

Can Beliefs Be True? A Socratic Reading of Plato's *Theaetetus*

[Note: This paper, presented as a talk at the HU Berlin in April 2010 and to be presented at the University of Notre Dame in September 2010, is a companion paper to "Why Beliefs Are Never True: A Reconstruction of Stoic Epistemology." I will present the latter at the Chicago Area Conference in Greek and Roman Ancient Philosophy, October 2010. Both papers are part of my current book project "Belief and Truth: A Socratic Reading of Plato."]

To believe is to hold something to be true, without knowing whether what one believes to be true is true. Even if one holds something to be true that is indeed true, one's judgment is deficient. It is not true in the normatively relevant sense – that is, it is not a judgment in which one is in possession of a truth. This is the view of the Stoics, inherited from Socrates. The Stoics infer that beliefs are not the kind of thing that can be true or false. Scholars tend not to notice this aspect of Stoic epistemology. As far as I can see, no one even mentions it, and there is no attempt at explaining it.¹ Perhaps it seems all-too-obvious to us that beliefs can be true and false, and accordingly we are blind to an idea that we find implausible. Certainly, the view that beliefs are deficient ('bad') kinds of judgment is alien to contemporary construals of the notion of belief.

At the same time, the Stoics are the inventors of our contemporary notion of belief,

¹ This applies even to publications that are immediately concerned with Stoic epistemology, such as Michael Frede's otherwise extremely precise chapter on Stoic Epistemology in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, eds. Algra, Barnes, Mansfeld and Schofield (Cambridge 2005), 295-322. Frede writes "Now a belief will be true or false, depending on whether the impression it is an assent to is true or false" (301); however, there are no true beliefs for the Stoics. Neglect of this aspect of Stoic philosophy is also widespread in literature that addresses other issues, outside of epistemology. For example, in reconstructing Stoic thought about the emotions, Martha Nussbaum elucidates the Stoic thesis that the wise person has no emotions as the thesis that the wise person has no false beliefs; she claims that the Stoics identify emotions and false beliefs (*The Therapy of Desire*, 1994). But the Stoics identify emotions and beliefs (*doxai*). The wise person has no emotions because she has no beliefs (cf. Vogt, "Die stoische Theorie der Emotionen," 1994).

according to which *all* cases of holding-to-be-true have the same structure – some content is accepted as true.² The Stoics aim to integrate the thesis that beliefs are bad with this analysis of the structure of truth-claims.

One way to approach the Stoic position is to think one's way through a Socratic-Stoic reading of Plato's *Theaetetus*, the earliest text that formulates a proto-version of the modern notion of belief.³ From the point of view of Socratically inspired Hellenistic philosophy, the *Theaetetus* explores both ideas relevant to their theory: that beliefs are judgments, and that beliefs are deficient. In what follows, I propose a Socratic reading of Part II of the *Theaetetus*, try to show that this reading elucidates the Stoic conception of belief, and argue that this conception leads to a plausible position on the question of what kind of entities are truth-evaluable.⁴

I. Interpreting the *Theaetetus*

1. Two Problems

The main question of the *Theaetetus* is “what is knowledge?” The interlocutors – Socrates

² On certain construals, these two ideas are in tension. If all cases of holding-to-be-true have a uniform structure, knowledge and belief do not seem to be different in kind. Rather, knowledge might appear to be a successful case of belief.

³ In a companion paper to this paper, “Why Beliefs Cannot Be True: A Reconstruction of Stoic Epistemology” (to be presented at Chicago Ancient Conference, October 2010), I analyse the direct evidence on the Stoic conception of belief. Ideally, both papers are read in conjunction. It is hard to understand the motivations of Stoic epistemology without thinking carefully through the Socratic-Platonic background.

⁴ Interpreters of ancient philosophy sometimes speak of ‘opinion’ rather than ‘belief’ when translating the Greek *doxa*, and when reconstructing ancient theories of *doxa*. This way of speaking has a clear advantage: to modern ears, ‘opinion’ carries more plausibly a derogative connotation than ‘belief.’ However, it also has a great disadvantage: it hides the fact that the ancient theories of *doxa* are indeed quite different from today's theories. There is only one relevant Greek concept: *doxa*. Accordingly, there is no room for a distinction between opinion on the one hand (a deficient kind of judgment), and belief on the other (understood as the terminus technicus for all truth-claims).

and Theaetetus - discuss three suggestions that Theaetetus makes, and ultimately dismiss all three of them.

(DEF I) Knowledge is perception.

(DEF II) Knowledge is true belief.

(DEF III) Knowledge is true belief with a *logos* (justification, account, etc.).

Accordingly, I shall refer to the three main sections of the text as TH I, TH II, and TH III.

Interpreters of the *Theaetetus* see two major problems with regard to the dialogue as a whole. First, the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* appears to them to be a purely aporetic (negative, refutational) Socrates. At the end of the conversation, no account of knowledge has been found. Interpreters tend to accept a certain distinction that can be traced to Aristotle.⁵ Dialogues in which Socrates is first and foremost a questioner, and no answers are found, are early dialogues. Dialogues in which Socrates formulates positive theories, however, do not present Socrates as he really was; in such texts, Socrates is a mere placeholder for Plato, formulating Plato's mature theories. These are the later dialogues.⁶ The *Theaetetus* is widely acknowledged to be a late dialogue, but it features, as scholars think, an aporetic-refutational Socrates, and that is, the kind of Socrates figure that is otherwise

⁵ According to Aristotle, the historical Socrates asked definitional questions that he himself did not know the answer to (*Soph. Ref.* 183b7).

