Plato’s Epistemology as Empiricism

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Abstract: Given the extreme importance of Plato’s contributions to the foundation of contemporary Western thought, there are very few aspects of his philosophy that are unexamined and even fewer that are agreed upon universally. One exception to this rule concerns Plato’s epistemological views, namely that his theory of the Forms and divided reality constitute what would contemporarily be called a form of rationalism. It will be the goal of this essay to demonstrate the opposite of this belief, that Plato’s epistemology as expressed through the doctrine of recollection constitutes an empiricist view of knowledge.

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doctrines will be required. First and foremost is the need to explain that, while Plato may claim that perception is not equivalent to knowledge, this denial does not explicitly preclude his epistemology being empirical in its foundation. In order to do this, it will first be necessary to establish a more clear definition of empiricism.

The first account of empiricism will be that of John Locke, who outlined his epistemological views most clearly in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding. The first of Locke’s goals in his essay is to deny the existence of pre-existing ideas. He denies the presence of even the most basic tenants of logic as “not known to children, idiots, &c.” (Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding). The claim that children are devoid of innate ideas holds an interesting parallel to the demonstration of recollection in the Meno which will be examined later. In opposition to ideas and thoughts being present a priori, Locke offers the following account:

The steps by which the mind attains several truths. The senses at first let in particular ideas, and furnish the yet empty cabinet, and the mind by degrees growing familiar with some of them, they are lodged in the memory, and names got to them. Afterwards, the mind proceeding further, abstracts them, and by degrees learns the use of general names. In this manner the mind comes to be furnished with ideas and language, the materials about which to exercise its discursive faculty. And the use of reason becomes daily more visible, as these materials that give it employment increase. But though the having of general ideas and the use of general words and reason usually grow together, yet I see not how this any way proves them innate. The knowledge of some truths, I confess, is very early in the mind but in a way that shows them not to be innate. For, if we will observe, we shall find it still to be about ideas, not innate, but acquired; it being about those first which are imprinted by external things, with which infants have earliest to do, which make the most frequent impressions on their senses. In ideas thus got, the mind discovers that some agree and others differ, probably as soon as it has any use of memory; as soon as it is able to retain and perceive distinct ideas. But whether it be then or no, this is certain, it does so long before it has the use of words; or comes to that which we commonly call "the use of reason." For a child knows as certainly before it can speak the difference between the ideas of sweet and bitter (i.e. that sweet is not bitter), as it knows afterwards (when it comes to speak) that wormwood and sugarplums are not the same thing.  

Locke’s views on the nature of knowledge are centered on the use of reason to order the perceptions one gathers from sensory experience. The pivotal concepts in Locke’s views are contingent on the absence of universally acknowledged truths, which would seem to indicate that no knowledge could be present prior to experience. Ultimately, Plato’s epistemology will not meet Locke’s criteria for empiricism for this reason.

David Hume is considered to be the greatest of the “British” empiricists; his skeptical views concerning epistemology nearly single-handedly ended abstract enquiry until Immanuel Kant rebuilt the intellectual pursuit. Hume’s position represents empiricist epistemology taken to its logical extreme and should for this reason be the final criteria by which Plato’s views are be judged. Hume

3 ibid
begins with a distinction between what he finds to be the two forms of human thoughts, simple and complex. Simple ideas are formed from sense-impressions, the direct perceptions of our sensory faculties. From these simple ideas, we make more complicated combinations in our minds, but ultimately never escape the foundation of all forms of knowledge as derived from impressions. For Hume, contemporary metaphysical and epistemological pursuits fail because they are overly ambiguous and have alienated themselves from the sensory origin of human knowledge. A theory compatible with Hume’s criteria will need to return to having its basis in simple, rather than complex, ideas.

The key to understanding Plato’s epistemological views as empiricist is the doctrine of revelation, an argument which states that our souls are born into our bodies with pre-existing knowledge of the nature of the immaterial Forms. Plato argues that seemingly untaught instances of knowledge of absolutes like geometrical images and concepts like equality demonstrate their necessary pre-existence. In the *Meno*, Socrates briefly describes the doctrine of recollection. “And if the truth of all things always existed in the soul, then the soul is immortal. Wherefore be of good cheer, and try to recollect what you do not know, or rather what you do not remember” He proceeds to question a young boy who, although without any sort of education, is brought to see the validity of various geometrical deductions. Ultimately, the burden of recalling our knowledge of the Forms falls on our sensory experience under such a doctrine. Because the soul is unable to escape the body while it is still alive, the only way to reach a greater degree of recollection is through experience of imitations in the physical world. The argument is clarified to a greater degree in the *Phaedo*, wherein Plato uses the form of Equality to champion his argument. While we can see the manner in which a stick may be equal to another stick in number, we have never in this current life experienced equality independent of other physical objects. Furthermore, because there are in this life no instances of complete equality, even among the most similar physical objects, the doctrine of recollection claims that the only feasible source for this knowledge comes from knowledge of the Forms prior to physical experience.

