

*Epistemology***13.1 Introduction**

In Chapter 11 we saw that human beings have a part to play in mediating divine providence into the empirical world. But to play this role involves a crucial duality within the soul: a capacity for knowledge (of forms) on the one hand, and for perception and opinion (of empirical objects) on the other. And these two capacities are difficult to keep in balance. Many people, indeed, effectively ignore their intellect and pass their lives quite unaware of the existence of forms. Those who recognise the significance of intellect may find that it is hard to build its exercise into their everyday routine, and that the ideal of the so-called ‘contemplative life’ (a life which draws its purpose and value from contemplation of the forms) is actually at odds with the demands of the ‘practical life’ (a life of engagement with the empirical world and which, in the absence of contemplation, even finds its purpose and value there). The proper appreciation both of the limits of thought about the empirical world and of the nature and significance of contemplation is central to Platonist anthropology, and vital for Platonist ethical theory.

13.2 Shortcomings of Empiricism

The question of how thinking about forms relates to thinking about the empirical world is one that we started to address in Chapters 8 and 9. Is empirical thought merely a degraded form of intellection, or does it have independent roots?

It is a common view of Plato’s own mature epistemology that he thought something like the former: that is, that our ability to make sense of the empirical world is not just based on our possession of a soul whose essence is, as a matter of fact, shaped somehow by the forms, but that in order to think about the world at all we need to invoke the forms – even if we do so unconsciously. This involves the mechanism of ‘recollection’, the idea

being that all of our concepts (i.e. the mental categories into which we sort our empirical experience and make sense of it) are, whether we realise it or not, in fact dim traces or ‘memories’ of the forms. The argument goes that, when we ‘acquire’ an empirical concept, for example ‘green’, it is because our encounter with certain features of the empirical world sparks a distinct ‘memory’ of a putative form ‘Green’ which our soul must have encountered on some earlier occasion. (As we saw in Chapter 9 Section 9.6, this becomes an argument for the pre-existence, and ultimately the immortality, of souls.) Most people of course never interrogate this process closely enough to realise that the acquisition of the concept *is* an act of recollection like this, and for that very reason they are not motivated to make the effort to move beyond the empirical concept (the ‘recollection’) to recapture that of which it is memory. But if there had been nothing there to recall, if the mind had been what empiricist philosophers such as the Stoics liked to call a ‘blank tablet’ (e.g. *SVF* 2.83 = LS 39E.1) and nothing more, the empirical experience of something green would have had no purchase on it. It turns out in fact that our acquisition of empirical concepts *involves* something like a remote and shadowy contemplation of the forms.

There is some *prima facie* evidence that Platonists were indeed thinking along these lines. A number of texts, namely, seem to make the point that our raw empirical (sensory) experiences do not have the regularity or consistency to carve clear conceptual divisions into the mind: **M, O; 9Kk**[3]. Empiricists say that we acquire our concepts by *repeated* experiences of particular sensibilia; but do we in fact ever experience *the same* quality twice – or do we rather rely on some *prior* mental capacity in order to be able to conceptualise qualities *as similar*, and bring them under the same heading? (The Stoics, who were radical empiricists, might be especially vulnerable here because they were also nominalists, and believed that no two qualities could in fact be identical or even, at least in principle, indiscernible: see LS 40 J.6–7.)

Despite this opening, however, it seems certain that Platonists did not all (or did not always) deny the possibility of an empiricist foundation for some form of cognition. For one thing, they had to explain the cognitive abilities of animals, which are evidently able to make systematic empirical discriminations in the world around them, and more generally to learn from experience. Even those Platonists who believed that animal souls were essentially rational might have fought shy of claiming that animal cognition involved ‘recollection’. (Those who denied that they were rational would not have this available as recourse at all.) But something more fundamental to their own metaphysics prevented Platonists from linking

all cases of concept-acquisition to recollection. It might be possible to construe Plato as having posited ideal correlates for sensibilia; but Middle Platonists did not take him this way. As we saw in Chapter 5, their belief was that forms corresponded by and large only to natural species. There is certainly no form 'Green'. But that means that our ability to develop a concept of 'green' can have nothing at all to do with recollection: it must be entirely based on our empirical experience. But if experience can get us to concepts of all empirical properties – and, presumably, the way they are regularly 'bundled' in the natural world (see Chapter 8 Excursus) – then there seems to be no principled objection to the possibility that humans could develop a fully articulated mental apparatus capable of successful pragmatic discrimination, and of underwriting a fully *rational* life, purely by the mechanisms of empiricism.

This does not mean that Platonists are going to be content with empiricism, however. Empiricism might be pragmatically successful and it might allow us to live rationally; in short, it might underwrite a successful shot at the (merely) 'practical life'. But there would be no guarantee that it would be a *well-grounded* life, in just the sense that there would be no guarantee that the concepts on which it was based had any factive authority. 9Kk[3], then, which at first glance appears to suggest that all concept-formation involves recollection in fact allows that we could acquire concepts empirically, but with the qualification that they would be fallible and defeasible. So the argument is precisely that '*learning*' – which must here be taken as a success-term: the acquisition of reliable and accurate concepts – is recollection, not that all concept-formation is. M likewise should not, after all, be read as an attack on the possibility of empirical concept-formation, but rather as an attack on the idea that empiricism could provide stable foundations for epistemically privileged claims about the world. To live this way is precisely to live as animals do (see again 10X): successfully enough, but not with anything that could count as well-grounded understanding.

It is in the light of these considerations that we can see why some Platonists thought that the scepticism of the Hellenistic Academy was justified in some measure: not, of course, insofar as the claim might have been that knowledge is actually impossible, but very much so if one considers it as a reaction to the claims of Stoics and Epicureans to find empiricist underpinnings for knowledge. Read *ad hominem*, the arguments of the Sceptical Academy amount to a demonstration that empiricism, even if it can guide practical choice, can never lead to knowledge – something with which Platonists can cheerfully agree. (The debate between

someone like Plutarch, who thinks that the New Academy was a legitimate part of the Platonist tradition, and those, like Numenius, who believe it to be a betrayal of Plato – see above Chapter 1 with Note 31 – is largely a debate over whether the Academics themselves intended their arguments to be purely *ad hominem* in this way.) Without a grasp of the forms, there is no justification at all for confidence in one's empirical concepts: none that they correspond to real features in the world in the first place, and none that they are correctly applied to the articulation and understanding of particular empirical circumstances.

