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***PLATONE NEL
PENSIERO MODERNO
E CONTEMPORANEO
Vol. VIII***

a cura di
Andrea Muni

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PLATO AND ANALYTIC EPISTEMOLOGY. HAS PLATO BEEN SET ASIDE? GIANGIUSEPPE PILI

I. INTRODUCTION

Analytic epistemology is a wide branch of analytic philosophy. I will consider analytic epistemology (from now only ‘epistemology’) as distinct from the wider ‘epistemological research’ either philosophical or not.¹ Indeed, the word ‘epistemology’ is a label for many different philosophical researches. The word itself is used in so many ways and in so different contexts that I cannot take them all into account. In addition, analytic philosophy is best investigated in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, where epistemology is a part of everyday language in the philosophical studies about knowledge and its related problems.

Epistemological theories share some goals; we can summarize them as follows:

- (a) They try to define knowledge and epistemic justification;
- (b) They reply to the skeptical challenges;
- (c) They provide some reasons to think about the value of knowledge as exceeding the value of true belief (true opinion) and also the value of justified true belief;
- (d) They attempt to define and to explain how knowledge and true beliefs spread in the social space.

Contemporary analytic epistemology consider also many other problems besides (a-d). These are just the major and most shared challenges. We can divide the list in two subsets: problems (a-c) and problem (d). Individual epistemology attempts to answer to problems (a-c), while social epistemology tries to solve problem (d).

¹ In particular, I distinguish epistemology from philosophy of science, a misunderstanding quite common in Italy.

Individual epistemology is bound to analyze knowledge from a first person perspective. What are the conditions under which we can ascribe knowledge to a cognitive subject? Can we establish a set of principles to treat epistemic rationality, i.e. under what constraints is a subject considered rational in his belief? Why is knowledge better than true belief and in which proportion?

Social epistemology is a far more recent subcategory of epistemology, although it is growing at a rapid pace. Its purpose is to fill up the gap in the analysis of knowledge in social contexts. In fact, historically, epistemology has constrained itself in the individual approach, inherited by the classic modern philosophy, started by Descartes and followed by the fathers of analytic epistemology like Bertrand Russell, Alfred Ayer, Roderick Chisholm etc.. In addition, the fathers of epistemology shared some of the assumptions of the analytic philosophy, one of which was the refusal of the hegemony and the neo-idealism. For these historical reasons, analytic epistemology was focused on the individual agents.

(a-d) are the most studied puzzles (we will see why in Par. 2) and the epistemological accounts have to consider them *at least* to be evaluated as good theories. I want to limit my attention just to (a), (c) and (d) problems for two reasons: (1) they are the classic challenges treated in the literature and all philosophical analytical theories have to consider them sufficiently. (2) They are all Plato's topics. Thus, I will not consider (b). Indeed, Pyrrho, who tried to challenge both Aristotle and Plato, expresses the major skeptical arguments. Pyrrho was not the only one who proposed skeptical arguments, but in the literature his arguments are considered far more than all the others (for a detailed discussion on the skeptical literature and replies, see Floridi (1996)).

II. THE PUZZLES IN CONTEMPORARY EPISTEMOLOGY AND PLATO'S INHERITANCE

Some influential epistemologists started their analysis quoting Plato. Roderick Chisholm (Chisholm (1966)) quoted Plato's *Meno* and *Taethetus* and he analyzed briefly the (a) problem. In fact, Chisholm wrote that Plato was the first who considered the problem of

knowledge, i.e. Plato distinguished true belief (true opinion) from knowledge (Chisholm (1966) p. 11). In addition, Chisholm seemed to consider Plato's quotation as a formulation of a puzzle: What do we have to add to true belief to consider it as knowledge? This question is the starting point of the analytic epistemology or, more precisely, it is considered as such. Any answer to this simple question brings further discussions and the strategies adopted to attempt to solve the puzzle differentiate the epistemological theories (for an introduction to this theme Steup (2005), Pili (2012)).

