The Origin of the Concept of Knowledge
Book Précis

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The idea that Plato and Aristotle analyzed knowledge, in the sense still discussed by modern-day epistemologists, enjoys wide acceptance among both scholars of ancient philosophy and contemporary theorists. I think that this idea is mistaken. To be sure, Plato and Aristotle were interested in epistemology, and presented theories of an important epistemic concept, which they labeled '*epistêmê*.' But, in doing so, they characterized what they took to be an optimal or ideal epistemic state. They engaged, that is, in what Robert Pasnau recently labeled 'idealized epistemology,' according to which one "first [describes] the epistemic ideal that human beings might hope to achieve, and then go[es] on to chart the various ways in which we ordinarily fall off from that ideal" (2013, 987).[1] Although several recent scholars have argued that Plato and Aristotle were not principally interested in knowledge in the modern sense, little work has been done to determine when and how knowledge became a focus of philosophical concern in the western tradition. The central claim of *The Origin of the Concept of Knowledge* is that this occurred in the work of the Stoics and, in particular, in their discussions of *katalêpsis* (standardly translated as "cognition").

Knowledge emerged as an object of philosophical study through a process that had two broad stages. First Aristotle, building on ideas in Plato, introduced the concept of belief into philosophical discourse;[2] then the Stoics, reflecting on the norms that govern belief formation and possession, introduced the generic notion of a thinker's being non-accidentally in touch with what is the case or what is true, which, I argue, is at the core of the notion of knowledge. I elaborate on each stage in turn.

Although most interpreters and translators think that the notion of belief is already present in Plato's use of the Greek term '*doxa*,' this is mistaken. In most of

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[1] I propose this interpretation of *epistêmê* in Plato in "Understanding *Epistêmê* in Plato's *Republic*" (*Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 2016) and defend it in "Plato's Ideal Epistemology" (to appear in *Ancient Philosophy for Now*, edited by Stephen Hetherington and Nicholas Smith).

[2] I present the fundamentals of this stage in "The Birth of Belief" (with Jessica Moss, forthcoming in the *Journal of the History of Philosophy*).

his dialogues, Plato's two central epistemic concepts—*doxa* and *epistêmê*—are distinguished by their objects: *doxa* can only be had of concrete, perceptible objects (e.g. the trees and people around us); *epistêmê* can only be had of abstract, intelligible objects (e.g. mathematics and Plato's Forms).[3] Crucially, there Plato does not employ a third concept that captures the generic notion of "taking something to be the case" or "taking something to be true," which would be common to both *doxa* and *epistêmê*. This generic notion is precisely what the concept of belief captures. In the *Theaetetus*, however, Plato arguably moves closer to articulating the generic notion of belief, exploring the possibility that *epistêmê* just is *doxa* plus certain other features. However, his use of '*doxa*' to denote something that might be *entailed* by *epistêmê* leaves ample room for confusion, as this is the label he uses elsewhere for a state that *excludes epistêmê*.

Aristotle clears up this confusion by isolating the generic notion of belief as such under the label '*hupolêpsis*,' reserving the name '*doxa*' for an inferior species thereof. Although *hupolêpsis* is standardly taken to approximate the notion of supposition, I argue that *hupolêpsis*, unlike supposition but like belief, requires commitment to the truth of something (i.e. we can suppose, but cannot have a *hupolêpsis* or belief, without thinking that something is true). Because Aristotle conceives of *hupolêpsis* in this way, he uses the notion, as philosophers use the notion of belief today, to characterize other cognitive states: *epistêmê*, for example, is *hupolêpsis* in an unprovable but necessary proposition and *doxa* is *hupolêpsis* in an unprovable but contingent proposition. Thus, Aristotle is the first thinker in the western tradition who clearly employs a generic concept that both shares an essential feature with, and plays an analogous theoretical role to, the notion of belief. As the characterizations of *epistêmê* and *doxa* illustrate, however, Aristotle thought that the interesting distinctions to draw among beliefs correspond to the different objects they can take, rather than to better and worse ways of taking something to be true as such.

The Stoics, however, did focus on the notion of belief as such, investigating its distinctive epistemic, logical, psychological, and ethical roles and, importantly, the norms that govern belief formation and possession as such. Since the Stoics focused on the generic state of taking something to be true, the norms they attempted to uncover were those that, when met, would yield a non-accidental connection between a thinker's taking something to be true and that thing's being true. According to the Stoics, the state one is in when one has a well-formed belief is *katalêpsis*, and one can be in that state regarding any object whatsoever. Thus, the Stoics distinguished

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[3]Aristotle shares this understanding of the distinction between *doxa* and *epistêmê* (although the objectual divide for him is between contingent and necessary matters) and explicitly says that *doxa* and *epistêmê* exclude each other (see *Posterior Analytics*, 1.33).

between beliefs based primarily on how they arise, rather than according to their objects. A crucial contrast between this Stoic project and the idealizing projects of Plato and Aristotle is that the Stoics take the neutral notion of belief as fundamental and seek to determine the threshold that beliefs must meet to be well-formed. The resulting Stoic view of the relationship between *hupolêpsis* and *katalêpsis* is much more similar to modern views of the relationship between belief and knowledge than anything we find in Plato or Aristotle.

This understanding of the origin of the concept of knowledge as an object of philosophical study also allows us to understand better why philosophical skepticism only becomes a robust movement in the time of the Stoics (and not for the flat-footed reason that skepticism is usually taken to threaten *knowledge*).[4] Since Plato and Aristotle characterized an ideal state, the skeptical charge that human beings cannot achieve that state is not particularly threatening since it can still serve a regulative function (just as we might think that a perfectly just society is impossible, but that a society is better off the closer it approximates the ideal of justice). Since the Stoics, however, try to determine the *minimal* threshold beliefs (*hupolêpseis*) must meet to be well-formed, the objection that even that minimal threshold cannot be met must be refuted. Thus, whereas many ancient scholars and contemporary theorists argue that knowledge became a focus of philosophical study in response to skepticism (see, e.g. Moravcsik (1979) and Zagzebski (2001)), I argue that skepticism became a philosophical concern in response to the focus on knowledge. Over the course of the ensuing debate between the Stoics and Academic Skeptics, we see the contours of the debate over infallibilist vs. fallibilist conceptions of knowledge, still alive today, as they first took shape.[5] Thus, by understanding the process through which knowledge became a topic of philosophical study, we can better appreciate what is at stake in debates over its nature.

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[4]I discuss skeptical attacks on Stoic epistemology in "Skepticism, Belief, and the Criterion of Truth" (*Apeiron*, 2013).

[5]Some philosophers have declared this debate over, with fallibilism the unanimous winner (see, e.g., Stewart Cohen, "[t]he acceptance of fallibilism in epistemology is virtually universal" (1998, 91) and Michael Williams, "[w]e are all fallibilists nowadays" (2001, 5)). Whether these philosophers are correct or not, the important point is that they are declaring (*de re*, not *de dicto*) fallibilism the correct conception of the notion first analyzed by the Stoics; they are not declaring fallibilism the correct conception of any notion analyzed by Plato or Aristotle.

References

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