For Platonists, then, knowledge could only be found in the forms, whose contemplation in consequence is, or is the basis for, the best sort of life. But this leads to an important question. We shall see in Chapter 17 that Platonists build their understanding of the ethical end on a line of Plato's that includes the exhortation to 'flee the world'; but, as we have already seen in Chapter 9, our commission for the time being is to live in it and widen the diffusion of good through it. This is what raises the ethical question about how we are supposed to square the pursuit of contemplation with the calls of practical activity in the empirical realm; but first of all it raises a question of epistemology. To what extent, exactly, *can* contemplation of the forms improve the quality of our understanding of empirical matters, and affect our actions? Allowing that contemplation will never be able to elevate our empirical judgements to the status of knowledge, can it nevertheless help us to make better calls on the basis of our experience? Or (the more 'pessimistic' response) does it merely help us to achieve critical distance on the imperfections and uncertainties of the world, and serve to motivate our flight from it?

13.3 Theory 1: Anon. in *Tht.* and Alcinous

13.3.1 Knowledge and the Criterion

Anon. in *Tht.* is one of those who thinks that contemplation of the forms *can* improve our empirical judgements. **B** shows that he subscribes to the definition of knowledge (strictly, what he calls 'simple knowledge') in the *Meno*: 'right opinion bound by an explanation of the reasoning'; and he goes on to make it clear that by 'right opinion' he means what the *Theaetetus* means by it. (The *Theaetetus*, as he says, fails to achieve a definition of knowledge only because it fails to add the idea of a 'bond' to the last definition it explores, right opinion with reason.) He specifies further that he is talking about items of knowledge such as 'individual

theorems which go to make up geometry and music': **C**. But from the way this is connected with the *Meno*, and from the discussion of recollection, especially the fact that Theaetetus is the ideal interlocutor because he is someone capable of 'recollecting' (**D**), anon. evidently thinks that these items of knowledge are recollected. This means that he thinks that recollection feeds into our understanding of *the world*. Specifically, it provides the elements which go to make up a scientific framework and reference-point for the objects of our mundane experience.

Alcinous seems to think something similar. Rather like anon., he equates an object of recollection with what he calls 'simple knowledge' (**A**[6]), and although he identifies the domain of such knowledge as the 'intelligibles', he distinguishes 'primary' from 'secondary' intelligibles, characterising the latter as 'forms in matter which are inseparable from matter': **A**[7] (see Chapter 8 Excursus with Note 1b(i)). It looks very much as if recollection is being invoked here once again to give a scientific framework for understanding *the world* (in addition, that is, to leading us to an undiluted vision of the primary intelligibles which are distinct from it). Unfortunately for us, Alcinous does not gather this thought together with his discussion of 'right opinion', as anon. does. (Perhaps he prefers to keep the language of 'opinion' to particular empirical judgements – e.g. 'this is Socrates': see **A**[5] – while anon. is prepared to say that a person's grasp of Pythagoras' theorem, say, is also an 'opinion' of a sort.) But it looks very much as if he shares his underlying view. This impression is strengthened by the coda to Alcinous' discussion, where he applies his account of knowledge to the field of ethics (see also **19E** [2]). In ethics, he says, we do not make judgements of truth and falsity, but about what is appropriate or not appropriate: **A**[8]. But we make these judgements 'by referring them to our natural concepts' (which are objects of recollection, as we shall shortly see), 'as to a definite standard of measurement'. So what we recollect *informs* our ethical judgements – just as, I suppose, our scientific understanding of the world in general informs judgements we might make concerning members of the various species.

In general, then, recollection on this theory informs and grounds certain of our judgements – not, to be sure, about whether this is Socrates, but, for example, what we expect in general terms from a human. One can operate in the world without it, but not with the scientific understanding that it allows.

13.3.2 Knowledge and Recollection

So much for what recollection is *for* on this theory. But what exactly will recollection lead us back to? The answer might seem obvious – the

paradigm forms – but in fact the adherents of this theory appear to deny this: at least, they deny that the process of recollection can lead us back to a direct experience of the forms. Such experience, they claim, is *only* possible for the soul when it is out of the body: **A**[6]; cf. **2M**; **17A**[3]. During life, we only have available to us the *memories* of forms – memories which are what constitute the natural concepts: **A**[6], **9Kk**[3]; cf. **14A**[5.7].

Anon., for his part, is not so explicit that incarnate recollection is the recovery of memories rather than a road to direct cognition of the forms; but like Alcinoüs he describes recollection as a process of ‘unfolding’ and ‘articulating’ what he too calls ‘natural concepts’: **D**. It seems quite likely that he too thinks that these ‘natural concepts’ are psychological artefacts of our encounter with forms, rather than naming the encounter itself – just as empirical ‘concepts’ are psychological artefacts of our perception of sensibilia, and not the experience of perceiving itself.

If this is right, there are the beginnings of a correlation here; because Alcinoüs and anon. would be the only (Middle) Platonists we know of who make the point that recollection is the recovery of ‘natural concepts’ *and also* the only Platonists we know of who think that recollection supplies criteria for our mundane judgements – the only Platonists who think that our judgements can be *improved* and to some extent ‘grounded’ by the process of recollection. Is this any more than coincidence?

Perhaps not. One might, after all, wonder whether direct cognition of the forms would even be *capable* of doing the job that the recovery of memories of them does for Alcinoüs and anon. – that is, the job of providing criteria of a sort for empirical judgements. There are two potential obstacles to their doing this. The first is that a direct vision of the forms might simply *distract* us from the world – just as conversely, in the normal situation, our perception of the world distracts us from the forms. It seems odd to think that one can both be actively contemplating the forms and also applying them, instrumentally, to the assessment of empirical data.

But even if this were possible, it is not clear that the forms have the appropriate sort of commensurability with the empirical objects whose principles they are. Can one even in principle compare the objects we perceive with the forms we cognize, placing them as it were side by side? The answer ought to be ‘no’ if, for the reasons we have seen, forms lack empirical properties (Chapter 5 Section 5.3; cf. perhaps **O**). On the other hand, one might be able to imagine how memories corresponding to a previous experience of the forms, i.e. conceptualisations of the forms which

we acquire through our experience of them, could work to provide a sort of bridge between our previous experience of the forms and our current empirical experience. There is no a priori reason why such conceptualisations might not be commensurable with empirical concepts, so that they can be criterial for them.

