

The Origin of the Concept of Knowledge

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Book précis

The idea that Plato and Aristotle analyzed knowledge, in the sense discussed by modern-day epistemologists, enjoys wide acceptance among both ancient scholars and contemporary theorists. I think that this idea is mistaken. To be sure, Plato and Aristotle were interested in epistemology, and they presented theories of an important epistemic concept, which they called ‘*epistêmê*.’ But, in laying out their theories of *epistêmê*, Plato and Aristotle were characterizing what they took to be an optimal or ideal epistemic state. They were engaged, that is, in what Robert Pasnau has 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 the idea that Plato and Aristotle were not principally interested in knowledge in the modern sense has experienced a recent growth in popularity, little work has been done to determine when and how knowledge became a focus of philosophical concern. The central claim of this research project is that this occurred in the work of the Stoics and, in particular, in their discussions of *katalêpsis*.

The Stoic interest in knowledge, however, did not come out of nowhere. Rather, I argue, knowledge emerged as an object of philosophical study through a process that had two broad stages. First, Aristotle introduced the

¹I defend this interpretation of Plato’s conception of *epistêmê* in my (2015) and (forthcoming).

concept of belief into philosophical discourse. 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. Plato's two central epistemological 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). Crucially, Plato does not employ a third concept that captures the generic notion of 'taking the world to be a certain way,' which would be common to both *doxa* and *epistêmê*. This generic notion is precisely what the concept of belief captures.

Aristotle introduced this concept into philosophical discourse with his use of the term '*hupolêpsis*.' Although Aristotle's *hupolêpsis* is often taken to approximate the notion of supposition, I argue that *hupolêpsis*, unlike supposition but like belief, requires a commitment to the truth of some relevant proposition (i.e. we can suppose that *p*, but cannot have the *hupolêpsis* or the belief that *p*, without taking *p* to be true) (cf. *Metaphysics*, 1005b23-32).² Moreover, Aristotle uses the notion of *hupolêpsis*, as philosophers use the notion of belief today, to characterize other cognitive states: *epistêmê*, for example, is *hupolêpsis* in an unprovable but necessary proposition (*Posterior Analytics*, 88b36-7) and *doxa* is *hupolêpsis* in an unprovable but contingent proposition (ibid., 89a3-4). Thus, I argue, Aristotle is the first thinker in the western tradition to employ a generic concept that both shares an essential feature with the contemporary notion of belief and plays a role in his epistemology analogous to that played by belief in modern epistemology.

Although Aristotle introduced belief into philosophical discourse, and thus helped clear up confusion in Plato's epistemology, he still thought that the interesting distinctions to draw among beliefs correspond to the different objects they can take. The Stoics, however, begin to focus on the notion of be-

²I argue for this interpretation of *hupolêpsis* in 'The Birth of Belief' (with Jessica Moss, in draft).

belief as such and, in particular, on the question of when beliefs are well-formed. 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 between cognitive states primarily based 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. So, just as Michael Frede (1980, 2011) argues that the Stoics introduced the original notions of cause and the will into philosophical discourse, I argue that they did the same for the concept of knowledge.

This understanding of the origin of the concept of knowledge also allows us to understand better why philosophical skepticism only becomes a robust movement in the time of the Stoics (and not for the simple reason that skepticism is usually taken to threaten knowledge). Since Plato and Aristotle were concerned to characterize an ideal state, the skeptical charge that human beings cannot achieve that state is not particularly threatening since it can still serve as a regulative ideal (just as we might think that a perfectly just society is not possible, 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 and so count as knowledge (*katalêpsis*), the objection that even that minimal threshold cannot be met must be refuted. Thus, whereas several philosophers contend that knowledge became a focus of philosophical study in response to skepticism (see Moravcsik (1979) and Zagzebski (2001)), I argue that skepticism became a philosophical concern in response to the focus on knowledge.

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