

An Argument Against Sight-Lovers: Knowledge and Belief in *Republic V*

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In Book V of the *Republic* there is an argument that, depending on how it is read, has the power to completely undermine what Plato has for centuries been interpreted to believe about the nature of knowledge, reality, and education.¹ The traditional reading of this argument was first attacked by Gail Fine in 1978, and since then a number of other scholars have embraced this alternative interpretation as well.² This essay offers a critique of the alternative interpretation, demonstrating that it is neither a necessary nor a possible reading of the text, and then explores the implications this has for our understanding of Plato's philosophy in general and specifically of his philosophy of education.

At the end of Book V Plato outlines his theory of the Forms and then draws a distinction between philosophers and sight-lovers (*philothaemones*). These sight-lovers are able to see only beautiful things, Socrates argues, while philosophers are able to see and embrace the nature of the beautiful itself, that is, the Form of beauty. Socrates concludes that the thoughts of philosophers can be called knowledge while those of sight-lovers merely belief (476d4–5) and then constructs a lengthy argument at 476e7–479e9 to convince any objecting sight-lovers that this is in fact the case. The argument, in outline form, is as follows:

1. The person who knows knows something (476e7–9).
2. Something that is not cannot be known (477a1).
3. Therefore, by (1) and (2), the person who knows knows something that is (476e10–477a1).
4. What is completely is completely knowable, and what is in no way is in every way unknowable. In other words, knowledge is set over (*epi*) what is, while ignorance is set over what is not (477a2–5, 9–10).
5. If anything is such as to be and also not to be, it will be intermediate between what purely is and what in no way is (477a6–8).
6. Therefore, by (4) and (5), what is set over what is intermediate between what is and what is not, if there is such a thing,³ must be an intermediate between knowledge and ignorance (477a10–b2).
7. Belief and knowledge are two different powers (477b3–6; e3–478a1).
8. A power is distinguished by what it is set over and what it does such that what is set over the same things and does the same thing is the same power, while what is set over something different and does something different is a different power (477c8–d4).
9. Therefore, by (7) and (8), belief is set over one thing and knowledge over another, according to the power of each (477b7–8). Or again, each is by

nature set over something different and does something different (478a3–4).

10. Therefore, by (4) and (9), knowledge is set over what is, to know it as it is (478a6).

11. It follows from (9) that belief cannot believe the very thing that knowledge knows (478a10–b1).

12. Therefore, by (10) and (11), the believable must be something other than what is (478b2–4).

13. Someone who believes sets his belief over something, for it is impossible to believe nothing (478b6–8).

14. Therefore, by (12) and (13), someone's belief is set over neither what is nor what is not (478c6).

15. Therefore, by (4) and (14), belief is neither ignorance nor knowledge (478c8–9).

16. It follows from (15) that since belief is not clearer than knowledge nor darker than ignorance, it must therefore be intermediate between them (478c10–d4).

17. Therefore, by (6) and (16), belief is set over what is intermediate between what is and what is not (478d5–13).

18. Beautiful things both are and are not, for they participate in both opposites (479a5–c3).⁴

19. Therefore, by (5) and (18), beautiful things are intermediate between what is and what is not (479c4–d6).

20. Therefore, by (17) and (19), beautiful things are believable but not knowable (479d7–10).

21. It follows from (20) that the sight-lovers who study the many beautiful things but do not see the beautiful itself believe everything but have no knowledge of anything they believe (479d11–e5). Philosophers who study things that are always the same in every respect, however, by (3) and (17) know and do not believe (479e6–9).

The traditional interpretation of this argument has been that knowledge and belief are set over different kinds of objects and that the knowing and believing that take place are of the respective objects themselves. Francisco Gonzalez, for example, writes that the argument at the end of *Republic V* “appears to understand knowledge and belief as direct cognitive relations to objects and as restricted to certain *kinds* of objects.”⁵ Socrates is thus justified in claiming that philosophers have knowledge while sight-lovers only have beliefs, for the set of objects toward which philosophers directs their gaze is distinct from the set of objects that enamors sight-lovers. This interpretation has led most to accept that Plato espouses a “two worlds” theory in which knowable objects (Forms) belong to one world and believable objects (sensibles) belong to another.