One might be tempted to think of the system of Alcinous and anon. ('Theory 1') as one with some formal similarities to Stoic epistemology. The hope of such thinkers, presumably, would be to mitigate the form of scepticism appropriate to the empirical world. Of course, we cannot have knowledge of it – only opinion (*doxa*); but one's opinions can be better or worse, at least in the sense of being more or less well founded. And this is possible insofar as recollection gives us a mode of knowledge against which one can measure the deliverances of 'opinionative' reason (see **A**[2–3]), and distinguish those which are consistent with them from those which are not – just as Stoic 'common concepts' can be used as criteria for judgements (e.g. **LS** 40A). Naturally, Platonists do not go anywhere near as far as the Stoics, who allow (in principle) unshaken certainty to anything one might perceive; on the other hand, Alcinous and anon. can say that they improve on the Stoics by providing objective grounding for their 'natural concepts' which the Stoics are not able to do: Platonist natural concepts, namely, are grounded in our incorrigible prenatal experience of forms.

Table 13.1 *Summary of 'Theory 1' in the evidence of Alcinous and anon. in Tht.*

	Alcinous	anon. in <i>Tht.</i>
Recollection	9Kk [3]	
is the unfolding and articulation		D
of natural concepts		
= 'memories' of forms	A [6]	
= items of 'simple knowledge'		B [2.18–23]
= 'true opinions bound by explanation'		B [3.2–3] C
which correspond to 'intelligibles' in matter		
and which are criterial for judgement.	A [7–8]	

13.4 Theory 2: Plutarch, Celsus, Numenius

13.4.1 *Forms and Recollection*

Whatever the advantages of Theory 1, it is not without its theoretical challenges. It wins for Platonism what one might think of as a more 'optimistic' epistemology (although that is of course a prejudicial way of putting it); and it might be an easier reading of Plato, especially the *Phaedo*, to say that we can only encounter the forms when outside the body. But at what price do these advantages come?

The problem here is to understand whether it is even *coherent* to talk about a 'memory' or 'conceptualisation' of a form. What, exactly, would such a thing be like? Precisely because forms lack empirical properties, they lack those attributes which one would expect to be needed if we were to acquire concepts of them which we could relate to empirical bodies. Indeed, one might think that cognition of forms is not, and cannot be, representational at all. Rather, there is some kind of union between our intellect and the form. It is, precisely, *direct* cognition. In fact, this is crucial to the role that forms play as epistemological absolutes: it is cognition through union that eliminates the possibility of doubt or *mis*-representation (see later Plotinus, *Ennead* 5.5.1). But if our cognition of forms is not representational, it is hard to see how it can be, or become, *conceptual*. One can easily argue that it should not be possible to have concepts of forms at all.

In this case, one might more naturally think that the way recollection works is that our experience of the empirical world challenges us to see that there must be non-empirical principles in terms of which the orderliness evident in empirical patterns is explained; recollection is, simply, the process by which we think harder and harder about the order in the world, and what these principles must be such that they explain it. The end-point of the process is not the recovery of a suppressed 'memory' or concept of the forms; it is the turning of our mind back towards the forms themselves. This construal of recollection seems much truer to the evidence for other Platonists, who do quite clearly talk as if we can get to see the forms themselves during life, albeit rarely and with difficulty. Notable examples are Plutarch (**Q**; cf. **9Aa**), Celsus (**P**) and Numenius (**O**). It may of course not be coincidence that at least some of these people believe that the forms have a

more intimate relationship with the constitution of the soul than we can assume for Alcinoüs (see Chapter 8 Section 8.5.2.2.2); or that the human intellect is precisely that part of the soul which is never 'in' the body at all (as Plutarch thinks: **9R**).

13.4.2 *Forms and Empirical Cognition*

But notice what is lost. On this theory, the process of recollection cannot *improve* our empirical or practical judgements about the world. This is due to the problem of incommensurability that I raised before: one cannot assess sense-based judgements against the forms. And anyway, even the authors who talk of our seeing the forms during life think that we can see them only fleetingly – a fact which guarantees that they really *are* talking about what we can achieve during life, but also guarantees that our vision of the forms is not meant to underpin our ability to make sound judgements. (It cannot, for example, be the case that we can only make ethically well-informed decisions on those rare occasions when we glimpse the form of the good. Quite apart from anything else, the circumstances of concentrated meditation under which we can achieve these glimpses will tend to be circumstances when we are least likely to be called on for practical decision-making.) Of course the *existence* of the forms continues to guarantee and underpin the reality of cosmic order, and might to that extent guarantee the appropriateness of the empirical apparatus we acquire in our interactions with it. To that extent, the metaphysical system as a whole indirectly gives extrinsic validation to the full range of our judgements, a form of validation to which the Stoics, for example, cannot appeal. But it does not, in any case, affect the *intrinsic* quality of those judgements.

So what does recollection achieve for us? Under this theory, I suggest, its effect is to be understood within a broader ethical frame. Recollection of the forms, especially the form of the good, is essential to our ethical success and underpins it consistently – *even though* the experience of recollection itself might be limited and sporadic, and *even though* our vision of the forms cannot directly inform our ethical judgements. It does this because the epistemic content at which it aims is not what is important: what is important is the discipline and behaviour involved in the *activity* of recollecting. But a full account of this is something that will have to wait until Chapter 17.

NOTES AND FURTHER READING

1 Cognitive faculties

(a) Alcinous and ‘opinionative’ reason (A). The relationship between opinionative and epistemic reason in Alcinous is a matter for debate – a debate related to the question of whether we can form empirical concepts without recollection. Some people think that opinionative reason has a purely empirical basis, and so is substantially distinct from ‘epistemic’ reason: see Sharples 1989: 254 (and Chapter 9 Note 3d for a comparison with Philo), Schrenk 1991a; Sedley 1996b; Sorabji 2004: 1. 88. (In this case, recollection begins only when epistemic reason, which by contrast deals in intelligibles, is brought to bear on the sensible world.) Others argue that ‘opinionative’ and ‘epistemic’ reason are the very same thing, the faculty of reason, but distinguished by content, that is, insofar as it is brought to bear on sensible or intelligible reality (Boys-Stones 2005, and esp. Helmig 2012: ch. 4.1; Trabattoni 2016: 62–5; see 8U[1024EF] with Thévanaz 1938: 81 for the same idea in Plutarch). Some people who hold the latter view take it to entail, or even to mean, that cognition of the sensible world must involve recollection (Helmig 2012: 144) – a view which might be tempting if one imagines reason as something *constituted* by its content, ideally the forms. This, however, is not a view Alcinous holds; and even if it were so constituted, it does not follow that the forms in the pre-philosophical mind would determine or colour its activity: it would be tantamount to something like the fallacy of composition to assume that they would. **(b) Plato’s ‘Line’ image.** For the image of the divided line at *R.* 509d–511e as a map of ontological categories in Platonism, see Chapter 5 Note 5c. The image is also a natural starting-point for the relationship between cognitive faculties and the various objects of thought. *(i) Plutarch.* See **N**, and further Dörrie 1981b (suggesting that Plutarch’s insistence on the unequal size of the parts is aimed against Pythagorean claims to a pre-Platonic ‘original’ with equal parts); Napolitano 1988: 407–13; Schoppe 1994: section II; Ferrari 1996b; 1999b. *(ii) Anon. in *Tht.** Tarrant 2000: 144–6 argues that anon. distinguishes intellection, *noësis*, from understanding, *dianoia*, rather by method than by object: the latter, namely, deals in ‘simple knowledge’, the former in that knowledge as articulated into science. *(iii) Alcinous.* The ‘Line’ probably forms part of the background of **A**[7], where it is married to the epistemological language of *Timaeus* 27d–28a (see 28c, 51d–52a).