⁶ Sedley writes: "It is easy to imagine a Plato who denied or minimized discontinuities in his own work, even when challenged by his eminent pupil Aristotle, who is widely agreed to make a sharp distinction between Plato's Socratic dialogues and those representing his mature work." (15) According to another well-known passage in Aristotle, Socrates was exclusively interested in ethics, not in questions about nature as a whole (*Met A.6*, 987b1-2). However, we should note that epistemology is, for Aristotle as much as for Plato and Socrates a normative discipline, thus falling under a broad conception of ethics.

associated with early dialogues.⁷

Second, scholars are puzzled by the absence of Plato's distinction between Being and Becoming (or, in other words, the Theory of Forms), which again does not seem to fit in with the assumption that the dialogue is late. DEF I, II, and III violate the Two-Worlds-Doctrine (TWD). According to TWD, perception and belief engage with the realm of the perceptible and changeable - the world of Becoming. Only Being is the object of knowledge. Accordingly, accounts of knowledge that envisage perception or belief as a component of knowledge are bound to fail. Perception and belief on the one hand and knowledge on the other simply do not engage with the same objects. The fact that Plato seems to discuss DEF I, II, and III in all seriousness is seen as puzzling: why would he explore options that are apparently in conflict with his own theories?

2. *Three Reactions*

If we approach the *Theaetetus* with the premises in mind that give rise to these problems, we need an explanation of why the mature Plato would reintroduce a figure that features in his earlier writing, and why he would forget his own substantive theories. I am deliberately putting these questions in these stark terms, to indicate that it is not likely that, if this is the way we approach the text, we shall find satisfactory answers. Consider

⁷ Sedley argues, in my view rightly, that reception of Plato's philosophy has been shaped too strongly by Aristotle's distinction between an aporetic Socrates of the early dialogues, and a Platonic Socrates, who in the later dialogues gives voice to Plato's mature theories (2004).

three reactions to these questions.⁸

Cornford argues that, quite obviously, Plato must regard DEF I, II, and III as false, because they violate TWD. The aims of the *Theaetetus*, according to Cornford, are purely negative. DEF I, II, and III are thoroughly misguided, and the dialogue is devoted to making this fact abundantly clear. As a result, TWD is reaffirmed: accounts of knowledge that ignore TWD are bound to fail on a deep level.

Burnyeat and McDowell refuse to approach Plato as if we already knew what he thinks. Cornford's line of argument assumes that, quite obviously, Plato holds a certain doctrine, TWD. But do we really know which precise positive doctrines to ascribe to Plato? Are not many of the details controversial, in particular because Plato himself raises problems for the Theory of Forms in his later dialogues? Burnyeat and McDowell suggest that we read the *Theaetetus* by itself, and that we value it for the sophistication of its arguments. We can learn much in epistemology by engaging with it, no matter how it relates or does not relate to other Platonic texts.

In a recent book, Sedley argues for a third position. As fruitful as McDowell's and Burnyeat's approach is, it is almost impossible to pretend that we do not know anything about Plato's TWD. It is highly implausible to suppose that Plato, when writing the

⁸ F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, London 1935; M. F. Burnyeat, Introduction to M. J. Levett (trans., rev. Burnyeat), *The Theaetetus of Plato*, Indianapolis 1990; J. McDowell, *Plato: Theaetetus*, Oxford 1973; D. Sedley, *The Midwife of Platonism*, Oxford 2004.

Theaetetus, sets aside the core concerns of his philosophy. Sedley thus makes a proposal that, like Cornford's interpretation, aims to explain the absence of Plato's metaphysics. The *Theaetetus*, he thinks, is devoted to Socrates, similarly to the way in which, say, the *Apology* is: it celebrates Socrates. In the *Theaetetus*, Sedley thinks, Plato focuses on a particular side of Socrates, his maieutic art. Through his philosophizing, Socrates helps others give birth to ideas. As readers of the *Theaetetus*, Sedley proposes, we shall discover the core elements of Platonism for ourselves.

These three approaches - Cornford's aporetic reading, McDowell's and Burnyeat's isolated reading, and Sedley's maieutic reading - share two premises, both of which, in my view, are questionable.

Premise 1: Plato relates to Socrates (the 'real,' historical Socrates) primarily as someone who was good at asking questions.

Premise 2: If the *Theaetetus* is concerned with TWD, it must be concerned with both sides of TWD at once, its metaphysics (the distinction between Being and Becoming) and its epistemology (the distinction between knowing and believing as two kinds of judgment and attitudes of holding-to-be-true).

Why are premises 1 and 2 problematic? Consider first the question of whether Socrates is rightly to be seen as a questioner, or whether there are, in addition, other important sides to his philosophy.

3. Socratic Philosophy

From the inner-Academic point of view of the Skeptics and Stoics, Socrates is not merely

or even predominantly considered a skilled questioner, refuting others and helping them formulate their ideas.⁹ Instead, he is associated with positive claims, in particular the identification of knowledge and virtue. This identification leads to or implies a number of substantive claims: ignorance is vice; belief is ignorance; in order to lead a good life, one must seek knowledge; there are no other parts or powers of the soul besides reason; one cannot act against one's judgment (since rational judgment is the only motivational force); and so on.¹⁰

This side of Socrates figures also in Aristotle's thought about Socrates' philosophy. It is crucially important for his discussion of *akrasia* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹¹ There, Aristotle raises the question of whether the analysis of *akrasia* should differ, depending

⁹ Zeno spends 20 years in the Academy, and Arcesilaus, roughly 20-30 years his junior, formulates the earliest version of Academic skepticism partly in response to Zeno's philosophy. These philosophers and their interlocutors in the Academy seem to have been careful and philosophically ingenious readers of Plato's dialogues. They dismiss Plato's metaphysics. But they pick up on Socrates' intuition that belief and knowledge are, metaphorically speaking, worlds apart.

