

Critically discuss Plato's distinction between knowledge and belief

Plato explains that his theories on knowledge and belief in part seven of his Republic, whilst explaining the ideal rulers of his republic- Philosophers. Plato must explain to Glaucon the attributes of a philosopher- primarily learning, knowledge and truth. Each of these definitions is tricky and to justify his words Plato must bring in his theory of 'Forms'.

Forms are really the crux of the issue concerning knowledge and belief. Plato never gives a full or direct exposition of the theory of Forms; instead we have to draw this theory from his implications and, perhaps more useful, his allegories. Plato believed that there exists an intangible group of 'forms', perfect aspects of everyday things or emotions such as love, beauty or the colour blue. The objects and ideas in our material world are 'shadows' of the forms. He uses the allegory of the cave to illustrate this. In the allegory a prisoner is taken from a cave where all he has known is the reflection of fire and shadow, and led into the real world of sunlight and real images. The cave is comparable to our world as perceived through the senses, and the outside world is the world that philosophers must strive for, as it is the 'truth':

*'...my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual.'*

Here Plato implies that seeing the 'truth', i.e. the forms of good and light, is the ultimate knowledge.

This theory of forms goes some way to explaining Plato's definition of knowledge, and so now we have a basis to differentiate this from opinion/belief (these two words were used interchangeably by Plato). In fact, Plato defines belief before he defines opinion. It is best shown in the divided line analogy:

It shows that opinions are only things that can be perceived through our senses and are therefore not as reliable as forms and do not amount to knowledge. Plato's distinction thus becomes clear: If there is a line with knowledge at one side and ignorance on the other side then belief lies in between, with only physical things giving cause for belief but concepts justifying knowledge.

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21/1/03