2 Scepticism towards the empirical world

(a) Plutarch (i) His position. Plutarch exemplifies what must be the general Platonist view that the perceptible world is strictly unknowable because of its own nature. (This position, sometimes known as ‘metaphysical’ scepticism, because it is grounded in a metaphysical view, is to be contrasted with ‘epistemological’ scepticism, i.e. the position of simple uncertainty about the world,

including whether it could be known or not, and the reasons for one's own uncertainty.) See in general, Boys-Stones 1997a; Opsomer 1998 (esp. but not only ch. 4); Bonazzi 2003a (ch. 6 for Plutarch), 2004a. Note that this is consistent with a form of 'probabilism' (the position that one can make a judgement about what is plausible or probable, even if unable to be sure what is true) – or what Platonists might rather think of as the facility to make 'doxastic' judgements, namely about the way the world as a matter of fact seems. Donini 1986b denies probabilism to Plutarch, on the basis of a remark at *On the Principle of Cold* 955 C; but see contra Boys-Stones 1997b; also Brittain 2007. Nikolaidis 1999, at the other extreme, argues that Plutarch's probabilism means that he is not properly thought of as a sceptic at all; but note that he was able to see the 'New' (sceptical) Academy as part of a unified Platonic tradition (see next note). (For epistemological *caution* in Plutarch, see Note 3a(iii) below.) (ii) *His relationship with other sceptical traditions.* For Plutarch and the New Academy see, in addition to the foregoing literature (also Chapter 1 Note 3i), Brittain 2001: 225–36; Bonazzi 2006. It is unclear why Plutarch thought that Academic scepticism was different from Pyrrhonian scepticism – which the title as given at *Lamprias* 64 suggests he did. It may be that he saw Pyrrhonism as 'epistemological': anon. *in Thet.* 61–3 seems to do so in distinguishing it from Protagorean relativism; but it may more simply be that he thought that Pyrrhonists did, but that Academics did not, positively rule out the possibility of non-empirical knowledge (see Bonazzi 2012b); or, again, more simply still, that he objected to the Pyrrhonists' refusal to judge probability as well as truth (something which is consistent with the view voiced by Florus in Plutarch's *Table-Talk* 5.2, 652B that Protagoreanism *leads* to Pyrrho). Finally, it is worth noting that Plutarch was aware of (what we call) Neo-Academic Sceptics, including his friend Favorinus (see Barigazzi 1993). Favorinus (who was also known to, and attacked by, Galen) may have been among those noted by anon. *in Thet.* who argued that Plato 'was an Academic, in the sense of not having doctrines' (col. 64; see Bonazzi 2003a: section 4.3; 2003b: 72). (b) *Apuleius.* For his 'scepticism', see Winkler 1985: 125–6. (c) *Philo.* It is interesting that Philo's own scepticism towards the empirical world (I) does not lead him to speak in denigrating terms about it; rather, he turns the thought around by inviting us to think of the empirical realm as a valuable portal to the intelligible: J.

3 Concepts

(a) *Empirically formed concepts.* See esp. Scott 1987 (using M[278] as the starting-point for a re-evaluation of Plato himself); Gerson 1999: section 3 (71–4). (Plutarch, using the language of Plato, *Letter* 7, 341 c–d, says at *On Right Listening* 48 C that a child's education already involves 'kindling' the mind rather than 'filling' it: but it might be reading too much into the metaphor to use this as evidence that he thought that all concepts were formed by recollection.) The

possibility of forming concepts independently of recollection would certainly need to be the case if Brenk 1994: 3 is right to argue that Plutarch has the soul first come into the world without any prior experience of forms at all. **(b) Recollection.** *(i) Common concepts.* Chase 2011 suggests that Antiochus already was responsible for linking the Stoic theory of common concepts to recollection. In general, the use among Platonists of the (originally) Stoic phrase ‘common concepts’ or ‘natural concepts’ has been explained as a token of eclecticism (e.g. Schrenk 1991a), or as an innocent example of the diffusion of philosophical language (Whittaker 1987a: 115; Whittaker and Louis 1990: 84 n. 58); but Boys-Stones 2005 argues that it has a polemic edge (the point would be that Stoic ‘natural concepts’ can only ground knowledge if they are really Platonic recollections); see subsequently Chiaradonna 2007a; Trabattoni 2016: 72–4; Bonazzi 2013c. Merlan 1963: 72–4, at another extreme, argues that ‘natural concepts’ in Alcinoüs, along with the type of ‘memory’ associated with them, refers only to the inductive concept, and not to ‘Platonic’ recollection at all. He is followed by Schrenk (see Note c below). *(ii) Finding god.* Coming to know god (usually identified, after all, with the form of the good) is a paradigm case of ‘recollection’, but also unusually hard. Plutarch, for example, having said in **Q** that some glimpse of forms is possible while we are in the body, goes on to say that there is no direct contact with god (Osiris, i.e. the Good) until we are free of it (*Isis and Osiris* 382 F). The model of ‘mathematical’ abstraction for making the approach in **N** has a parallel in **6A**[5] (although note that Alcinoüs ends with a point, not a monad: see Invernizzi 1976a: 49–50); see perhaps Celsus ap. Origen, *Against Celsus* 7.42–4. Invernizzi (1976a: 46–8) supposes that the model is just that – the transfer of a methodology from mathematics to theology (and see Wolfson 1952: 118–19), and there is no need to follow Schoppe 1994: 25–6 to posit a lacuna at 1002A to prevent the conclusion that forms are numbers (i.e. the unique quantities with which the passage formally ends). But for a different view, see Krämer 1964: 1.4, arguing that the theology here essentially *is* mathematical, in the mould of Xenocrates. *(iii) Plutarch and knowledge of forms.* For the point that **M** is concerned with recovering a ‘normative concept’ (i.e. recollection of the forms), see Fine 2014, ch. 9 (albeit Fine’s view is that this is all it *would* be good for, as if it is intended to criticise the possibility of any concept-formation at all without recollection). In a series of studies, Donini has argued that Plutarch associates theoretical reflection on the divine realm with Pythagoreanism: see Donini 1999b, 2003, 2007. This realm Plutarch thinks of as knowable, of course – but properly subject to epistemological *caution* (*eulabeia*): see Donini 1986a, 1986b, 1994: 5065–7, 2007; also Bonazzi 2006; Babut 2007. *(iv) An Empiricist response?* A counter-attack against what they see as the arbitrary postulate of recollection may be visible in the work of contemporary empiricists, who talk of the absurdity of ‘running into’ a concept as it were by accident: see Seneca, *Letter* 120, esp. 120.4 and Alexander, *Mantissa* 152.27–9, with Boys-Stones 2014,