¹⁰ These are much discussed ideas, often discussed under the label of Socratic Intellectualism, and equally often in the context of the so-called Socratic Paradox (or the most famous Socratic Paradox), that no one does wrong voluntarily.

¹¹ In *NE VII*, Aristotle discusses the Socratic thesis that one cannot act against one's judgment. Indeed, Aristotle's discussion of *akrasia* is a core example for his method of engaging with earlier views that Aristotle judges to be philosophically interesting. In this particular context, Socrates looms large. Aristotle ascribes views to Socrates that are central to the theory of action, ethics, and epistemology. The Stoics and Skeptics ascribe precisely these views to Socrates, and engage with them. While it is, on the whole, not clear how well the Hellenistic philosophers knew Aristotle, scholars tend to think that their conception of Socratic philosophy is shaped by the *Nicomachean Ethics* (cf. Alesse 2000).

on whether the agent has knowledge or mere belief (*doxa*) (VII.2).¹² Aristotle asks whether beliefs might be *weaker* than knowledge - whether they might be a lesser impediment for the agent who, for example, eats more chocolate even though she thinks she ought to stop eating. If she knew that she ought to stop, perhaps she would stop; but since she merely believes so, she might not.¹³

The Stoics endorse and develop further this characterization of belief. Like Aristotle, they ascribe the idea that belief is weak to Socrates. They define belief as weak and false assent (SE, *M* 7.151, LS 41C). Note that belief is not said to be false insofar as all beliefs were acceptances of falsehoods. Belief is assent falsely given: one should not have assented, because in belief one's doxastic attitude is changeable rather than firmly rooted, and therefore bad. In belief, the cognizer shall give up on her truth-claims easily, make *ad hoc* adjustments to her views, and so on. All beliefs, not just false ones, are changeable, because the logical ties with the cognizer's other truth-claims are weak.

¹² "But there are some who go along with Socrates' view in some respects but not in others: they agree that nothing is superior to knowledge, but they do not agree that no one acts contrary to his belief about what is better (*para to doxan beltion*), and because of this they say that the un-selfcontrolled person is overcome by pleasures not when he has knowledge of something but when he merely has a belief (*doxa*). And yet when it is a matter of mere belief and not knowledge, and the belief that is resisting is not a strong but a light one, as with people in two minds about something, there is sympathy for any failure to stand firm in such beliefs in the face of strong appetites, but there is no sympathy for badness, nor for any other object of censure." (1145b33-1146a4) Broadie/Rowe translate "what merely seems"; they do not use the word "belief"; I take this to be misleading, because it hides an important issue in Aristotle's discussion. Consider also a related point in Aristotle's discussion "What is more, if self-control makes one tend to stick to any and every belief (*doxa*), it is bad, e.g., if it makes one stick even to the one that is false, and if lack of self-control tends to make one depart from any and every judgment, lack of self-control will have a good form..." Again, the Broadie/Rowe translation is misleading: at this point, "*doxa*" is rendered as "judgment". (Translations Broadie/Rowe with changes.)

¹³ Aristotle says that beliefs *can* be weaker. For Aristotle, the question is (roughly speaking) to what degree a judgment is a hindrance for the motivational force of pleasure. With this question in mind, one might think that beliefs can also be rather robust: people sometimes hold on with particular force to beliefs that appear dogmatic and willful. For the Stoics, all beliefs are weak, because they are not rooted in a system of knowledge. That is, their logical ties with other truth-claims are weak.

That beliefs are changeable does not mean that a cognizer could not persist in holding on to her beliefs, even though that may be irrational. The characterization of belief as changeable does not imply that all beliefs, *de facto*, constantly change. Rather, the logical relationships in which beliefs stand among each other are weak: a set of beliefs is bound to be incoherent and full of contradictions. A cognizer with a set of beliefs is, as it were, in a chaotic state of mind: her truth-claims are made in a precipitate fashion, or held on to from stubbornness; they do not really fit together; they undergo *ad hoc* adjustment and reinterpretation; they are easily forgotten and buried under more recent judgments.¹⁴ This explains why beliefs are, as Socrates puts it in Plato's *Republic*, shameful (*aischron*) (506c).¹⁵ Belief is, notably, a kind of ignorance. Ignorance is understood as a doxastic attitude: the ignorant person makes a truth-claim about something she does not know. This is why the wise person, as the Stoics construe her, has no beliefs: she is not ignorant. Ignorance is defined through the same properties as belief is - ignorance is changeable and weak assent (Stobaeus 2.111.18-112.8, LS 41G).

From the point of view of the Hellenistic Academy, Socrates is thus associated with substantive epistemological views, views that matter to the development of TWD in Plato's thought. Socrates' insistence that belief and knowledge differ deeply from each other is captured, albeit in a reinterpreted and more comprehensive way, in TWD. This

¹⁴ These are some of the many ways in which Socrates' interlocutors fail to adhere to epistemic norms, from Socrates' point of view and from the point of view of the Stoics.

¹⁵ Socrates says that beliefs without knowledge are ugly, blind, and crooked. For discussion of the clause "belief without knowledge," cf. my "Belief and Investigation in Plato's *Republic*," *Plato* 9 (2009), 1-24.

brings us to Premise 2. Scholars assume, in my view without good reason, that, if the *Theaetetus* were to be concerned with TWD, it would have to be concerned both with its metaphysics and with its epistemology.

