be able to play with men tripping them up and oversetting them with distinctions of words' (Jowett, 278). Yet one must be cautious in simply assuming that Plato never attempted to clarify the meaning of his central philosophical terms; in particular, one must note that the *Theaetetus* contains several attempts to mark off various senses of *λόγος*, and that the entire dialogue is directed toward a precise account of what is, or ought to be meant by 'knowledge'. Thus while it is true to say that Plato usually fails to mark off distinctions between various senses of the same term, the *Theaetetus* shows that this is not always the case.

In this paper, I shall argue (1) that Plato attempts to separate two distinct senses of the comprehensive Greek term for knowledge, *εἰδέναι*, reserving *γνώσις* for what we should term 'knowledge by acquaintance' and employing *ἐπιστήμη* for 'intellectual knowledge' or 'knowledge that something is the case', and (2) that the statement and refutation of Socrates' dream theory in the *Theaetetus* show this.

It has been recently argued on different grounds that Plato in fact adopted a distinction along these lines. D. W. Hamlyn argues that Plato's employment of *γνώσις* and *ἐπιστήμη* at *Theaetetus* 203a and 207a is significant in this respect:

The difference between the two passages is that the earlier one [a discussion of the dream theory] uses words like *γνώσις* and its derivatives, making no reference to *ἐπιστήμη*, whilst in the latter passage [the first account of *λόγος*] the reverse is true. The systematic use of different terminology suggests that Plato had made a distinction between two senses of knowledge.¹

Hamlyn is correct in pointing out that Plato's usage in these passages is selective, but this is far from showing that Plato had developed two distinct senses of 'knowing'. In the first place, Plato's terminology in the statement of the dream theory is *prima facie* incompatible with Hamlyn's claim, for he there employs both *γνώσις* and *ἐπιστήμη*:

So when a man gets hold of the true notion of something without an account, his mind does think truly of it, but he does not know it [*γινώσκειν*]; for if one cannot give and receive an account of a thing, one has no knowledge [*ἀνεπιστήμονα*] of that thing. (202b8-c3)²

Second, as W. G. Runciman has pointed out, the passage at 209e seems to be an explicit denial of Hamlyn's claim: 'For knowing (*γινώσκειν*) is somehow the same as having knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*).'³ If a distinction between *γνώσις* and *ἐπιστήμη* is to be established, some explanation for these passages must be given. Finally, we must then have some additional

¹ D. W. Hamlyn, 'Forms and Knowledge in Plato's *Theaetetus*: A Reply to Mr. Bluck', in *Mind* xvi (1957) 547.

² F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962); unless other-

wise noted, all translations from the *Theaetetus* are from this work.

³ W. G. Runciman, *Plato's Later Epistemology* (Cambridge: University Press, 1962) 43.

reason to view *γνώσις* as knowledge by acquaintance, and *ἐπιστήμη* as knowledge that something is the case. It is unlikely that a survey of Plato's usage, without reference to the doctrines being presented or discussed, will shed light on these questions.

The Statement of the Dream Theory

If you have had a dream, let me tell you mine in return. I seem to have heard some people say that what might be called the first elements of which we and all other things consist are such that no account can be given of them. Each of them just by itself can only be named; we cannot attribute to it anything further or say that it exists or does not exist; for we should at once be attaching to it existence or non-existence, whereas we ought to add nothing if we are to express just it alone. We ought not even to add 'just' or 'it' or 'each' or 'alone' or 'this', or any other of a host of such terms. These terms, running loose about the place, are attached to everything, and they are distinct from the things to which they are applied. If it were possible for an element to be expressed in any formula exclusively belonging to it, no other terms ought to enter into that expression; but in fact there is no formula in which any element can be expressed; it can only be named, for a name is all there is that belongs to it. But when we come to things composed of these elements, then, just as these things are complex, so the names are combined to make a description (*logos*), a description being precisely a combination of names. Accordingly, elements are inexplicable and unknowable, but they can be perceived; while complexes ('syllables') are knowable and explicable, and you can have a true notion of them. So when a man gets hold of the true notion of something without an account, his mind does truly think of it, but he does not know it; for if one cannot give and receive an account of a thing, one has no knowledge of that thing. But when he has also got hold of an account, all this becomes possible to him and he is fully equipped with knowledge. (201d8-202c5)