esp. n. 13. (Numenius in **O**[2] may have this sort of response in mind when he says that one cannot indeed chance upon the Good; cf. **M**[280].) **(c) Is incarnate cognition of forms possible?** Theories 1 and 2 in my reconstruction above are distinguished in their view of whether a soul can be led to direct vision of the forms while it is still in the body. Modern scholarship on Plato tends to take its cue from the *Phaedo* and argues that it cannot, and some see this more ‘pessimistic’ stance even in Plutarch (Schoppe 1994: 250–66; Bonazzi 2015a: 350–1); but the evidence of **O** makes it undeniable for Numenius at least. Conversely, Linguisti 2012: 192 argues that *all* Platonists held the ‘optimistic’ view that cognition of the forms is possible – despite doubts about the coherence of the view in the absence of a theory of undescended intellect, and despite texts such as **A**[6]. Schrenk has argued that Alcinous’ incarnate soul lacks the capacity for indirect as well as direct cognition of the forms. In Schrenk’s view, the soul while incarnate only has access to ‘secondary intelligibles’ (understood by him as immanent forms), as it only has access to primary intelligibles (paradigm forms) when separated from the body. (‘Natural concepts’ in this case are derived from reflection on secondary intelligibles, and not traces left in the soul by transcendent forms.) See Schrenk 1991a: 357 (against Invernizzi 1976a: 95 n. 44), with 1991c and 1993 (which argue for the roots of the theory in Aristotelian scientific method).

4 Reading the *Theaetetus*

(a) Disagreement over its aim. This dialogue played a special role in Platonist epistemology, not least, no doubt, because its formally aporetic ending might have given succour to the scepticism of the Academy. See especially Sedley 1996a, showing that anon. *in Tht.* interprets the work in the light of the *Meno* as concerning knowledge – specifically (as argued in Tarrant 2000: ch. 10 and 2005: ch. 6) the starting-point in ‘right opinion’ for what ‘recollection’ will later turn into ‘simple’ knowledge. Alcinous on the other hand reads it in the light of *Republic* *Timaeus* as concerning the nature of the criterion (anon. *in Tht.* criticises just such a reading at **B**): see again Sedley 1996a; also 1996b. If Thrasyllus’ view is reflected in **H**, then he sees its work as that of clearing away false conceptions of knowledge (Sedley 2009); this might be the view taken by Plutarch, who argues in his first *Platonic Question* (of which **L** is a part) that Socrates’ ‘maieutic’ method involves him in refraining from making dogmatic claims about the empirical world as well as provoking recollection of the intelligible. **(b) Its theory of perception.** Another exegetical crux relevant to epistemology appears to have been whether the theory of perception at 156a–157c (part of the so-called ‘secret doctrine’) represents Plato’s own. Sedley associates the view that it does with those who think that the *Theaetetus* is about the failure to find a criterion for knowledge – a group opposed by the anonymous commentator (Sedley 1997b; cf. Tarrant 2000: 172; 2003); Tarrant 2000: 175 places Plutarch’s teacher Ammonius among this group. Whether the

association holds in every case, though, is unclear: Alcinoüs also thinks the *Theaetetus* is about the criterion (see Sedley 1996a, 1996b), but there is no clear indication that he takes a radical position on the flux of perception (see above): it is enough that empirical concepts have no privileged status. (c) **Ancient commentaries** (i) *Anon. in Tht.* See references and discussions in the foregoing, and also Mansfeld 1973 and Burnyeat 1978 (on its discussion of the mathematics behind *Tht.* 147d–148b); Sedley 1993 (on definition, making the case for the author’s acquaintance with Aristotle’s *Topics*); Tarrant 2003 (on its engagement with relativism); Bonazzi 2008 (on its engagement with the Stoics). (And see Chapter 2 Note 8b for the role of **C** in discussions of the text of *Meno* 98a.) (ii) *Others.* **H** may be a fragment of a commentary on the *Theaetetus*, by Thrasyllos or someone influenced by him: see Sedley 2009. But we know of no other commentary until Proclus (who wrote one which no longer survives: he refers to it at *On the Timaeus* i. 255.24–6). That might conceivably be taken as evidence for a decline in the popularity of ‘Theory 1’ as I describe it above: Theory 1 is more closely bound up than ‘Theory 2’ with a systematic discussion of the *Theaetetus*, which it construes as a discussion about knowledge of the empirical realm.