4. The Epistemological Side of TWD

Several late dialogues are devoted to specific problems in Plato's metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. The *Parmenides* critically explores the specifics of the relationship between Forms and particulars; the *Philebus* reconsiders the account of the good from the *Republic*; the *Sophist* draws attention to the fact that, if one's fundamental notion in philosophy is Being, one shall also need a plausible account of not-Being, and it admits that TWD might not be able to account for the causal roles that the Forms are meant to have; and so on. These examples show that, at least in some late dialogues, Plato raises substantial problems for his own theories, and is prepared to think through significantly altered accounts in order to address these problems. The *Theaetetus* seems to me to be precisely this kind of dialogue. It focuses on the problems that attach to the distinction between belief and knowledge. This distinction is a cornerstone of Plato's substantive theories. It is one of its deepest concerns, reaching back to Plato's engagement with Parmenides and Socrates.

Note that there is a genuinely epistemological side to TWD. This is not always recognized. Instead, one might think that the epistemology of TWD is immediately metaphysical. The well-known distinction between knowledge and belief in *Rp. V* is

metaphysical, in the sense that it appeals solely to the kinds of *objects* that knowing and believing are concerned with. If knowing and believing were to differ in no other respects than this, that is, if all that mattered was that the knower and believer were thinking of and relating to different kinds of subject-matter ('knowables' and 'believables'), then there might be no genuinely epistemological side to TWD. But this is implausible. For Plato, there are also epistemic differences between knowing and believing. The knower makes a truth claim that she knows to be true. The believer makes a truth claim that she takes to be true, but that may be false.¹⁶ This is a far-reaching problem: belief is something like presumed knowledge. In forming a belief, one makes an unqualified truth-claim, thus as it were ignoring that one is not in the position to ascertain whether what one takes to be true really is true. Belief, as Socrates and Plato understand it, thus differs importantly from, say, an assumption, that comes with the explicit proviso that one merely thinks that *p*, but does not know that *p*.

Throughout the early dialogues, Socrates is presented as interrogating his interlocutors in such ways as to make them aware that their beliefs are presumed knowledge and ultimately ignorance. Socrates' interlocutors are presented as violating epistemic norms: they endorse their views, making unqualified truth-claims, even though they should not; instead, they should say that things appear to them a certain way, or that they find it plausible to assume that things are a certain way, and so on. They should not assert that

¹⁶ Even in the *Republic*, arguably a text where Plato's epistemology is thoroughly metaphysical in the sense described, the idea that belief and knowledge relate differently to truth plays an important role. In the Simile of the Line, Socrates makes the rather obscure remark that there is the more truth in things, the higher up the line we move (that is, there is less truth in the realm of belief than in the realm of knowledge).

things *are* such-and-such, thereby uttering beliefs. In the spirit of the *Apology*, one might say that Socrates asks others to abstain from endorsing their views and instead continue to investigate, rather than settle on something that might be false. For Socrates, and arguably also for Plato, this is crucial to the project of leading a good life. To live guided by belief is to walk with a blindfold over one's eyes: it is to go through life without knowing whether, with one's next step, one shall walk over a cliff or hit a wall. Guided by mere belief, which can be false, one pursues things that might well bring misery.

Plato's distinction between belief and knowledge thus has a genuinely epistemological side: belief relates differently to truth than knowledge; as compared to knowledge, belief is a different and inferior kind of judgment. In the *Theaetetus*, Plato seems to me to re-open discussion on this intuition, which he has explored all along, but which he never yet made the primary focus of discussion in the context of his mature philosophy. Like in other late dialogues, Plato thus challenges an intuition that figured prominently in his earlier dialogues, and that has shaped the formulation of TWD.

II. "Knowledge is True Belief"

1. What Are Beliefs?

Discussion in TH II begins with the proposal that "knowledge is true belief" (subsequently considered a hypothesis that is to be examined), a twofold question, and three premises.

Hypothesis: Knowledge is true belief (DEF II).

Question: What are beliefs? What are false beliefs?

Premise A: Knowledge is true.

Premise B: Beliefs can be true or false.

Premise C: It is impossible to know and not know one and the same thing.

Consider first which question TH II aims to address. On the standard reading, the interlocutors hypothetically assume “knowledge is true belief” as the correct account of knowledge, and proceed to examine whether false belief is explicable on this premise.

DEF II is read as a digression on false belief.¹⁷ This reading, however, overlooks an important step in the conversation. Socrates raises the question what false belief is as a subsidiary question, which belongs to the more general question of what beliefs (*doxai*) are (187c-d). I suggest that we should take this question seriously - it is by no means a trivial question, from which one can simply move on to another question.

Two different notions of *doxa* figure in the *Theaetetus*. These notions are ancestors to the two Stoic claims that, on the one hand, all judgments have the same structure, and on the other hand, beliefs are deficient doxastic attitudes. A famous passage in TH II, 198e, formulates the former intuition, arguably for the first time in Greek philosophy.

“[thinking is] [s]peech which the mind itself goes through with itself about whatever it’s considering. (...) when the mind is thinking, it’s simply carrying on a discussion, asking itself questions and answering them, and making assertions and denials. And when it has come to a decision, either slowly or in a sudden rush, and it’s no longer divided, but says one single thing, we call this its *doxa* (judgment). So what I call *doxazein* is speaking (*legein*) and what I call *doxa* is

¹⁷ Sedley describes TH II as an “excursus on false belief” (13). As he sees it, DEF II is the “official topic”; but in fact, false belief is the real topic. Sedley thinks that this fits well with the fact that Plato examines falsity in a number of dialogues (false statements, false names, false judgments, false pleasures) (118).

speech (*logos*); but speech spoken, not aloud to someone else, but silently to oneself. (...) So whenever someone judges that one of two things is the other, he's actually saying to himself that the one is the other.”¹⁸ (*Th.* 198e, tr. Levett/McDowell)