The theory of knowledge being put forward here is a curious mixture of argument and dogmatic assertion. Though it is in part a revolutionary proposal (that the basic elements of which all things are composed are themselves unknowable), Socrates attempts to give the theory some plausibility by justifying several of the claims being made. For example, the statement that terms like 'each' and 'this' cannot appear in the *λόγος* of the element is justified by the assertions: (1) if there is to be a *λόγος* of the elements, then the *λόγος* must not contain any term which is applicable to more than just that element, and (2) that 'each' and 'this' are in fact applicable to more than one entity. Yet the most fundamental doctrines of the dream theory stand without support; that is, statement (1) just mentioned, and the claim that knowledge of X requires the possession of the *λόγος* of X, are not justified by any other premiss, or argumentation.

Which assertions in the theory does Plato wish to deny? The difficulty in analyzing the refutation is that it is a *reductio ad absurdum*, it shows that the theory leads to the absurd conclusion that there can be no knowledge at all, but it does not indicate which of the assertions which lead to this conclusion must be given up. The first step in evaluating the theory is to note that Cornford's view of its significance cannot be sustained. He maintains that 'The theory here put forward was certainly never held by Plato himself.' (p. 143). It may be true to say that the theory *in its entirety* was never held by Plato, but there is ample evidence that at least part of the theory, the claim that *ἐπιστήμη* requires the possession of a *λόγος*, is an important part of Plato's own theory of knowledge (*cf. Meno* 98a3, *Phaedo* 76b5-7, *Republic* 533b6-c5). It is important then that the dream be understood, at least in part, as a re-evaluation of Plato's earlier accounts of knowledge. Any position which treats the dream theory apart from its relationship to this oft stated doctrine surely rules out what may be the most interesting and important consequences of the theory.

According to Cornford, the dream theory is rejected by Plato because it maintains ‘. . . that the only things we can perceive or know or talk about are concrete individual things in nature, complex or simple . . .’ (p. 151). Plato’s own view, he continues, is that knowledge has for its objects things of a non-material sort, and the failures of the *Theaetetus* to extract knowledge from things on the phenomenal level are designed to demonstrate this.

There are at least two major difficulties in Cornford’s account of these passages. First, Cornford cannot substantiate his claim that, according to the dream, the objects, simple and complex on the phenomenal level, are the *only possible* objects of knowledge. It is true that the dream theory is concerned with the possibility of knowledge of objects of this sort, but nowhere can one find any assertion that these are the *only possible* objects of knowledge. The theory requires that the object of knowledge be complex, but it does not require that it be a material object.

Second, it must be pointed out that the conclusions of the dream theory would hold even if the objects under discussion were Forms rather than material objects. In the *Phaedo* (78,80), Plato characterises the Forms as ‘uniform’ and ‘simple’ *μονοειδές, ἀσύνθετον*, and in the *Symposium*, he refers to Beauty Itself as ‘completely separate and simple’ (*αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτὸ μεθ’ αὐτοῦ μονοειδές, 211b1*). In the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, the accounts given of the method of collection and division refer to some classes which are simple and which remain apart from every other class (*ἀδιαίρετον, ἄτμητον, ἄτομον*). When these passages are compared to the account of the elements in Socrates’ dream, the difficulties in Cornford’s position are evident: the elements themselves are said to be *αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτὸ, ἀσύνθετον* and *μονοειδές*, completely separate and simple. It is difficult to believe that this striking resemblance in terminology is accidental.