Scholars such as Fine, however, reject this two worlds interpretation by arguing that knowledge and belief in Socrates' argument are not of objects but of the content of propositions and that there are not distinct contents over which knowledge and belief are set. Fundamentally this alternative interpretation rests on the widely recognized ambiguity of the Greek verb "to be." While *eimi* can be taken in an existential sense, as the traditional reading assumes, it can also be predicative or veridical in meaning.⁶ Proponents of the alternative interpretation embrace the veridical reading on which, for example, (4) can be read as meaning not that knowledge is set over what *exists* (the existential reading) nor over what is *F*, where *F* is some particular property (the predicative reading), but rather over what is *true*. The conclusion Socrates draws in (17) is similarly read as meaning that belief is set over what is intermediate between what is true and what is false, not between what exists and what does not exist or between what is *F* and what is not *F* (*KBRV*, 123–6).⁷

On this veridical reading, then, Socrates' view of knowledge in (1) through (3) is that the knowledge of the person who knows has some *content* and that this content is something that is *true*. In other words, knowledge is by definition of true propositions such that knowledge entails truth (*KBRV*, 124). The distinction between knowledge and belief is therefore not that they are set over distinct sets of objects as the traditional interpretation maintains, for "although knowledge and belief differ in their truth implications, the claims that are known or believed can be directed to the same objects" (*KBRV*, 125–6).

When she gets to (17), however, Fine is faced with a problem. Here Socrates states that belief is set over what is intermediate between what is and what is not. Read in the veridical sense this seems to imply that the propositions over which belief is set are neither true nor false but have a truth value somewhere in between. Fine rejects this "degrees of truth" reading, however, and argues that what Socrates means is that the propositions of belief are *disjunctively* true and false. That is to say, the set of propositions over which belief is set contains both true and false members. This interpretation allows Fine to avoid the unintuitive result that the content of knowledge and belief are irreducibly different — unintuitive because on the degrees of truth reading (as on the traditional existential reading) the same proposition cannot be the object both of one person's belief and of another person's knowledge (*KBRV*, 126). Fine thus concludes "knowledge and belief are distinguished not by their different sets of objects, but by their truth implications. Knowledge, but not belief, entails truth" (*KBRV*, 139). On this reading the two worlds theory commonly attributed to Plato is therefore completely undermined, for there is no distinction between the content of the propositions over which knowledge and belief are set. Both knowledge and belief can be set over propositions about either Forms or sensible objects.

According to proponents of this alternative interpretation there are two key reasons why the veridical reading is preferable. The first is based on what is called the principle of noncontroversiality or the dialectical requirement. This principle, simply put, is that an argument should use only noncontroversial premises that the

interlocutors accept (*KBRV*, 123).⁸ Before he begins the argument Socrates tells Glaucon to answer on behalf of the sight-lovers, and thus Socrates clearly intends his argument to rest on premises that the sight-lovers would accept.⁹ We cannot, therefore, read Socrates as intending the existential sense of *eimi*, for taken in this way his argument assumes different degrees of existence — an assumption the sight-lovers clearly reject. That is to say, on the existential reading the objects of knowledge are the Forms, but at 476c2–4 we are explicitly told that the sight-lovers do not believe in the Forms. The objects of belief are similarly consigned to the realm of the “half-existent” on the existential reading, but the existence of such a realm is contingent on the degrees of reality distinction between Forms and sensible objects which would not be acceptable to the sight-lovers. On the veridical reading, however, the sight-lovers are merely committed to accepting the uncontroversial assumption that “knowledge is of what is true, that belief is of what is and is not true, and that ignorance is of what is false” (*KBRV*, 125).¹⁰ Thus only the veridical reading provides Socrates with an argument that does not violate the dialectical requirement and would be convincing to his supposed interlocutors.

The second argument for the superiority of the alternative interpretation is that Socrates’ argument is valid only if it is taken in the veridical sense. Fine argues that there are logical fallacies throughout Plato’s argument when taken in the existential sense that can be avoided by the veridical reading. For instance, Fine contends that the statement in (7) that belief and knowledge are two different powers is an invalid inference made from (8). Plato’s assumption is that because knowledge and belief do different things they must also be set over different things, and this is what allows him to assert that knowledge and belief are different powers. Such reasoning is invalid on the existential reading, for certain powers such as husbandry and butchery may do different things yet be set over the same set of objects (*KBRV*, 128). The reasoning is valid, however, if we read “set over” not as ranging only over objects but also over contents. On this reading Socrates’ reasoning that if knowledge and belief do different things they are also set over different things simply means that when one knows one knows a piece of knowledge and when one believes one believes a belief (*KBRV*, 129). Thus according to proponents of the alternative interpretation the veridical reading is preferable because only it can preserve the validity of Socrates’ argument and not violate the principle of noncontroversiality. Although this alternative reading implies a rejection of the two worlds theory traditionally held to be a central aspect of Plato’s philosophy, Fine simply concludes that, “The price of ascribing to Plato a valid argument whose premises are noncontroversial is the loss of the two worlds theory. It is a price I am quite willing to pay” (*KBRV*, 139).