Edmund Gettier's paper, *Is justified true belief knowledge?* (Gettier (1963)), is one of the most influential and quoted essays of all times in epistemology. It bares the platonic inheritance in the title. However, Gettier considers this thesis, i.e. the puzzle of the definition of knowledge and his platonic inheritance, just in the first footnote: "Plato seems to be considering some such definition at *Theaetetus* 201, and perhaps accepting one at *Meno* 98." (Gettier (1963), p. 123). This is a symptom of the fact that the connection between Plato's theories (cfr. Par. 3) of knowledge and the new formulations of them are not so obvious, at least.

If Chisholm and Gettier's works are considered as two classics of the field, philosophers of the recent literature keep on quoting Plato's works. This is true in particular in some introductory books (Fumerton (2006), Pritchard (2006), Audi (1998)). These works devolve few words to Plato's theory of knowledge, because they just consider that the conundrum of the definition of knowledge appeared in Plato's works. Silence descended upon Plato's own position. Richard Fumerton, Duncan Pritchard, Robert Audi recall Plato's puzzle about the definition of knowledge, i.e. the (a) problem, in the sections devoted to the distinction between true belief (true opinion) and knowledge. This is not a matter of chance. It is a sign of the fact that the formulation of the problem carries Plato's inheritance *also in didactic contents*. This general recall to Plato tends to be implicit in other papers, because nowadays it is considered as part of the epistemological common sense: epistemology started with Plato's puzzle.

Now it is time to turn our attention to the (c) problem: Why is knowledge more valuable than true belief? The puzzle here is different from (a). Indeed, the problem of the value of knowledge is definitely

more recent than (a). A good answer to (a) does not necessary apply also to (c). For example, some sharp critics to the process reliabilist theory (cfr. Par. 5)² underline that reliabilism is able to answer to (a) but not (c). Indeed, the theories about the definition of knowledge often require a detailed analysis of epistemic justification, i.e. the definition of epistemic rationality for beliefs. This is not necessary the case of (c). The conundrum here is to find out a good explanation and evaluation of knowledge vs true belief: is knowledge always better than true belief?

It is important to focus the attention on the fact that we do not want a practical evaluation, i.e. a utilitarian explanation. For example, an account that considers knowledge better than true belief for practical reasons fails from an epistemological point of view: It does not explain to us why knowledge is epistemically desirable, at least why it is more desirable than true belief. (c) is not a practical problem, but a theoretical one and we want an account that explains the evaluative gap between knowledge and true belief: What is the characteristic that we have to add to true belief to be as good as knowledge? The theories have to constrain their answers to their general approach, e.g. an evidentialist account (cfr. Par. 5) has to solve the problem in terms of evidence, i.e. knowledge is better than true belief because it is, at least, true belief plus evidence and this evidence adds an epistemic value to the belief sustained by it.

Also the (c) puzzle owes its origin to Plato. In fact, some of the most influential epistemologists as Alvin Goldman (Goldman and Olsson (2009)), Ernest Sosa (Sosa (2011)), Jonathan Kvanving (Kvanving (2003)), and John Greco (Greco (2010)) consider Plato's *Taethetus* as the origin of the problem. It is interesting to observe that the passages quoted are the same to those that introduce the conundrum about the difference between knowledge and true belief. Thus, (a) and (c) problems start with the same quotations from Plato's work. As saw above, the two problems are really quite different; nevertheless, epistemologists agree that they share the same origin. They change the interpretation of

² Roughly, the process reliabilism theory states that a belief is justified if and only if the belief is formed by a cognitive process and this process is reliable. A process is reliable only if it tends to form more true beliefs than false.

the quoted passages, but they use them to fix the two different puzzles in different contexts.

Finally, I want to consider the third problem (d): social epistemological theories attempt to define and to explain how knowledge and true beliefs spread in the social space. Social epistemology is a recent subset of epistemology and there is not a diversification of schools of thought as in the individual epistemology. It is not just a matter of diversification. Indeed, we do not have monographies about that: we just have papers or collective works – but we do have two monographies about social epistemology (Fuller (1988), Goldman (1999)). Finally, we do not have solid and exhaustive theories about knowledge in social contexts. The most influential theory is still Alvin Goldman's veristic approach (Goldman (1987, 1999, 2012)).