Norman Gulley, arguing only on the basis of the *Phaedo* passages, states that this correspondence ‘establishes an important link between the discussion of the latter half of the *Theaetetus* . . . and the theory of Forms.’⁴ The evidence from the *Symposium* and the later dialogues serves only to confirm this view. Thus, far from showing the necessity for Forms as objects of knowledge, the dream theory points to a fundamental difficulty in Plato’s earlier accounts of these lofty and eminent nameables. Cornford’s account of these passages simply does not do justice to the similarity between elements and Forms and the unhappy consequences of the dream theory for the Theory of Forms.

If Cornford’s interpretation of these passages cannot be adopted, then what precisely is wrong with the dream theory? To answer this question, we must examine the detailed and sophisticated refutation which Plato presents.

The Refutation of the Dream Theory

Sufficient attention has not been given to the fact that Plato does not immediately proceed to refute the dream theory. In the passages which follow the presentation, Socrates summarises the central thesis of the dream, and seems to make important concessions on its behalf. If we are to understand the nature of the refutation which follows, the concessions made at the outset cannot be ignored. Socrates first grants that true opinion and the possession of a *λόγος* are indispensable for the possession of knowledge: ‘. . . for how can there ever be knowledge [*ἐπιστήμη*] without an account and right belief?’ (202d6–7). He and Theaetetus also grant that, in the case of the letters of the alphabet, there can be no *λόγος* given for the letters taken by themselves.

These two concessions are obviously sufficient for the conclusion that there can be no *ἐπιστήμη* of simple letters while *ἐπιστήμη* of complexes is possible. Socrates concludes his introduction to the refutation by saying, ‘So far, then, we have reached a right conclusion about knowledge’, 203b8–9. Since this statement is a conclusion of the discussion of letters

⁴ Norman Gulley, *Plato’s Theory of Knowledge* (London: Methuen, 1962) 102.

and syllables, what else could be meant other than that there is no knowledge of the letters themselves, while knowledge of syllables is possible? Yet Cornford maintains that "The 'right conclusion' is that, if *logos* means an account or explanation consisting in the enumeration of the components of a complex thing, we must finally reach simple parts which cannot be so "explained".' (p. 147). His own suggestion is that there may be some other sense of *λόγος* (presumably with reference to the Forms) which would make the elements knowable. This possibility however is flatly contradicted by the text and argument of the dream. Socrates and Theaetetus explicitly agree that no account of *any sort* (*ὄντιωδόν*) can be given of the elements. The dream had maintained that nothing whatsoever could be said about the elements, because each of them has only a name. Surely if nothing whatsoever can be said about the elements, then it is false to say that there is some *λόγος* of a special sort which can be given of them. The only reasonable reading of Socrates' remarks here is that the dream is correct in maintaining that there is no *λόγος*, and thus no knowledge of the letters taken by themselves. Yet this conclusion is explicitly denied in the refutation which follows. If any sense is to be made of Plato's remarks in this introduction to the refutation, some reconciliation of this apparent inconsistency must be accomplished.

It is at precisely this point that attention to Plato's terminology becomes crucial for understanding the significance of the dream theory and its refutation.

Throughout the introduction to the refutation, whenever Socrates speaks approvingly of the dream theory, he employs *ἐπιστήμη* in assessing the worth of its conclusions about knowledge; whenever he expresses doubt or disagreement with the dream theory, he employs *γνώσις* and its derivative forms for knowledge. These remarks can be summarised as follows:

- (1) For how can there ever be knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*) without an account and right belief? (202d6–7)
- (2) But there is one point in the theory as stated that does not find favour with me . . . its most ingenious feature: it says that elements are unknowable (*ἄγνωστα*), but whatever is complex can be known (*γνωστόν*). (202d8–202e1)
- (3) So far, then, we have reached a right conclusion about knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*). (202b8–9)
- (4) But now, have we been right in declaring that the letter cannot be known (*γνωστόν*) though the syllable can? (203c1–2)

It has already been noted that the statement of the dream employs both *γνώσις* and *ἐπιστήμη* and their derivative forms and, as a result, provides for conclusions to be drawn employing both terms. In the present passages, Socrates supports only one of the two alternative sets of conclusions: in so far as the dream theory holds that there is no *ἐπιστήμη* of the elements, it is correct. In so far as it maintains that there is no *γνώσις* of the elements while *γνώσις* of complexes is possible, the dream is possible, the dream is mistaken, and does 'not find favour' with Socrates.