Despite whatever power of persuasion these arguments have, I do not think either of them provides a compelling reason to accept the alternative interpretation as superior to the traditional one. With regard to the dialectical requirement, Fine’s objection is that the sight-lovers would have no reason to “agree at the outset that every object of belief only half-exists.”¹¹ Socrates’ statement about that over which belief is set is not a premise at the outset of the argument, however, but is drawn by

Socrates as a conclusion in (17). Furthermore, the only premises he needs to draw this conclusion are (4), (5), (7), (8), and (13), and none of these posit the half-existence of the objects of belief. (5) does mention that which is intermediate between what is and what is not, but not in a way such that acceptance of the premise entails acceptance of the existence of such a thing. As Gonzalez points out, the conclusion that is immediately drawn in (6) does not assume that in fact there is anything either between knowledge and ignorance or between existence and nonexistence. All it asserts is that “*if there is something between being and nonbeing and if there is something between knowledge and ignorance, the latter must be set over the former.*”¹² There is therefore no reason to think that the sight-lovers would object to any of the premises needed to draw the conclusion that belief is set over what is intermediate between what is and what is not. Fine’s application of the principle of noncontroversiality, then, is illegitimate, for the requirement is only that the interlocutors accept the premises of the argument, not that they agree with what follows from those premises. The fact that the sight-lovers would not look favorably upon the conclusions Socrates draws is irrelevant. Socrates would expect this, in fact, for the whole point of the argument is to prove to them that they do not have true knowledge but only belief.

The second argument in favor of the alternative interpretation is based on making the argument valid, but here Fine gravely misreads the flow of Socrates’ reasoning. Her argument rests on the claim that (7) is an invalid inference from (8), but in fact Socrates never intends (7) to follow from (8) nor does he need it to do so. (7) is simply stated at 477b3–6, and from this single premise (9) is immediately drawn as a conclusion at 477b7–8. Socrates goes on to infer (10) at 477b10 and then realizes that something has been left out. At this point he acknowledges that before drawing (10) as a conclusion “*first maybe we’d better be a bit more explicit*” (477b11), and he thus goes back and gives his analysis of powers at 477c1–d4. After explaining the powers in (8) he then restates (7) at 477e3–478a1 and draws the same conclusion he has already drawn,¹³ and there is therefore no basis for Fine’s claim that Socrates’ first statement of (7) must be an inference from what he subsequently says in (8). Thus the alternative interpretation fails to conclusively demonstrate, either by means of the dialectical requirement or by an appeal to validity, that the veridical reading should be preferred over the traditional existential interpretation.

While in the foregoing I have argued that the alternative interpretation is not necessitated by the text, I further wish to argue that it is not a possible reading of the text. I will demonstrate this first by exploring some of the conclusions that follow if the alternative interpretation is correct and then by analyzing the purpose of the argument given the context in which it takes place.

Simply put, the veridical reading commits Socrates to conclusions that are both clearly false and contradictory. For instance, if by “*what is*” Socrates means only to refer to true propositions, then he seems to suggest at 476e7–477a1 that only true propositions are something. Similarly, on this reading it clearly follows from 478b11–c1 that false propositions are nothing.¹⁴ Such conclusions, however, are patently false. Furthermore, if Socrates’ assertion at 478b5 that it is impossible to

believe what is not is taken in the veridical sense, it stands in direct contradiction to the distinction drawn throughout the argument between knowledge and belief. That is to say, on the veridical reading the statement that it is impossible to believe what is not means that it is impossible to believe what is not true, and it follows from this that the set of objects over which belief is set can contain only true propositions. *Per* the veridical reading, however, knowledge is distinguished from belief precisely because knowledge is only of true propositions while belief is of both true and false propositions.¹⁵ Thus the veridical reading leads not only to obviously false conclusions but also to a blatant contradiction of the central point of the entire argument: the difference between knowledge and belief.