5 Plato-inspired dogmatism about the empirical world

(a) *Antiochus and the early Academy* (?). Two texts not included in this chapter use Plato to underpin the view that knowledge of the empirical realm is possible: I mention them here, because they might qualify for inclusion on purely formal grounds: the first because it is contemporary and refers to ‘Platonists’, the second because it is from an account of Plato normally assumed to rely on Middle Platonist sources. (i) *Sextus Empiricus, Against the Professors* 7.141–4. Sextus here ascribes to ‘Platonists’ the view that reason discerns truth from falsehood in cases where sensation yields ‘clarity’ (*enargeia*). But this empiricist interpretation of the epistemology of Plato’s *Timaeus* is at odds with all other evidence for ‘Platonist’ positions. At best, it recalls Antiochus of Ascalon – conceivably representing here the views of the early Academy (which would explain the reference to ‘Platonists’, a term otherwise not used of Antiochus, even by Sextus): see Sedley 1992, 2012c: 93–101 (esp. 98); but also Brittain 2012: 108–13 (arguing against the possibility of specific attribution). (ii) *Diogenes Laertius* 3.15. This text reverses the normal direction of inference in the argument from forms to recollection, arguing instead that, since memory (which matches an earlier perception with a current one) is of what is unchanging, there must be forms. But this argument may go back to Alcimus (fourth century BC), named in 3.17 as the source of supporting quotations from Epicharmus. In any case, the argument works best if the ‘forms’ at issue here are structures in the perceptible world rather than the transcendent objects of recollection – not least because (all) animals are said to need access to them (but see

Chapter 10 Note 4a). **(b) Galen.** Galen is most obviously distinguished from the ('mainstream') Platonist tradition by his conviction that empirical experience as well as reason can supply knowledge (medicine for example allows of certainty); indeed it can be a much surer path to knowledge than thought about 'divine' matters (such as the eternity of the cosmos). See e.g. Chiaradonna 2009b (esp. 249, 259); Havrda 2015; and Chapter 16 Note 5a.

6 Divine inspiration: Jewish, Christian, Platonist

I have argued that Platonists did not view Plato as in any literal sense *inspired*: see Chapter 1 Note 2b. Attacks on the supposed fideism of the Christians, as in **R**, might be taken to support this view; although others have found fideism in some Platonist authors, notably Plutarch (e.g. Frazier 2005: 125–7; Van Kooten 2012); and the Chaldaean Oracles are certainly meant to come directly from god. (Philo sometimes casts what can be read as a standard move to ground certainty in the divine realm and its providential relationship with us in more personal terms, as if secure cognition is a gift from god: e.g. *Confusion* 125–7.)

TEXTS

**A. ALCINOUS, *Didaskalikos* 4.2–8 (pp. 154.18–156.23)
(followed by 14A)**

Approaching this more clearly, the philosopher might be said to be the judge by whom things are judged; but reason, which we call an instrument too, is also a judge, through which the truth is judged. And reason is twofold: there is one sort which is completely firm and unshakeable, and another which is reliable in its grasp of things. Of these, the former is possible for god but impossible for man; the second is possible for man as well. [3] And this too [i.e. the second kind of reason] is double: there is reason concerned with intelligible objects and reason concerned with perceptible objects. Of these, the one concerned with intelligibles is ‘knowledge’ or ‘epistemic reason’; the one concerned with perceptibles is ‘opinionative reason’ or ‘opinion’. So epistemic reason is secure and permanent, since it is concerned with secure and permanent objects; but persuasive, ‘opinionative’ reason contains a great deal of [mere] likelihood because its objects are not permanent.

[4] The principles of knowledge, i.e. knowledge regarding intelligibles, and of opinion, i.e. opinion regarding perceptibles, are *intellection* and *perception*. Perception is an experience [*pathos*] of the soul that comes by way of the body – announcing in the first place the [perceptual] capacity that has been affected. And when perception takes place and an imprint comes about in the soul by way of the sense-organs – the imprint is a ‘perception’ – and when this imprint does not fade in the course of time, but remains and is preserved, its preservation is called ‘memory’.

[5] Opinion is the interweaving of memory and perception. We encounter some perceptible thing, and from it a perception comes about in us, and from this memory; and then, when we encounter the same perceptible thing again, we combine the pre-existing memory with the perception we get the second time, and we say to ourselves ‘Oh – Socrates!’ (or ‘horse’, or ‘fire’ or whatever). This is called opinion: our combining a pre-existing memory with a recent perception. And if the two things go together, we have a true opinion, but if they clash, a false one. So for example if someone has a memory of Socrates, encounters Plato, and because of some similarity between them thinks he has met Socrates again, he takes the perception he has from Plato as being from Socrates, and combines it with his memory of Socrates – and a false opinion results. Plato compares that in which

memory and perception come about to a wax block [*Tht.* 191 c ff.]. When the soul has formed the objects of opinion from perception and memory and considers them in thought [*dianoia*], as it might consider the things from which they come about, Plato calls this kind of thing ‘visualisation’ [*anazōgraphēsis*, cf. *Ti.* 71c; *Phlb.* 39b–40a], or sometimes ‘imagination’ [*phantasia*, e.g. *Sph.* 263d]. And he says that thought is the soul’s dialogue with itself, and speech an emanation which comes from it, through the mouth, with voice [*Sph.* 263e].

[6] Intellection is the activity of the intellect contemplating the primary intelligibles: it seems that there are two types. There is the sort before the soul is in the body, when the soul is contemplating the intelligibles; and there is the sort after it enters this body. Of these, the sort before the soul is in the body is what is really meant by ‘intellection’; but when the soul is in the body, what had been called intellection is now said to be a ‘natural concept’, a sort of intellection stored up in the soul. So when we say that intellection is the principle of epistemic reason, we do not mean the so-called intellection that we have now, but what the soul has when it is separate from the body – i.e. what is *called* intellection in that state, as we said, but is now a natural concept. Plato also refers to a natural concept as ‘simple knowledge’ [see perhaps *R.* 438e] and the ‘soul’s wing’ [*Phdr.* 246e] – and sometimes even ‘memory’ [e.g. *Phdr.* 250a]. [7] From these items of knowledge, i.e. of simple knowledge, natural epistemic reason is constituted, arising in us naturally.

Since there is epistemic reason and opinionative reason, and there is intellection and perception, there are also things that fall under them, such as intelligibles and perceptibles. And since of intelligibles some are primary, like the forms [*ideai*], and others secondary, like the forms [*eidē*] that are in matter and inseparable from matter, intellection too is double. There is intellection of the primary intelligibles, and intellection of the secondary intelligibles. And again, of perceptibles some are primary, such as the qualities (e.g. colour, whiteness), but others accidental (e.g. the white, the coloured); and on top of these there is the bundle (e.g. fire, honey). Consequently there is a kind of perception which is of primary perceptibles, and called ‘primary perception’, and there is ‘secondary perception’ of secondary perceptibles. Intellection discriminates primary intelligibles not without epistemic reason – and by a sort of comprehensive grasp, not serially; epistemic reason, not without intellection, discriminates secondary intelligibles; perception discriminates primary and secondary perceptibles, not without opinionative reason; and opinionative reason discriminates the bundle, not without perception. [8] The intelligible cosmos is a

primary intelligible, while the perceptible cosmos is a 'bundle': so intellection with reason – that is, 'not without reason' – is the judge of the intelligible cosmos, while opinionative reason not without perception is the judge of the perceptible cosmos.