In light of this introduction, one would expect the refutation to be couched in terms of *γνώσις* and its derivatives, and this is exactly what one finds in the arguments which constitute the refutation proper. From 203c1 to 206b11, forms of *γνώσις* appear no less than nineteen times while forms of *ἐπιστήμη* do not appear at all.

The refutation is a detailed and sophisticated series of dilemmas and a listing of each appearance of *γνώσις* here would be laborious. It will be sufficient if we summarise the arguments, and then state Socrates' conclusion at the end of the refutation. Socrates argues that a syllable is either the same as its individual letters or a 'new entity' that comes into being when they are brought together. If the syllable is understood as the sum of its letters, then since each letter is, according to the dream, unknowable, then the syllable itself is unknowable. It is a 'monstrous absurdity' to think that a man could know the first syllable of Socrates' name, 'SO', without knowing 'S' and without knowing 'O'. On the other hand,

if the syllable is not the same as its parts, then it is a new entity of its own, but it will have to be simple as well: 'if the letters are not parts of a syllable, can you name any things other than its letters, that are parts of a syllable?' (205b). If the syllable is a simple entity, then it will be unknowable as well. Thus the dream theory is mistaken in holding that the syllable can be known (*γνωστόν*) and explained, while the letter cannot (205e6–7). Socrates then concludes by citing the case of children who learn the individual letters before learning syllables:

Then, if we are to argue from our own experience of elements and complexes to other cases, we shall conclude that elements in general yield knowledge [*γνώσῳ*] that is much clearer than knowledge of the complex [*τῆς συλλαβῆς*] and more effective for a complete grasp of anything we seek to know [*μάθημα*]. If someone tells us that the complex is by its nature knowable [*γνωστόν*] while the element is unknowable [*ἄγνωστον*], we shall suppose that, whether he intends it or not, he is playing with us. (206b5–11)

Thus, attention to Plato's terminology makes it clear that the dream theory's weakness lies in the claim that the elements are unknowable (*ἄγνωστον*) while the complexes are knowable (*γνωστόν*). More precisely, it lies in the first part of this thesis, that the elements are *ἄγνωστον*, for, as the refutation makes evident, if the elements are unknowable, then knowledge of the complexes is also impossible. Nothing of similar magnitude follows from holding that the syllables are knowable (*γνωστόν*), and thus it cannot be this latter claim which must be given up. It has not yet been shown however that this conclusion on Plato's part amounts to a distinction between intellectual knowledge (or knowledge that something is the case) and knowledge by acquaintance. Nor has it been made clear why such a distinction would be appropriate to the problems of the *Theaetetus*.

γνώσις and ἐπιστήμη

Though *γνώσις* and *ἐπιστήμη* are often used interchangeably in the dialogues, there are certain contexts where one of these terms is used almost without exception to the exclusion of the other. John Lyons, whose *Structural Semantics* is in part a study of three Greek terms for knowledge (*εἰδέναι, γνώσις, ἐπιστήμη*) makes the following observation: 'The most striking positive difference between the distribution of *γινώσκειν* and that of *εἰδέναι* and *ἐπίστασθαι* is the relative frequency of occurrence of *γινώσκειν* with a personal noun as object: there are twenty-seven clear instances in the corpus, against seven occurrences of *εἰδέναι*, and one only of *ἐπίστασθαι*, in an environment of this class.'⁵ It should be noted that *ἐπίστασθαι* occurs in this context only in the *Theaetetus* (192d) where, as Lyons observes, a number of 'odd' cases of *ἐπίστασθαι* and *εἰδέναι* occur. Illustrative of the appearances of *γνώσις* in this context, which Lyons terms its 'most typical class of environment' is this passage from *Laches*: 'I see very clearly, Lysimachus, that you have only known (*γινώσκειν*) Socrates' father, and have no acquaintance (*συγγεγονέναι*) with Socrates himself. . . .' (Jowett 187d7). Even in the *Theaetetus*, when Socrates asks Theodorus if he knows Theaetetus, and when Theodorus replies that he does know him, the terms are *γινώσκεις* and *γινώσκω*.