Alvin Goldman founded the social epistemology and formulated the first part of his project as an account that tries to explain and to evaluate societies in their capacity to form and spread knowledge in the social space. Goldman considers some interesting problems about knowledge in social contexts. Roughly, he defines a virtuous epistemic organization one that is able to form and spread knowledge or, at least, true beliefs in the social space. However, he reconsidered his theory (Goldman (2012)) to take into account the problems of privacy and some other constraints that bound societies from epistemological point of view. For example, in times of war, we want to protect our society from certain types of threats rather than exposing it to them by sharing sensible information. Thus, there are epistemic virtuous societies *because* they do not spread knowledge in the other part of social space. Plato explicitly stated this problem in his *Republic*. Karl Popper (Popper (1945)) quoted the passage (*Republic* 475e); nevertheless, the social epistemologists do not know it. I reported the passage to claim the fact that Plato's stated the problem first (Pili (2015), Part II, Cap. 2). Although it is not considered as such, Plato is the first philosopher that spoke about social epistemology and he did it in a quite clear and coherent way. This fact is still ignored.

III. WHAT ABOUT THE PLATO'S EPISTEMOLOGY?

I want to consider three possible interpretations of Plato's epistemology. I cannot complete the analysis on Plato's position for some reasons: (I) it is too wide; (II) it is too controversial, i.e. there are too many alternative interpretations of it; (III) it is not necessary related to our themes. Nevertheless, it is important to consider what Plato thought about knowledge. Here a synthesis:

- (1) Human knowledge is the grasping of ideas.
- (2) Knowledge is the transitory result of a way of knowing.
- (3) Knowledge is the consequence of the apprehension of beauty.³

I want to reformulate (1-3) in order to clarify their contents. I will try to do so in an analytic fashion, to make Plato's proposals comprehensible also to the analytic epistemologists. (1) A subject *S* knows a proposition *p* if and only if *S* grasps the idea *I* of the objects of the proposition *p*. For example, I know that "A table is round" only if I grasp the ideas of wood and rotundity (*sub condizione* that the table has just these two ideas to be understood). This formulation tries to take in the account the fact that knowing something implies grasping the ideas that correspond to that thing. We can briefly define an idea as a model of an object, which is not determined by causal chains, it is not a cognitive subject's state of mind and it is not part of our world.

(2) A subject *S* forms a belief *p* and *p* stands for knowledge only if *p* was formed by a good way of knowing, i.e. *S* formed *p* through a dialectic process. A dialectic process is the public discussion of a thesis or a philosophical theme and it considers all the alternative possibilities

³ There is also another possible formulation of (3). (3b) Knowledge is the consequence of the apprehension of the idea of right. Federico Croci suggested this to me. He is right, but this is not so important here because the "idea of right" is the most important idea of all, but at the same time it's just a peculiar idea. Thus, I can consider it as a special case of (1). In addition, if somebody can doubt this possible reduction, then it's easy to reformulate (3) by adding or substituting beauty with rightness. Nevertheless, I think that it's plausible to consider the idea of right as part of (1). Finally, I don't want to endorse a particular interpretation of Plato's proposal. I am constrained only to a rational reconstruction. I am still open to possible alternatives. I want to thank Federico for this remarkable consideration.

and controversial argumentations. The dialectic process has the shape of a public discussion. In many dialogues (the aporetic ones) Plato seems to consider (2) more important than (1) because the dialectical process is a work in progress and a non-definitive way to grasp knowledge. More precisely, the way of knowing is far more important than the intermediate steps and, maybe also of the final results. In fact, even if Plato seems to deny the possibility of a definitive knowledge in some places, it seems plausible to consider the dialectical process as a sufficiently safe way to improve our vision of the world.

Finally, (3) *S* knows that *p* just in the case *S* experiences a feeling of beauty *B* on *p*. More precisely, *S* knows that *p* if and only if *S* recognizes the property *B* of *p* and *S* grasps the ideas *I* of *p* from *B* and because of *B*. In this respect, *S* knows that *p* because *S* appreciates the property *B* inherent to *p* and he forms his beliefs *p* from *B*. Plato seems to consider beauty as a property of knowledge. Moreover, beauty is not just a signal or a characteristic of knowledge. It is another way of grasping it.