It is now necessary to address the apparent difficulties with maintaining the stance articulated in the opening of this paper. A cursory examination of the doctrine of recollection would apparently indicate the opposing view, namely that it more closely resembles rationalist epistemology rather than it does empiricism. Because our acquaintance with the Forms, the ultimate source of knowledge, takes places before experience, the deductions made from sensory experience cannot be seen as the origin of true knowledge. In order to maintain consistency, the definition of empiricism used in this essay will need to establish experience from the soul as an equally dependable as that of our corporeal sensory faculties. The focus of this examination will therefore need to change to the manner in which the soul experiences the Forms and whether this can be deemed a form of observation.

Little is said concerning the relation between souls and the Forms in the Platonic canon; however, two such instances can be found in the *Republic*. The first and most recognizable of these is found in book seven, in the allegory of the cave. In the allegory, the philosopher is dragged up from the cave, thrust into the light of the surface and blinded upon his first seeing the sun. The surface is of course analogous to the world of the Forms and the sun to the form of the Good. Here

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it is apparent that the manner in which we experience the Forms is at least closely related to sensory observation. However, one may argue that the apparent ability to escape the cave would indicate that experiencing the Forms in this life is in fact possible. An immediate objection to the use of this example is that the allegory refers to the life of an individual rather than the transition between life and death (which is for the purposes of this essay the only time during which an individual can re-attain their knowledge of the Forms), and those returning to the cave are both aware of the Forms and aware of their awareness which is a very different set of circumstances than we see present in the original doctrine of recollection. This objection is easily resolved when taken in conjunction with Plato’s claim that no true philosopher has to this point ever agreed to take up the role of leader, i.e. return to the depths of the cave.8 Another favorable interpretation is that the “rough, steep path”9 is rather the life journey of a philosopher and it is only through the escape of the soul from the body that we are truly able to leave the cave of our ignorance. This would resolve both the issues of experiencing the immaterial Forms with the sensory faculties of the body as well as explain why there have been no instances of someone returning to the physical world with knowledge of the Forms. This interpretation, while significantly more pessimistic than the general tone of the Republic, provides a feasible explanation concerning an issue to which Plato’s immediate writings do not provide a satisfying answer.

The second instance supporting the soul’s empirical experience of the Forms is found in book ten, specifically within the myth of Er. While this story never explicitly recounts the soul’s experience of the Forms themselves, it does relate a soul’s journey through a series of empirical observations. An interesting passage may contain the closest description of the form of the Good:

Each group spent seven days in the meadow, and on the eighth they had to get up and go on a journey. On the fourth day of that journey, they came to a place where they could look down from above on a straight column of light that stretched over the while of heaven and earth, more like a rainbow than anything else, but brighter and more pure. After another day, they came to the light itself, and there, in the middle of the light, they saw the extremities of its bonds stretching from the heavens, for the light binds the heavens like cables girding a trireme and holds its entire revolution together.10

In the preceding description, it seems clear that the marvelous light described is the form of the Good, the force which holds the universe together. The inclusion of such a vivid description of what the form of the Good would look like seems to indicate that Plato understood the process of experiencing the Forms as very similar to the process literally described in the myth of Er.

In considering Plato’s conception of knowledge obtained before birth, it is necessary to return to Hume’s criteria for empirical knowledge. For Plato, the only source of knowledge is the Forms; all things experienced in the physical world constitute opinion.11 If one considers Plato’s Forms in terms of Hume’s simple ideas, Platonic empiricism appears to be logically consistent. Just as Humean complex ideas are formed on the basis of our knowledge of simple ideas, so too is the ordering and comprehension of our experience of the physical world dependent on our preexisting knowledge of the Forms in Platonic thought. The similarity of the two bases for knowledge shows

8 Ibid
9 Ibid
10 Ibid
11 Ibid
an adequate agreement between the two epistemologies to deem Platonic empiricism at least compatible with what has been decided to be Hume’s requirements for empiricism.