γνώσις also appears with great regularity in discussions of children learning their letters, i.e. in being able to recognise and name them. At *Republic* 402b, Plato compares the education of the Guardians with this rudimentary form of education: just as children must come to know (*γνώσις*) individual letters before they can recognise them in combinations or reflected images of them, so the Guardians must know (*γνώσις*) individual Forms before they can recognise them in combination or in objects which participate in those Forms. This emphasis on the necessity for simple acquaintance with objects, Forms, or letters re-occurs in the later dialogues (*Theaetetus* 206a1, *Sophist* 253b, *Statesman* 277). It is clear then that

⁵ John Lyons, *Structural Semantics* (Oxford: University Press, 1963) 199.

Plato often speaks of having knowledge of X or knowing X where 'X' refers not to the truth of a proposition or to something being the case, but to a particular person or object. In contexts of this sort, it is *γνώσις* which is employed almost without exception.

In addition, the account of knowledge as true belief accompanied by a *λόγος*, or ability to give an account for one's beliefs, is almost always related to *ἐπιστήμη*. The only exception to this is the conjunction of *γνώσις* and *λόγος* in the *Theaetetus* which, as it is now argued, is rejected by Plato.⁶ At *Meno* 98a, *Phaedo* 76b, *Republic* 533a, *Statesman* 266a, and in the *Seventh Letter*, *ἐπιστήμη* is understood as justified true belief, but with the exception already noted, this is never said about *γνώσις*.

We can conclude then with some assurance that the 'point' which the dream is designed to make is that there can be no *ἐπιστήμη* of the first elements because nothing can be said about them, but that they can be known in the same way in which Socrates knows Theaetetus and a child knows his letters, that is to say, we can become acquainted with them. Runciman makes the following comment about the dream theory:

But of course the truth is that the dream is in fact quite right in a way that Plato did not realise. For the sense in which we know individual letters or notes is the sense in which a dog knows its master or a baby knows its mother; that is to say, we can recognise them. But this is very different from knowing whether something is true or false.⁷

If the arguments given so far are correct, then Plato did in fact realise this. To miss this point, that there is a distinction between *γνώσις* and *ἐπιστήμη*, is to miss the main point which the refutation of the dream theory is designed to make.

It may be objected here that if the main 'point' of these passages in the *Theaetetus* is to promote such a distinction, then Plato manages to conceal it very effectively. It would indeed be puzzling for Plato to present so important a development in his epistemology by veiled hints and such complex argumentation. There are however two reasons for believing that the refutation would not have been so obscure or misleading for Plato's intended audience. If, as has been recently suggested,⁸ the dream theory is best understood as an outgrowth of discussions occurring within the Academy, and its presentation in the dialogue intended primarily for students rather than the general public, then Plato's *reductio* argument might not have been nearly so ambiguous. Moreover, if Snell is correct in his description of pre-Platonic usage of *ἐπιστήμη* and *γινώσκειν*,⁹ that there were in fact embodied in the

⁶ It is true that what is *ἄλογον* is said to be *ἄγνωστον* at 205c, e, but Plato is still arguing here on the basis of the dream theory. It should not be concluded that this conjunction of *ἄλογον* and *ἄγνωστον* refutes the present interpretation. The conjunction occurs within Plato's refutation which is essentially a drawing out of the dream theory's implications, and showing that an absurdity arises. At this stage of the argument (205e) Plato is maintaining that if the elements are *ἄλογον* and, for that reason, *ἄγνωστον*, then so are the complexes composed of them. This is quite different from affirming that since the elements are *ἄλογα*, they must be *ἄγνωστα*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁸ Winifred Hicken, 'The Character and Provenance of Socrates' Dream in the *Theaetetus*' in *Phronesis* iii (1958) 126-45.