That is, the noun *doxa* (belief) is introduced via the verb *doxazein* (to form a belief), and the activity of *doxazein* is explained as a kind of acceptance and rejection in thought that concludes an inner conversation.¹⁹ The cognizer considers a matter and eventually finds it to be so-and-so. In other words, *doxazein* is judging that something is so-and-so.²⁰

In TH I, however, *doxa* is understood differently: a belief is a case of ‘seeming’. *Doxa* is introduced via the verb *dokein*, to seem or appear. In a *doxa* something appears to be so-and-so to someone.²¹ This notion of *doxa* is closely related to the Socratic intuition discussed above: beliefs are instances of holding-to-be-true that are, compared to knowledge, deficient. Something seems to be so-and-so to a cognizer, but the cognizer does not know whether it is so-and-so.²² Beliefs are a different kind of judgment than

¹⁸ Socrates then adds: I call *doxazein legein*, and *doxa logos*. Roughly: I call belief-formation ‘saying,’ and belief ‘statement.’

¹⁹ McDowell considers the question of whether *doxa* is to be translated as “judgment” or as “belief” as the question of whether *doxa* is an act (to judge) or a state (to hold a certain belief). McDowell writes: “I have used the translation ‘judgement’, suggesting an act, rather than ‘belief’ or ‘opinion’, suggesting a state, because it seems to be required at 189e4-190a7. However, the Greek word (*doxa*) could equally well mean either; and in fact belief or opinion would be a better candidate to appear in a definition of knowledge than judgment. Plato shows no sign of having explicitly distinguished the act from the state.” (193)

²⁰ It is mostly due to this passage that translators of the dialogue tend to render *doxa* as judgment. According to McDowell, 189e speaks particularly clearly in favor of this translation: “Socrates here introduces the idea that judging should be conceived of as the making of inner assertions. Since the making of an assertion is an act rather than a state, this passage indicates the translation ‘judgement’ rather than ‘belief’ or ‘opinion’.” (205)

²¹ *Doxa* is initially introduced as a *pathos*, an affection. In TH II, this conception of *doxa* as passively acquired is rejected, in favor of an act of judgment. The conception of *doxa* as passive is explored in TH I: there, the point is that things strike one a certain way, and this is how they seem to one. What appears to A is true for A.

²² Plato first uses *dokein*, which perhaps is best translated as ‘seeming’; Plato then switches to *phainesthai*, ‘to appear,’ and continues discussion in terms of sensory and non-sensory appearances.

knowledge.

DEF II cannot accommodate this Socratic intuition. Knowledge is, *pace* DEF II, the holding-to-be-true of truths. Assuming that DEF II holds, no plausible notion of belief, conceived as a *different doxastic attitude from knowledge*, can be formulated. Assuming that knowledge is true belief, what should one say that belief is? Are beliefs the holding-to-be-true of falsehoods? That would be absurd. DEF II fails because it does not make room for any conception of belief according to which belief is a different kind of judgment or attitude than knowledge. Accordingly, DEF II does not fail because it cannot explain false belief; it fails because it cannot explain belief. Or rather, it can only accommodate one aspect of belief: that beliefs are judgments. It does not capture the normative dimension of the distinction between belief and knowledge.

2. Premises A, B, and C

Right at the beginning of the *Theaetetus*, Socrates says that knowledge is unerring and always true: knowledge is of what is and free from falsehood (152c).²³ The relevant intuition can be expressed in a stronger and a weaker way, and accordingly there are two versions of Premise A.

²³ Early on in Parmenides' poem (B1.28-30), it may appear as if 'the beliefs of mortals' could be true, but lacked certainty. However, the text continues (B2.1-6): "But come, I will tell you – preserve the account when you hear it – the only roads of enquiry there are to be thought of: one, that **it is** and cannot not be, is the path of persuasion (for truth accompanies it); another, that **it is not** and must not be – this I say to you is a trail of utter ignorance." The path of belief is a path of ignorance. Interpreters sometimes employ a distinction between different ways in which "*estin*" ("is") may be used, which goes back to Chalmers Kahn. In the spirit of this distinction, one might say the following (cf. Kirk/Raven/Schofield 270): If "is not" is taken in the existential use, then the point of the passage is that one cannot know what does not exist; if "is not" is read in the veritative sense, that is, as "is not true," then the point is that knowledge of the non-true is no knowledge.

A-weak: Knowledge is always true.

A-strong: Knowledge is always true and the only cognitive attitude that is concerned with truth.

Premise A is again referred to in the final refutation of DEF I. It marks the transition between TH I and TH II, leading toward the formulation of DEF II. Socrates associates Premise A with Parmenides (183e5): knowledge, truth, and being belong together (186c7-e6). The reference to Parmenides suggests that we should read A in the sense of A-strong.²⁴

Premise B says that *doxai* can be true or false. Scholars do not call B into question; presumably because it is unproblematic. But if A is to be read as A-strong, B is false. According to A-strong, beliefs cannot be true, and are not to be evaluated as true or false. Only knowledge is 'in touch with' truth.

Premise C says that one cannot know and not know the same thing. Either one knows it or one does not know it.²⁵ The dichotomy of knowing and not-knowing supplies much of

²⁴ Cf. *Theaetetus* 200e: Making a true judgement is, at any rate, something free of mistakes, and everything that results from it is admirable and good. Other relevant passages: *Charm.* 171d2-172a6; *Meno* 97c2-10; *Rep.* 477e4-478a1; *Tht.* 207d8-208b3.