There is theory and there is action, and right reason does not judge what falls under theory the same way that it judges what is to be done. In the case of theory, it examines what is true and what not; in the case of what is to be done, it examines what would be appropriate, what would be inappropriate, and what is actually done. For, in virtue of having a natural concept of the fine and good, we use our reason and judge if things are one way or the other by referring them to our natural concepts, as to a definite standard of measurement.

B. ANONYMOUS (I), *On the Theaetetus* 2.11–3.28 (from the preface)

Some Platonists thought that the dialogue is about the criterion, since it is rich in investigation of this. This is not right. Rather, it is about [2.20] simple and incomposite knowledge: for this purpose it has to look into the question of the criterion. By 'criterion' I mean that through which we judge, as a tool. For we need something by which to judge things: then, as long as this is accurate, the steadfast acceptance of [2.30] well-made judgments gives us knowledge. But these people say that, having proposed to search for knowledge, he shows in the *Theaetetus* what its objects are not, and in the *Sophist* what its objects are. [2.40] They came close, but they did not reach the truth: for he does not seek the material with which knowledge is concerned, but [2.50] what its essence is. This is a different thing, as in the case of skills it is one thing to look for the essence of each of them, another to look for the material with which they concern themselves. [3.1] Knowledge is right reason bound 'by an explanation of the reasoning' [*Men.* 98a] – for we know things when we know what they are, but also why they are. But there were those who valued the senses highly because they possess [3.10] something striking, attributing accuracy to them as well. Because of this, he is first going to put their supposition to the test; then he will pass on to right opinion, and after this to right opinion with reason. [3.20] Then he will cease the investigation – for he would only need to add the *bond of explanation* for his account of this kind of knowledge to be complete. This sort of thing will be clarified in the exegesis.

C. ANONYMOUS (1), *On the Theaetetus* 14.45–15.30

He [Socrates] did not say: ‘You learn geometry from Theodorus’, [15.1] but ‘something of geometry’ [*Tht.* 145c8]. For the discussion is not about composite knowledge (what some people call ‘systematic’ knowledge), but about simple knowledge, such as the cognition of [15.10] individual theorems which go to make up geometry and music. These individual items of cognition go to make up one composite body of knowledge (what is simple is prior to what is composite). [15.20] He defined this [i.e. ‘simple’ knowledge] in the *Meno* as ‘right reason bound by an explanation of the reasoning’ [*Men.* 98a]; Aristotle defined it as ‘supposition with proof’;¹ Zeno as a ‘condition in the receipt of impressions which is not subject to modification by [15.30] argument’ [see LS 41 H.1 = *SVF* 3.112]. . . [[*text breaks off*]]

D. ANONYMOUS (1), *On the Theaetetus* 46.34–48.11

[Socrates to Theaetetus:] ‘*Try to copy the answer you gave about powers: there are many of them, but you embraced them in a single species; in a similar way, give a single account of the [46.40] many examples of knowledge*’ [*Tht.* 148d4–7].

For the natural concepts are in need of articulation. Before this, people apprehend things insofar as they have traces of them; but they do not apprehend them clearly. This is why [47.1] Theaetetus was not in a position to give an adequate account of knowledge, but did not find it easy to listen to anyone else properly either, as Socrates encouraged him to do.

[Theaetetus:] ‘*But I can’t stop worrying.*’ [47.10] [Socrates:] ‘*They are labour-pains, my dear Theaetetus – because you are not empty, but pregnant*’ [*Tht.* 148e5–7].

And yet, although he did not hit on it, Theaetetus does not give up searching for what knowledge is. [47.20] His good nature meant that he was full of common concepts, and that they were not buried too deep in him.

[Socrates:] ‘*But have you heard that I practice the same skill?*’ [*Tht.* 149a4]. ‘*So do you know that I myself have the same skill as my mother, [47.30] because I act as midwife?*’ He called himself a midwife after her because his method of teaching was that kind of thing. Sometimes he expounded and

¹ No such claim is found, at least in surviving works; Bastianini and Sedley 1995: 499 (ad loc.) compare texts including *de An.* 427b25 and *Ph.* 227b13–14 (knowledge as ‘supposition’, *hypolépsis*) with *APo.* 1.2 (dependence of knowledge on proof).

committed himself to doctrines; but when he was teaching, he prepared [47.40] his students to talk about things themselves, unfolding and articulating their natural concepts. And this way of doing things follows from the doctrine that so-called acts of ‘learning’ [48.1] are in fact acts of recollection, and that the soul of every man has seen what exists and does not need the mathematical sciences to be inculcated – it needs recollection. This doctrine will be discussed in my commentary on [48.10] *On the Soul* [i.e. the *Phaedo*].

E. ANONYMOUS (1), *On the Theaetetus* 52.44–53.36

One might ask how it is that anyone can have a thought that is a ‘phantasm’, or ‘false’ [*Tht.* 150c2], [53.1] if you believe that learning is always recollection. In fact, this would be a difficulty for us if the claim was that souls had knowledge equally prior to embodiment and when they are in the body [53.8]... [[15 lines beyond reconstruction]]... [53.23] and different souls are joined to different bodies, and to different characters. Again, some souls recollect more quickly, some [53.30] more slowly. Some are completely confused, cannot make any judgements, have a random disposition, and so acquire false thoughts.

F. ANONYMOUS (1), *On the Theaetetus* 56.11–37

[Socrates:] *‘But they discover and give birth to many fine things themselves’* [*Tht.* 150d7–8].

How can he maintain that souls recollect if they learn or ‘discover’? One answer is that those who have lost something and [20] get it back later are also said to ‘discover’ it. And anyway, he does not always use the term ‘recollection’, but only when it is the principal object of his inquiry. He made this clear in the *Meno* when he said: ‘It makes no difference if we say that [30] it can be learnt or remembered’ [see *Men.* 87b8–c1].

[Socrates:] *‘The god and I are responsible for their delivery’* [*Tht.* 150d8].

For the concepts are not enough to show someone wise, unless they are also articulated.

G. ANONYMOUS (1), *On the Theaetetus* 57.11–42

[Socrates:] *‘Some people, Theaetetus, who do not seem to me to be somehow pregnant...’* [151b2].