⁹ Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, trans. T. G. Rosenmeyer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953) 13. Snell notes that in Homer, 'Frequently it [*γῶσις*] is combined with *ιδεῖν*,

but it stands for a type of seeing which involves not merely visual activity but the mental act which goes with vision. This puts it close to *γινώσκειν*. But the latter means "to recognize"; it is more properly used in the identification of a man, while *νοεῖν* refers more particularly to situations . . .' Snell's work also figures prominently in John Gould's *The Development of Plato's Ethics* (Cambridge, 1955); Gould concludes his discussion of the pre-Socratic employment of *ἐπιστήμη* by summarizing Snell's account: '*ἐπίσταμαι* and *ἐπιστήμη*, like *σοφία* and unlike *γινώσκειν* and *συνιέναι*, have as their primary meaning "efficiency in practice", practical intelligence; sometimes denoting a restricted technique (ability in some specified field), sometimes a generally intelligent approach to living' (p. 15). Gould attempts to show that *ἐπιστήμη* should be understood in terms of Ryle's sense of knowing *how*, but this view has been effectively criticized by Vlastos, R. E. Allen, and others.

ordinary language preceding and including Plato's time certain rough distinctions between these two terms, then the refutation of the dream theory with its peculiar employment of *γνώσις* would in effect be pointing out the consequences of this familiar distinction.

What then can be said about that curious passage at the end of the dialogue, 'For to know (*γνῶναι*) is somehow to have knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*) or isn't it?' (209e). The context of this remark is the discussion of the third sense of *λόγος* as 'stating a distinguishing characteristic' in an attempt to give some sense of *λόγος* for which it is correct to say that knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*) consists of true belief plus the *λόγος*. The test case for this third sense is Socrates' knowledge of Theaetetus, and the dialogue ends with the conclusion that this sense of *λόγος* is inadequate.

If a distinction between *γνώσις* and *ἐπιστήμη* has been promoted earlier in the dialogue to show that there are some cases of knowledge which cannot be accounted for in terms of justified true belief (i.e. our knowledge of the elements), then the failure to find an explanation for our knowledge of persons in terms of justified true belief should come as no surprise. There are of course obvious differences between the elements described in the dream and the person Theaetetus. Theaetetus is, after all a complex entity, and there are some things that can be said about him. But they are similar in so far as both can be known in the sense that someone can become acquainted with them. It is then not unreasonable to take Plato's point at the end of the dialogue to be that in cases like our knowledge of Theaetetus, as well as in cases like our knowledge of elements, we must distinguish between *ἐπιστήμη* of X and *γνώσις* of X. The difficulty with the third sense of *λόγος* is that it is being adopted in an attempt to account for our acquaintance with Theaetetus as if it were the same as our knowledge about him; that is, the dialogue ends in failure because Theaetetus still believes that *γνώσις* is somehow the same as *ἐπιστήμη*.

It is to be admitted that Plato is not always consistent in his employment of these terms; there are many passages in the middle dialogues where *γνώσις* and *ἐπιστήμη* are used interchangeably without the slightest hint of any distinctions to be made (e.g. *Republic* 477a-480). Yet these passages in the *Theaetetus* reveal that part of Plato's critical undertaking is to distinguish senses of 'knowing' which had either been unknown or ignored in his earlier epistemology. It is a measure of his philosophical acumen that by the time of the *Sophist*, Plato was no longer content to characterise knowledge of Forms as simple acquaintance with a supreme and simple entity, but as knowledge *that* certain Forms combined with others to make complex Forms. At *Sophist* 253a-e, Plato argues that what is perhaps the most important *ἐπιστήμη* of all lies in ' . . . pointing out which Kinds are consonant, and which are incompatible with one another; also whether there are certain Kinds that pervade them all and connect them so that they can blend . . .' (253b11-c2). The distinction between *γνώσις* and *ἐπιστήμη* promoted in the refutation of Socrates' dream in the *Theaetetus* marks the beginning of this important development in Plato's later epistemology.

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