²⁵ I shall not engage here with one of the difficulties in interpreting this idea, as it figures in the *Theaetetus* and the *Meno*: an ambiguity of the notion of knowing between propositional knowledge (knowing that *p*) and what Plato scholars sometimes call object knowledge (knowing in the sense of having met with or having seen or being acquainted with something). There is much to be said about this ambiguity, the precise way in which it should be stated, and why Plato puts forward a notion of knowledge that comes with this kind of ambiguity. Scholars tend to find C puzzling. Sedley notes that, in his view, this dichotomy between knowing and not-knowing figures at *no* other place in Plato, other than TH II: "No very satisfactory account has been offered of how Plato might have arrived at this strangely extreme dichotomy, nor am I aware of any example of it in operation outside the *Theaetetus*" (120). Sedley sketches the "knowing-and-not-knowing puzzle" of TH II as follows: "You cannot judge falsely that A is B, whether you know A, or B, or both A and B, or neither A nor B" (120). This is a version of the Meno Problem: One cannot judge falsely, because one either knows something, so that there is no room for falsity, or one does not know something, and then one cannot even refer to it.

the structure of TH II. Readers often find it implausibly stark, and accordingly, one might think that TH II fails because it begins from such a strange premise. The dichotomy of knowing and not-knowing, however, should not be dismissed too quickly. It has a history within Plato's epistemological discussions: it is one of the premises of the well-known Meno Problem (80d-e).²⁶ One cannot investigate, neither what one knows, for then there is no need to investigate, nor what one does not know, for then one does not know what to look for, and one would not recognize it if one found it. That is, one either knows something or does not know it; there are no in-between cases.²⁷

3. *The Main Argument of TH II*

Consider the argument that takes up the largest section of TH II (187e-200d). Strictly speaking, this section divides up into a series of attempts to explain false belief, or rather, to explain cases of misidentification. Premise C, the dichotomy of knowing and not-knowing, supplies the structure of the argument. Assuming that one either knows something or does not know it, no plausible account of false belief can be formulated.

²⁶ The relevant parts of the middle section of the *Meno* (80d-86c) are: (1) Formulation of the problem (80d-e). (2) Response 1: recollection (we recollect latent knowledge, and thus there is a sense in which we already knew what we come to know) (81a-d). Response 2: the 'lazy argument' (if we gave up on investigation, we would be lazy) (81d-e). Response 3: the geometrical example and its interpretation (distinction between belief and knowledge) (81e-85b; 85b-86c). The dialogue continues in what Socrates calls a Hypothetical Method: one can hypothesize one's beliefs, thus having a starting-point for investigation. The Platonist-Aristotelian tradition assumes that Recollection is Plato's response the Meno Problem. The Socratic-Hellenistic tradition, I think, has a more plausible proposal: the introduction of beliefs as hypothesis solves the problem. Recollection is a story heard from priests; Plato does not endorse it as a theory he can argue for,

²⁷ The issue also comes up as one of the so-called superficial objections in the *Theaetetus* (160e-166d). Socrates says that, according to Protagoras' doctrine, one could know and not-know something at the same time. Protagoras' response: only a child would be shocked at that idea. However, things are discussed in rather crude terms at this point: If one were to cover one eye, one would not know/perceive with one eye, and know/perceive with the other eye. Later on in the discussion, it turns out that it is not the eye, ear, etc., that knows/perceives, but the subject (186b-d). For the present purposes it is important to note that Premise C is not an unheard-of premise coming out of nowhere, but an idea that was apparently widely discussed. Plato refers to it in a number of ways, with the implication that his philosophical interlocutors also think about it and have views about it.

Premise C apparently has the absurd implication that one could not, for example, say that someone is Socrates who in fact is not Socrates. However, such cases of misidentification obviously occur. Suppose you see someone from a distance who looks like Socrates, and you say “here is Socrates”; but a bit later, it turns out that the approaching person is someone else, who looked like Socrates from a distance. Surely, an epistemological theory should be able to describe such cases.

Throughout the discussion of false belief, however, such cases appear impossible. Four kinds of cases are considered. (i) Suppose one knows Socrates and sees him; then one says knowingly “this is Socrates” and one’s claim is true. (ii) Suppose one does not know Socrates and does not see him; then one does not say anything about him. (iii) Suppose one knows Socrates but does not see him; then one does not say “this is Socrates.” (iv) Suppose finally that one does not know Socrates, sees him, but does not know that one sees him; in this case, one also does not say “this is Socrates.” The four cases cover all possible combinations of knowing and not knowing Socrates and the approaching person. The case in which one would falsely say “this is Socrates” does not seem to arise. But this is unacceptable, for clearly there are such cases. Scholars assume that DEF II is presented as failing because Premise C is false: surely, there are cases in which we know and do not know the same thing.

The kind of reader whom I imagine - the Socratically inspired reader - has a different perspective on the text. Premise C is not as problematic as it appears; if adequately

reformulated, it does not have the implausible implication that there can be no misidentifications. The Socratically inspired reader recalls that Plato already has a solution to the kind of puzzle that comes with Premise C, a solution that he develops in the *Meno*. In the *Meno*, the implausible side of the dichotomy is resolved through the introduction of a threefold distinction between knowledge, belief, and ignorance. The threefold distinction explains how investigation is possible. One can begin to investigate by formulating a belief. Beliefs can be considered as hypotheses; this is, for example, how the discussion of virtue in the *Meno* or the discussion of knowledge in the *Theaetetus* proceed. In such investigations, one is concerned with something that one does not know: the interlocutors do not know what virtue and knowledge are. But one has some kind of idea what to look for (say, in the case of virtue, one is looking for something that is good to have) and accordingly also some indications of whether one has found what one is looking for (if, say, on one's account of virtue a bad state could count as a virtue, then one's account is likely to be false). That is, the Meno Problem - namely, that one cannot investigate, neither what one knows nor what one does not know - is solved because, next to knowledge and ignorance, there are beliefs. Investigation can begin from beliefs. This leads to a revised version of Premise C:

C-Revised: One cannot know and not know the same thing; but one can have beliefs about something that one does not know.