The other key difficulty in reconciling Platonism with Humeanism is in determining whether experience of the Forms can be considered sensory observation to a strict empiricist. Consider for example an individual who was completely unable to see, for a Humean skeptic, this individual would have no basis for assuming the reality of the visual world. If all the world were in this condition and one individual were to gain or recover the ability to see, there would be no objection on the side of empiricists to that individual’s determination of reality through the new-found sensory ability. This same principle can be applied to the ability of the soul to perceive the Forms; there is no empirical reason to deny the validity of a new or newly recollected form of sensory observation insomuch as it can be deemed to be sensory. Furthermore, because Humean empiricism disregards the importance of other individuals in determining validity of knowledge, the denial of or failure to recollect the Forms by any other person or group of people would have no bearing on whether knowledge of the Forms should or should not be trusted. Therefore, an individual who becomes cognizant of their prior experience of the Forms can, by Humean standards, feel assured of the empirical validity of their observations.

Finally, the most persuasive argument in viewing Plato’s epistemology as empiricist may stem from the role of the Form of the Good in shaping human reasoning. Concerning the role of the good in the act of knowledge, Plato states, “the objects of knowledge owe their being known to the Good, but their being is also due to it, although the Good is not being, but superior to it in rank and power.” Here we can plainly see that, according to Plato, it is through the Good that we are able to know other things; this creates an inconsistency between Platonic and traditional rationalist epistemology. For a rationalist, humans are innately endowed with the faculties of reason and through this faculty they are able to establish certain principles. For a Platonist, it is only after we experience the form of the Good that we are able to know anything else, making all knowledge dependent on the original experience of the form of the Good. As no knowledge can be acquired without prior experience, Plato’s epistemology cannot be called rationalist by nature and is consequently much more appropriately deemed empiricist in nature.

One important distinction to bear in mind in all interpretations of the doctrine of recollection is centered on the differing terms for “remembering” and “recollecting” in ancient Greek. In response to the theory concerning recollection in the Meno, Aristotle wrote an essay attempting to differentiate the terms for memory and recollection. Jacob Klein summarizes the distinction in his Commentary on Plato’s Meno:

Memories are about what happened in the Past. Thus we remember that and what we thought, learned, grasped immediately, heard and saw in the past. To remember is not to have a sense perception or a notion of something “right now,” but to have or to experience these as having been had or experienced in the past. Memories are time-laden… To remember something means to possess a more or less persistent image of that something as it happened or appeared in the past, comparable to a picture or an imprint made by a seal ring… On the other hand, to recollect something does not at all mean to have something “in one’s memory”; nor does it mean to reacquire the same memory of that something, nor even to acquire such a memory at all.

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12 Ibid
Here the difference between recollection and memory, particularly in regards to the Meno’s presentation of recollection, becomes critical. The nature of recollection does not have the same material implications of those of remembering, meaning that reasoning back to the necessity of empirical experience of the Forms is more difficult. In arguing from this differentiation, one could claim that the distinction between memory and recollection is sufficient evidence to infer that Plato’s epistemology is more based in rational deduction than empirical observation. While the distinction between the two terms confirm the differing nature of normal sensory observation and the soul’s interaction with the Forms, such a difference does not preclude the possibility of both being a form of experience or observation. Using the term recollecting does not speak to the nature of the process, but rather seeks to separate it from the process of remembering, a separation which is very much compatible with the thesis of this paper.

The objection still exists that a Platonic empiricism misses the entire essence of empirical epistemology, namely that something’s measurability corresponds to its truth value. In Plato’s works, there is not only nothing to suggest that anyone can find and measure the Forms but rather a stronger suggestion in the more self-critical works such as the Sophist and the Parmenides that it may be impossible for anyone to find the Forms in his or her life. It is for this reason that the expanded definition of empiricism presented to this point is being supported. Plato’s ideas are admittedly incompatible with strict empirical views; the application of the term’s validity is dependant entirely on one’s evaluation of the manner in which Plato relates the soul to the Forms in the time a soul spends between two human lives.

No collection of arguments involving interpretation of Plato’s dialogues can completely quell the qualms associated with describing an immaterial, immeasurable experience as empirical. Because the Forms exist beyond the physical realm, empiricists and Platonists would agree that there should be no union of the two ideologies. Additionally, as Plato was among the first devoted epistemologists in the history of philosophy, he would have been largely unconcerned by attempts to label his theories of knowledge. The distinction between empirical and rationalist epistemologies is more a byproduct of the importance of Enlightenment philosophers than of an actual use in creating a divide among theories of knowledge. However, referring to Plato’s epistemology as rationalist holds implications (discussed in this paper) which deviate from the theories Plato actually formulated. For this reason, it is more accurate and intellectually responsible to, if compelled, label Plato as a very unique empiricist.