A second reason why the veridical reading is not possible is the purpose of the argument given its context. In Book V Socrates argues that the type of city he has described will come about only when rule is given to philosophers, and he then sets out to demonstrate why this is so by defining what a true philosopher is. At 475d1–e1 Glaucon points out that based on the definition Socrates has given, the sight-lovers also count as philosophers, and Socrates then attempts to show why these two groups are different. The key distinction, he argues, is that “The lovers of sights and sounds like beautiful sounds, colors, shapes, and everything fashioned out of them, but their thought is unable to see and embrace the nature of the beautiful itself... In fact, there are very few people who would be able to reach the beautiful itself and see it by itself” (476b3–8) The problem that Socrates then faces is what to do with a sight-lover who “believes in beautiful things, but doesn’t believe in the beautiful itself,” and the purpose of the argument in question is to convince such a person that he has belief but not knowledge (476c2–3).

The key point is that the context of the argument has to do with different *objects* to which philosophers and sight-lovers turn their attention and the unwillingness of sight-lovers to acknowledge the *existence* of a realm of objects beyond their beautiful things. The contrast Socrates draws is between the beautiful in itself and a beautiful thing, never between a proposition that is true and one that is false. Indeed, if the debate were about propositions, there is nothing said previous to the argument itself that would give sight-lovers and philosophers reason not to be in complete agreement that all known propositions are true. Socrates needs to construct an argument, however, precisely because the sight-lovers deny “the distinguishable *existence* of ‘the beautiful itself’ and of ‘beauty itself,’ not the *truth* of any proposition or predication.”¹⁶ Dirk Baltzly correctly argues that Fine’s version of the division between the objects over which knowledge and belief are set over is “too weak to be consistent with Plato’s imagery and with the normative purpose of the Book V argument.”¹⁷ A similar conclusion is drawn by Michael Stokes who contends that proponents of the alternative interpretation “have paid insufficient attention to the precise context in which the argument with Glaucon as sight-lover lies embedded. The context deals with existence.”¹⁸ Once this context is recognized it becomes evident that Socrates’ argument makes sense only when taken existentially, and thus the alternative interpretation is simply not a possible reading of the text.

Having shown the alternative interpretation to be neither a necessary nor possible reading of Socrates' argument, I now wish to address the implications this argument has for our understanding of Plato's philosophy in general and specifically of his philosophy of education. It is first of all imperative for us to recognize that this argument has momentous consequences that go far beyond the end of Book V. If the alternative interpretation is correct, then we must completely rethink how we conceive of Plato's epistemology and metaphysics presented in Books VI and VII as well. His famous metaphor of the sun, allegory of the cave, and metaphor of the divided line, for instance, must be completely rethought, for the traditional interpretation of these images rests squarely on the two worlds theory and the assumption that the objects of knowledge are distinct from those of belief. Fine recognizes these far-reaching implications and in fact does try to reinterpret Plato's sun, cave, and divided line in terms of her veridical reading.¹⁹ Although I do not find her reinterpretations persuasive, it is of paramount importance to recognize that there is much more at stake in this debate than a few minor technicalities about how we understand Socrates' argument against the sight-lovers. Rather our entire understanding of Plato's epistemology and metaphysics in the *Republic* hinges on this argument, and thus it is essential for a correct reading of Plato in general to correctly interpret what this argument means.

It is perhaps with regard to the allegory of the cave that these implications for the philosophy of education in particular become most evident. In his explanation of the allegory of the cave Socrates argues that to truly learn the whole soul must turn around from darkness to the study of the brightest thing that is, the Form of the good (518c3–d1). From this he concludes at 518d3–7 that

Education is the craft concerned with doing this very thing, this turning around, and with how the soul can most easily and effectively be made to do it. It isn't the craft of putting sight into the soul. Education takes for granted that sight is there but that it isn't turned the right way or looking where it ought to look, and it tries to redirect it appropriately.