The Socrates of the *Theaetetus* endorses Premise C, because a strong intuition counts in its favor: in believing that such-and-such is the case, one does not know that it is the case.

If, for example, one believes that the approaching person is Socrates, one does *not know* that it is Socrates. But one can believe that this is Socrates, and this explains how misidentifications are possible. Belief is a kind of ignorance.

Once we see that C is not easily dismissed, it is clear that DEF II does not fail due an obviously implausible premise. Importantly, it is also clear that Plato in TH II has not given up on the Socratic idea that belief is deficient - that, indeed, it is ignorance.

Otherwise Premise C, which builds on this intuition, would not be the framing assumption of its longest argument.

4. The Judge-Example

At the end of TH II, Socrates puts forward a seemingly simple argument against DEF II. He describes the procedures in a courtroom: a lawyer presents his case, and a judge comes to hold a belief based on the lawyer's speech; the judge judges truly, but does not know what happened.²⁸ According to Burnyeat and McDowell, this brief argument is by

²⁸ Socrates says that a whole profession (the orators who speak in law courts) claims that true belief is knowledge (201a). However, he then goes on to say that these orators instill *whatever belief they like* in those who listen. The point of this seems to be that, for orators, seeming is being. They are concerned with appearances and persuasion. The lawcourt-example thus is a reminder that *doxa* is located in the realm of seeming, and that, accordingly, *doxai* are cases where something seems to be so-and-so, but one does not know whether it is so-and-so.

itself a sufficient and valid refutation of DEF II.²⁹ As they see it, there are obviously cases in which someone has a true belief that does not qualify as knowledge. Accordingly, “knowledge is true belief” is false.³⁰

How compelling is this reaction? According to the text, the judge lacks knowledge because the lawyer merely wants to persuade, rather than genuinely inform or teach.³¹ However, if the lawyer merely aimed to persuade, he might not aim to persuade of the *truth*. Socrates says that the orators in courtrooms try to talk others into the belief that happens to please them at a given moment (201a). Accordingly, Plato does not offer an

²⁹ The Judge Example marks the transition between DEF II and DEF III. It reminds Theaetetus of something he has heard: that a true belief must come with a *logos* in order to qualify as knowledge (201c). This proposal - that knowledge is true belief with a *logos* (an account, definition, justification, or theory) - is the topic of TH III. From the perspective of the Socratic Reading, it fails for the same reasons as DEF II. Ancient JTB accounts are markedly different from contemporary JTB accounts of knowledge. Consider an example that fits the ancient line of argument: suppose I have the true belief that water is H₂O. I haven't studied chemistry, and in a sense I'm just repeating what others told me. If I were to study chemistry, I would come to understand a complete system. I would not *keep* the belief “water is H₂O,” and be able to justify it. Rather, coming to know the field as a whole, I would now understand what I say when I say “water is H₂O.” Accordingly, the judgment I make as a knower is a different judgment—the sentence now means something different to me. As the Stoics see it, knowledge is a true *logos*. In acquiring knowledge, one replaces beliefs with pieces of knowledge, putting a whole system of knowledge in the place of changeable beliefs. This is suggested at 207c2-3: knowledge is put in place of (*anti*) opinion. DEF III famously explores the question of whether elements are knowable: qua elements, they are 'simple' and thus, in a sense, admit of no explanation; if knowledge is associated with explanations, then elements are not knowable. On the other hand, it seems that, say, in learning grammar, one does come to know individual letters (the elements); if one didn't recognize, say, a Greek *tau*, one might confuse it with a *theta*, and thus get things wrong. It is an important move for the Stoics to associate explanations with a *system* of knowledge as a whole. One piece of knowledge qualifies as knowledge and is associated with explanations insofar as it *figures in explanations*, not insofar as it was explicable in isolation.

³⁰ Burnyeat and McDowell seem to me to read the *Theaetetus* in a way that is inspired by the structure of arguments that are raised in the discussion of Gettier cases. This structure is roughly the following: (i) an account of knowledge is put forward (“knowledge is justified true belief”); (ii) an example is found for something that should, according to the account, be considered knowledge, but is not plausibly considered knowledge (Jones is justified in his belief, that either Smith has a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona; his belief is justified by virtue of a correct inference; it is true because Brown is in Barcelona; but it is not plausibly seen as a case of knowledge, because Jones has no idea whether Brown is in Barcelona); (iii) the account is seen as refuted (“knowledge is justified true belief” is refuted). As I see it, Plato does not offer an example for a true belief that does not qualify as knowledge. He offers an example for a belief that might be true or false, and accordingly is a mere belief, not knowledge.

³¹ Socrates also remarks that this is the kind of thing one only knows if one has seen it (201b). If Plato means to say that, at least in some domains, one only knows what one has seen, he could have at least two ideas in mind. Either he calls into question whether there is such a thing as knowledge of testimony. But this is unlikely, since it is incompatible with the framing narrative of the dialogue. The dialogue as a whole was written down by Euclides, who did not witness the original conversation, but writes up a transcript by questioning Socrates repeatedly about the conversation that took place (142d-143a). Otherwise, Plato might suggest that, if one's judgment relies on someone's testimony, one might judge falsely. If this is his point, then he is not concerned with an example for a true belief that does not qualify as knowledge, but instead with an example for a belief that might be true or false.

example of someone whose *true* belief does not qualify as knowledge. Rather, he gives an example of someone who holds a belief, and is unable to tell whether the belief is true.

