

SHORT

Knowing may not *be* the good, but apparently it makes us good. Quite possibly knowledge is virtue, or else displaces any need to talk of virtue in the usual way. These outrageous Platonic claims seem indefensible. This course will seek the best possible defence, and in the course of that deepen our understanding of who we are and the importance of reality and integrity in ethical formation.

We will first examine Plato's epistemology, which might be described as recommending we be *auto-logos* rather than *auto-nomos*. We become *auto-logos* by appreciating the robust standards of complete knowledge as having ultimate authority in our cognitive lives, and therefore in our estimation of the importance, salience, meaning and desirability of whatever perception of the world presents to us. Granting it this authority integrates our cognitive lives, and also our experience as sensate creatures with respect to a reality that is not determined by us. That is to say, aiming at accountability is a practice in integrating ourselves; aiming at comprehensive accountability integrates us comprehensively. A different account of knowledge – one for instance that distinguishes, as Aristotle does, between theoretical and practical knowledge – could not be expected to have the like effect on us; and similarly, restricting the relevant bit of reality to a pre-defined conception of the human (as at least neo-Aristotelian naturalists do) would not promise the fundamental reorienting that Plato's knowledge-seeking does. We will close by considering the expected or promised effect on character of a non-naturalist ethics, such as the Indian Buddhist one, which grants a Platonic sort of priority to knowing impersonal reality, but *does not* suppose the reality to be known is itself intelligible – nor that knowing consists in accountability.

LONG

Knowing may not *be* the good, but apparently it makes us good. Quite possibly knowledge is virtue, or else displaces any need to talk of virtue in the usual way. These outrageous Platonic claims seem indefensible. This course will seek the best possible defence, and in the course of that deepen our understanding of who we are and the importance of reality and integrity in ethical formation.

I. We begin by considering the thing for which such high claims are made: What *is* knowledge, according to Plato? An account focusing on the *Republic* and *Philebus* – not to the exclusion of the *Meno-Theaetetus*, and *Timaeus* – illuminates the authority knowing has and why. On this view, it is not being *auto-nomos* that we aim at, but being *auto-logos* – we do not give ourselves customs, but rather we are capable of giving and receiving complete accounts. Approximately instantiating the high standards set by complete explanation defines the domain of cognition, distinguishing it from sensation. Accountability is the source of the authority knowing has over belief or perception, and what distinguishes it from force.

II. Aiming at knowledge, as this ideal is described in the *Republic* and *Philebus*, commits us to certain principles – that reality can be distinguished from appearance, that truth is better than fiction or falsehood, that accuracy matters, that explanations cannot be idiosyncratic, that the more comprehensive explanation is the stabler and better one, the good is prior to the desirable. Indeed, true ability to give an account, or to give account of oneself and one's convictions, can only be distinguished from expediency by its ultimate commitment to real goodness. Any active seeking of knowledge will be a practice in respecting these principles. Even humble sort sorts of knowledge-seeking have this character, and so a salutary effect; while also making us amenable to extending this practice. In this way, we turn from what knowing is to what it does to us, and to how seeking to know forms character.

III. If we take the intelligibility of reality as a regulative ideal, then every attempt to understand better according to the ideal of knowledge described is necessarily *integrating*: Aiming at knowledge is aiming to clarify, make more coherent and accurate and stable the beliefs that we have, and thus to make *ourselves* – our priorities and preferences, and the choices and actions that follow from

these – likewise stably and comprehensively integrated. More important than merely integrating our belief set, aiming at knowledge gives shape and focus to our attention. It yields a perspective on the world, a way in which the world has meaning for us, which points always outside of and beyond ourselves as we happen to be.

Perspectives are morally assessable according to their accuracy, truth, fairness – that is, according to how they permit (or prevent) the good to come to light in everyday experience. The moral assessability of pleasures and pains – of our interests and our loves and professions and choices – is merely one manifestations of this. We locate the ethical relevance of Plato’s epistemology not primarily in action, then, but in the epistemic terms that qualify perfect knowing.

IV. Integrating Sensation and Knowing. If happiness (*eudaimonia*) is the human good, and *eudaimonism* the an ethos centred on *eudaimonia*, then Plato is no *eudaimonist*. The human good plays virtually no role in an ethic governed by knowing the good, as Plato describes it. The only relevance our humanity has thus far is that it (as any embodied, percipient nature) has modes of experience which mislead, are not truth-aiming and even defy accountability. There is something for us to work *against* in aiming at knowledge. At the same time, however, aiming at knowledge as Plato describes it offers the best hope of integrating the whole of our natures and faculties, unifying ourselves through aiming to unify our understandings of reality, such that our preferences and desires accord, our relations with others are honest and reliable, our words accord with each other and with our actions.

Along the way, we will be making contrasts particularly with Aristotle – at least Aristotelian ethics of the late-20th C. Anglophone ‘virtue ethicists’: unlike Aristotle*, Plato is not a naturalist, and does not advocate aiming at – or even think in terms of – the human good; Aristotle’s distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge is unknown to Plato, who would blanch at the quasi-perceptual character of the latter. Aiming at such a thing could not hope to promise to improve our character. We will also contrast Plato’s view with another non-naturalist idealism: Like Plato, Indian Buddhist philosophers suppose that aiming entirely to understand reality aright will reorder ones character, outlook and desires comprehensively. But they do not agree to the regulative principle of the intelligibility of reality, nor therefore can they call the effects of aiming to know integrating in the same way. The contrast should illuminate for us what is at stake in rejecting Plato’s intelligibility principle. For knowledge-seeking to be ethically central, is it sufficient to insist on aiming at truth as something outside of us and independent of our desires?