On the traditional interpretation, the educator's goal is thus to help students turn their gaze from one set of objects to another. Like the prisoners who are bound in the cave, students are capable of seeing only shadows, and the educator's task is to turn them around and guide them toward an experience with something that is true and real. This is why at 519b6 Plato defines the uneducated simply as those who "have no experience of truth." In other words, to be uneducated is to have experienced only the set of objects over which belief is set, while to be educated is to have experienced a different set of objects that can be known. After experiencing the Forms, the freed prisoner is able to reenter the cave and correctly appraise as mere shadows the images on the wall. As Socrates says at 520c4–6, "Because you've seen the truth about fine, just, and good things, you'll know each image for what it is and also that of which it is the image." Experience with a new set of objects thus enables the educated person to understand the old sights he used to love for what they really are: mere illusions of reality.

On the alternative interpretation, however, the allegory of the cave describes education quite differently. The key difference between a bound prisoner and one

who has turned around and left the cave is not that a new set of objects has been experienced but rather that the person is now able to distinguish between what appears to be true and what really is so.²⁰ Thus the difference between an educated and uneducated person is not that the former has become acquainted with a set of objects that the latter has not but rather that the former recognizes which of the latter's beliefs are true and which are false. The educator's task, then, is not primarily to show students that there is "something more" out there that they have not yet experienced and of which they can have true knowledge but rather to help them distinguish between true and false propositions so that the content of their current beliefs can be purged of all falsehood and hence become knowledge. Socrates' description of education as the craft concerned with "turning around" should therefore not be interpreted in terms of reorientation toward a new set of objects but rather reorientation toward a standard that allows previously held beliefs to be more accurately assessed for their truth or falsity.

It is therefore clear that our interpretation of the argument in Book V has a drastic effect on how we understand Plato's philosophy in general and specifically his philosophy of education as presented in the allegory of the cave. I have argued that the traditional reading of the argument against the sight-lovers is preferable to the alternative interpretation, and it therefore follows that the traditional interpretation of Plato's epistemology, metaphysics, and educational philosophy should be maintained as well. It is imperative, however, that any analysis of Plato's views on knowledge, reality, or education pay careful attention to this argument against the sight-lovers at the end of Book V, for it is on this argument that our interpretation of these philosophical issues depends.

1. Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1992). This work will be cited parenthetically in the text for all subsequent references.

2. See Gail Fine, "Knowledge and Belief in *Republic V*," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 60 (1978): 121–39. This work will be cited as *KBRV* in the text for all subsequent references. In this essay I will focus on the arguments for the alternative interpretation made by Fine, though there are others who argue for various forms of the alternative interpretation as well. See, for example, Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's "Republic"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 190–216; J.C. Gosling, "Doxa and Dunamis in Plato's *Republic*," *Phronesis* 13 (1968): 119–30.

3. That is, if there is a thing that is intermediate between what is and what is not.

4. Socrates' point is that any particular thing appears both beautiful in a way and ugly in a way, and thus we can rightly say both that it is beautiful and that it is not. In a similar fashion a thing can be both big and small, heavy and light, and so on.

5. Francisco J. Gonzalez, "Propositions or Objects? A Critique of Gail Fine on Knowledge and Belief in *Republic V*," *Phronesis* 41, no. 3 (1996), 245 (emphasis in original).

6. I do not know a single defender of either the traditional or alternative interpretation who does not recognize this ambiguity. For a general discussion of *eimi*, see Charles H. Kahn, *The Verb "Be" in Ancient Greek* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1973).

7. It should be noted that the debate is usually centered between the existential and veridical readings. The propositional reading is generally taken to be compatible with the traditional interpretation but incompatible with the alternative interpretation.

8. See contrast, Gosling, "Doxa and Dunamis," 120–2.

9. Gosling, "*Doxa and Dunamis*," 120.
10. See contrast, Gosling, "*Doxa and Dunamis*," 120–1.
11. Gail Fine, "Knowledge and Belief in *Republic V–VII*," in *Epistemology*, ed. Stephen Everson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 89.
12. Gonzalez, "Propositions or Objects," 250 (emphasis in original).
13. See contrast, 477b7–8 and 478a3–4.
14. Gonzalez, "Propositions or Objects," 263.
15. *Ibid.*, 269–70.
16. Michael C. Stokes, "Plato and the Sightlovers of the *Republic*," *Apeiron* 25, no. 4 (1992), 110 (emphasis in original).
17. Dirk Baltzly, "Knowledge and Belief in *Republic V*," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 79 (1997), 266.
18. Stokes, "Plato and the Sightlovers," 111.
19. Fine, "Knowledge and Belief in *Republic V–VII*," 95–115.
20. *Ibid.*, 99–100.