III. Stoic Conclusions

The Stoics think that Plato rightly takes seriously two intuitions about belief, but that he fails to integrate them with each other, the intuitions that beliefs are bad and that all judgments have the same structure.

According to DEF II, every instance of holding-to-be-true is a judgment. From the point of view of the Stoics, something important is being captured here: all judgments have the same structure. This proposal is perhaps one of the greatest achievements of the *Theaetetus*. Plato's account of judgment is taken up by the Hellenistic philosophers, and through them by early modern philosophy, thus influencing how we still conceive of belief-formation. Thought and judgment are envisaged as a kind of conversation that the mind has with itself, a conversation that ends with settling on an answer to a question that one was considering. The mind comes to a decision, no longer going back and forth, but "says one thing" - this inner statement is a *doxa* (189e). Belief-formation is the acceptance of some content as true.

This idea is central to Stoic logic. According to the Stoics, the philosophy of language and logic deal with the way in which the mind accepts, as they put it, impressions (*phantasiai*). The impressions of human beings are thoughts, and they have linguistic

entities corresponding to them, so-called *lekta* or sayables. Those *lekta* that can be asserted - complete *lekta*, rather than incomplete *lekta* such as predicates - are called assertibles (*axiomata*). They are, according to the Stoics, the bearers of truth-values. Assertibles are defined as that which is true or false (DL 7.85). Strictly speaking, only assertibles are the bearers of truth-values.³² That is, the Stoics propose that the truth-predicates are to be assigned to entities that resemble our propositions, not to beliefs; they figure in logic, a philosophical discipline that analyses how content is accepted as true.

Logic is not concerned with evaluative and normative issues. It leaves open questions that then need to be tackled in normative epistemology, in particular, the distinction between belief as a deficient and knowledge as a superior kind of judgment and attitude.

Normative epistemology discusses how we should judge, when we should assent, which judgments to revise, and so on. If the relevant epistemic norms (a main topic of Stoic epistemology, but one that would lead too far here) are consistently applied, one shall come to acquire knowledge. The Stoics distinguish between *the true* in the sense of true assertibles, and *truth* as a state of reason.³³ Only a knower in this strong sense - and that

³² Impressions (*phantasiai*) are true or false in a derivative sense: a true impression is an impression of which a true predication (*katēgoria*) can be made (SE, *M* 7.242-6, LS 39G). – Early research on Stoic logic in the 1980s was enthusiastic about the fact that the Stoics develop a propositional logic, and the Greek term *lekton* was often translated as 'proposition'. However, it is important to keep in mind that the Stoics assign truth-predicates to particular utterances, and that is, to utterances made by a specific person, in a specific context, and at a specific time. For example, “it is raining” is true when uttered by someone who is at a place where it is now raining. Importantly, while assertibles are true or false, more strictly speaking, assertibles that are *said* by someone are true or false. “Assertibles are those things saying which we either speak true or speak false” (SE *M* 8.73).

³³ Truth and the true differ in three respects (SE, *PH* 2.80-84). (i) In what they are: the true, i.e., a true *axioma*, is incorporeal; truth as a state of the soul is corporeal. (ii) In composition: the true is simple in the sense that individual *axiomata* are the bearers of truth-values; truth is constituted by the knowledge of many truths. (iii) In their modalities: it is possible to say something true by chance, not having the relevant knowledge; truth is tied necessarily to knowledge.

is, only someone whose rational soul is structured and made firm by a system of knowledge - possesses truth. Someone who holds a belief is never, even if the corresponding assertible is true, in the possession of truth. Her mind or reason is in such a state that her judgments are continually subject to change. Her attitudes to content are connected with each other in such chaotic ways that change can go both ways. Belief-change is thus not well described as belief-*revision*, which would imply that change follows certain norms of getting it right. Rather, all judgments are changeable and thus they are, in evaluative terms, all equal: beliefs that correspond to true assertibles are no better than those that correspond to false assertibles. Accordingly, any evaluation of beliefs as true is misguided. It suggests that some beliefs, the true ones, are better than others, the false ones. But no beliefs are better than other beliefs. The truth-predicates should only be used in characterizing assertibles, not in characterizing beliefs.³⁴

Insofar as this is the Stoic proposal, one might revise one's initial reaction to the claim that beliefs are not true or false. The Stoics advance a thesis on the question of which entities are truth-evaluable. These must be entities that can be true *or* false. Neither pieces of knowledge nor beliefs are plausible candidates: pieces of knowledge cannot be false, and beliefs are not true in the normatively relevant way - the believer is not, as the Stoics would put it, in possession of truth. This train of thought leads the Stoics toward their conception of *lekta*, the only ancient predecessor of our conception of propositions. The

³⁴ Accordingly, the truth-predicates are also not to be applied to pieces of knowledge. This may appear implausible, since pieces of knowledge are judgments in which true assertibles are asserted. The truth-predicates do not attach to pieces of knowledge because pieces of knowledge are not the kind of thing that can be true or false.

bearers of truth-values must be found outside of the field of normative epistemology; they are part of the subject-matter of logic and the philosophy of language.

IV. Conclusion

The proposed reading of the *Theaetetus* has many virtues. First, it explains something that no other interpretation can explain - that the *Theaetetus* is plausibly a late dialogue. Second, it helps understand core features of Stoic epistemology. Third, it takes seriously the question of what entity is to be considered the bearer of truth-values. We might agree with the Stoics that the answer to this question shall not be found in normative epistemology, but rather in the philosophy of language and logic. While we ordinarily call beliefs true and false, we might agree with the Stoics that propositions (or their Stoic cousin, complete *lekta*) are the bearers of truth-values.