(1-3) proposals are not mutually disjoint. The three possible formulations of the Plato's account of knowledge are, indeed, not independent. Here it is a matter of interpretations. Nevertheless, it is plausible to state that Plato's theory of knowledge can arrange (1-3) as three forms of the same principle. For example, it could be the case that *S* knows that *p* because he recognizes the beauty *B* of *p* from a dialectical process and throughout this process, he grasps the corresponding idea/s *I* of *p*. It is possible to think about Plato's (1-3) accounts as either different theories of knowledge or one single, more or less coherent position. Nevertheless, I think that they are three ways to think about the same problem. They are compatible in some cases, but not in others.

I cannot report the entire history of effects of the (1-3) proposals. They are at the origin of wide distinct researches in the history of philosophy but I'm not going to deepen any details. In fact, it is time to turn our attention to how Plato's (1-3) accounts are treated by the analytic epistemologists.

IV. A LIGHT IN THE DARK: HOW MUCH DO EPISTEMOLOGISTS KNOW PLATO'S ACCOUNTS OF KNOWLEDGE?

I want to start this section with three different questions: (i) Who's Plato been quoted by? (ii) How much do epistemologists know Plato's works? (iii) Do they really care about Plato's thought?

Everybody reports the same Plato's quotations. Nobody spends time and efforts to do a detailed reconstruction about it. In particular, we can find some epistemologists, like Ernest Sosa, who know something about history of philosophy. Nevertheless, they consider just the modern philosophy. They consider neither ancient philosophy nor medieval philosophy. Thus, also Plato's account is widely ignored. What epistemologists really care about is to find good formulations of philosophical problems, i.e. they search for puzzles.

Philosophical puzzles assume different shapes, e.g. they can be stated as syntactical or semantical paradoxes (the liar paradox, the sorites paradox and similar); they can appear as simple problematic statements as the first platonic problem we considered. In this respect, the origin of the problem is irrelevant. Many of the most treated and analyzed conundrums in analytic philosophy are quite old questions or paradoxes. Nothing new under the sun! Nothing new under the sun, and yet it seems that nobody cares about the historical philosophical literature.

Thus, in general, a philosophical puzzle is interesting for an epistemologist if it is a clear and problematic statement. What we want is something that arises a paradoxical counterintuitive problem for the common sense. The epistemologist's job will be to clarify it. For this reason, Plato's (a) and (c) problems are so repeatedly quoted: Plato posed a problem in a perspicacious way, i.e. (a/c) are good puzzles. That's all epistemologists need to start their analysis. Amazingly, although now we know why, Plato's point of view is out of the epistemologists' interest. In addition, Plato proposed a general definition of knowledge in his *Taetetus* (knowledge is true belief plus *logos*). Nevertheless, this definition is not sufficiently discussed by epistemologists.

Thus, according to this fact, we can answer also to (b): Plato's account/s is not so studied by the epistemologists! Why? Because they

want to find good puzzles, not good *ancient* theories. As it is easy to see, we answered also to (c) question. This wide ignorance shared by most epistemologists explains why nobody found out the third problem (c), which is a good basis to start an interesting social epistemological account.

V. SOME EPISTEMOLOGICAL THEORIES AND PLATO'S INHERITANCE

There are two big theoretical families in individual epistemology: internalistic accounts of knowledge and externalistic theories of knowledge. The internalist account of knowledge think about knowledge as a justified true belief and the justification is internal to the subject. In some theories the subject knows that p if he has some state of mind that sustain p (*mentalism*). In other internalistic theories the subject knows that p if the subject holds some reasons to believe that p and he can report them. The term 'internalistic' is applied to all the theories that think about knowledge as something internal to the subject. They share the idea that it is not so important how a belief is formed to consider it as knowledge.

In both cases, the internalistic theories are quite different from the (1-3) Plato's proposals. First of all, the internalistic accounts treat knowledge as something internal to the subject. On the contrary, Plato's first proposal states that knowledge is grasping ideas, which are not internal to the subject, i.e. they are neither states of mind nor internal to the subject. Thus, the platonic ideas does not count as internalistic justifiers, i.e. something internal to the subject that sustains the subject's belief or knowledge. Plato's second proposal reconsiders knowledge as a way of forming beliefs. The internalists do not accept this idea either. Finally, nobody cares about the recognition of beauty as a privileged way of knowing. A possible answer about that would be that even if knowledge is something beautiful, this is meaningless from an epistemic perspective. Beauty is not an epistemic property or an evaluative epistemic term. These considerations stand also if we substitute the idea of beauty with rightness. For this reasons, it is quite difficult to find Plato's analysis in the internalistic accounts. This possible answer would be shared among all kind of epistemologists.

The state of affair is quite similar in externalistic accounts of knowledge. The far most influential externalistic account of knowledge is reliabilism

(Goldman (1979, 1986, 1992, 2009)). In this position, roughly a subject knows that p if the subject formed p thorough a reliable process. A reliable process is a cognitive process that tends to form more true beliefs than false ones.

Plato's first proposal is excluded by this account, because the reliabilism does not consider the source of knowledge but just the way we form our beliefs. This way, it is possible to consider Plato's proposal (b) as compatible with the reliabilism. Nevertheless, dialectic would be just one of the possible processes that enable the subject to form true beliefs. Dialectic is indeed a useful tool to form our beliefs, but it is neither the only one nor is it so interesting in itself. It is just a particular case, maybe a good one, but nothing else. In addition, Alvin Goldman (1979) openly explained that his position is quite new in all history of philosophy. Although Goldman in other passages seems to reconsider this strong statement, he did not consider Plato's account/s neither in surface nor in details.

I cannot analyze the detail of the two families of epistemological theories.⁴ What I wanted was to consider the fact that many epistemologists consider Plato as the starting point of their analyses and, *at the same time*, they do not care about Plato's account/s. It is a quite strange fact, indeed.

VI. CONCLUSION: WHAT DO WE HAVE TO THINK ABOUT THE NEAR FUTURE?

I want to end this analysis with some considerations about the *liaison* between Plato's theory of knowledge and analytic epistemology. I considered a brief history of epistemology, its themes and its platonic inheritances. I provided some reasons to explain why Plato is often quoted and he is considered the classic author of some of the most important puzzles treated today in the literature. We saw why we spoke about 'platonic puzzles', although, I am sure, this would be not so appreciated by Plato! Nevertheless, Plato's removal is explained by historical

⁴ For an introduction to internalism, Pili (2013); for an analysis of externalistic account, Pili (2015), part II, cap. I.

reasons and by logical arguments. I underline that historical reasons are the sufficient causes that explain why Plato is substantially ignored by the actual debate in epistemology.

Analytic philosophy was born when some authors tried to attack the main philosophical problems without any link to the ancient tradition. It is a clear simplification but it is still a clear way to think about it. This extremist approach fell, but some long-term trends remain alive. In fact, Plato is still quoted just to find out an illustrious precedent, nothing more. I want to remark that this is not a critical judgment upon an extraordinary set of theories and researches. I worked on analytic epistemology and I am still working on it. Nevertheless, it is important to say that the recent debate in epistemology seems to be poor. We would like new analyses, new ideas, platonic or not.

Luciano Floridi (Floridi (1996)) stated that analytic philosophy should return to the tradition to explore new themes and new concepts. Although Floridi is quite pessimistic and he is critical toward the classic epistemological approach in analytic epistemology while I am not, I want to say that he is right and I totally agree with him. I have to say that little is changed since Floridi's issued his masterpiece. In addition, I strongly believe that epistemology will go on without major revolutions, because many things have to change to suggest to the epistemologists that the time has arrived.

Nevertheless, if there is something sure in this unpredictable world is our lighthouse: the Western tradition. Plato's works are immortal and eternal, in the human dimension of time. Eventually, also the epistemologists will return to Plato's proposals. We need new ideas also from the classic authors. And Plato still has many arrows because his philosophy is still alive in our hearts.

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and I still remember his thought. Finally, I want to remark the Sara Giussani's efforts. Sara is an example of a kind person and her linguistic correction was substantial. Nevertheless, all the errors are mine.

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SOMMARIO

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