In fact, in the *Symposium* he says that *all* men are pregnant in soul and body [*Symp.* 206c], [57.20] and it is likely that pregnancy of the soul in this case is recollection. So how can he say here that he thinks that some are not pregnant? You have to understand the qualification ‘in this life’. For although recollection is sometimes possible, [57.30] it cannot be readily available in every incarnation. It was not for nothing that he wrote ‘somehow’ before ‘pregnant’: it is there so that it would be understood that in some way they are *not* pregnant, i.e. in terms of its [recollection’s] availability. [57.40] But in general terms, souls must be pregnant.

H. PAPYRUS (anonymous): *POxy* 4941, fr. 1, col. i.6–14

Next, this one, the *Theaetetus*, and after the *Theaetetus* the *Sophist* and *Politicus*, which teach the method of definition and division. The latter [works] are unambiguously concerned with this, but the *Theaetetus* less clearly so, since he [Plato] also wants there to dismantle errors and demonstrate things of human concern. In the three dialogues, the unfolding from memory. . . [[*text breaks off*]]

I. Philo, *On Drunkenness* 169–71 (a passage which is the prelude to an account of the ten ‘modes’ of scepticism originally developed by the Pyrrhonian sceptic Aenesidemus)

If someone prides himself in being sufficiently competent at planning, or at choosing and avoiding things, the following considerations ought to serve as a reminder. If it happened that we were always struck by the same, invariable impressions from the same things, then perhaps we would have had to admire the two criteria established in us by nature, perception and intellect, for their honesty and impartiality; we would not be in doubt about anything and have to suspend judgement; instead, we would trust how things seemed to us and immediately accept some impressions and reject others. [170] But in fact we find ourselves moved by them in different ways, and are not able to say anything certain about anything, because what appears to us is not fixed, but changes in many ways into many forms. And since impression lacks secure foundation, judgement of it lacks sure foundation as well. [171] There are many reasons for this. . .

J. Philo, *On Dreams* 1.185–7

What can be pointed to and seen, this perceptible cosmos here, is nothing else than a ‘house of God’ [Genesis 28:17], of one of the powers of *being* – that in virtue of which it is good. [186] And he [Moses] called the cosmos a ‘house’, and described it as a ‘gate’ of the true ‘heaven’ [*ibid.*]. And what is that? The intelligible cosmos, constituted by the forms within his agent by God’s patronage, can only be grasped by inference [*metabasis*] from this perceptible and visible cosmos: [187] one cannot get an intellectual grasp of any of the incorporeal things that exist except by taking one’s start from bodies.

K. MAXIMUS, *Orations* 10.3a–f (on why some thinkers have talked of death as the awakening of the soul)

What then do Epimenides and Pythagoras and Aristeas mean to hint at? Is it not the relief from pleasures and afflictions of the body that the good man’s soul enjoys when it is released from the turmoil associated with it, turns its intellect to itself, and encounters once again the truth itself, free of images? [b] This is like a beautiful sleep full of clear dreams; but it is also like the soaring flight of the soul – not over the peaks of mountains in the misty and turbid air, but higher than this, up in the stillness of the aether, where the calm and silence leads it effortlessly to the truth, to vision. [c] And what is the nature of its escort? What can we fittingly call it? Surely ‘learning’; or, with Plato, ‘recollection’. Or should we say that it has two names: learning *and* recollection? [d] And this thing is like eye-disease: the eye always possesses sight, even when sometimes, unfortunately, mist pours in and surrounds the organ, and separates it from association with visible things. The application of skill can not bring sight to the eye, but does draw off the impediment and unblock its channel to the outside world. [e] Think of the soul as a kind of sight which naturally perceives and has knowledge of what exists. It is filled by mist through its unfortunate association with bodies, and the mist confounds its vision and destroys its precision and extinguishes its proper light. [f] But when expert reason, like a doctor, is present, it does not fill it with* knowledge that it brings and which the soul did not already have; rather, it rouses what it had, although it was dark and imprisoned and drowsy.

* reading οὐ προστιθέναι (attested as a correction in one ms.); εὐπροστιθέναι Hobein (‘it makes it receptive to’)

L. PLUTARCH, *Platonic Questions* I, 1000D–E

Consider as not worth the trouble everything else that his divinity [*daimonion*] prevented Socrates from ‘begetting’: poetry, the mathematical sciences, rhetorical speeches and the views that sophists have. But the only wisdom Socrates recognised, that concerning the divine and intelligible – what he called ‘erotics’ – is not a matter of people’s begetting it, [E] or discovering it, but of recollecting it. So Socrates did not teach, but implanted in the young the starting-points for doubt, which is a sort of birth-pang, and so awoke and stirred up and drew out their innate intellection. He called this the ‘maieutic art’: it does not instil intellect from outside in those who encounter it, which is what other people claim to be able to do; rather, it shows people who have it what they possess, albeit imperfect and confused and in need of nurture and confirmation.

M. PLUTARCH,² fr. 215a–f = Damascius, *On the Phaedo* (I), 275–80

From the Chaeronean [Plutarch]: [275] (a) that, as Arcesilaus said, the object of knowledge is not the cause of knowledge: if it were, a lack of knowledge would also seem to be a cause of knowledge; [276] (b) that the soul does not turn itself to grasp things or to be in error about them, as the Stoics think: how can the soul be the cause of its own knowledge [*gnōsis*] and ignorance when it does not already possess them to begin with? [277] (c) that only Plato can give a ready explanation, by referring knowledge and ignorance to forgetting and recollection; [278] (d) that items of knowledge are within, but hidden beneath experiences that overlay them, like the tablet sent by Demaratus [see Herodotus 7.239];³ [279] (e) that both seeking and finding illustrate recollection (for one cannot search for something of which one has no notion, or find it – at least by searching, since someone who comes across it by accident is also said to find it); [280] (f) that the question raised in the *Meno* [80d] whether it is possible to seek and to find is a real problem: we cannot seek and find what we know (it would be superfluous), or what we do not know (for even we if came across it by accident, we would not know it: it would be like any chance thing). The Peripatetics came up with the idea of *potential intellect*: but we were

2 These arguments clearly represent a Platonist position, but there are doubts whether they are properly ascribed to Plutarch: see Opsomer 1998: 200–3.

3 Demaratus secretly conveyed a message inscribed on the frame of a wax tablet, *underneath* the wax which was there to be written in.

worried about actually knowing and not knowing. Let there be ‘potential intellect’: still the same problem persists. How does this intellect think? Either it thinks things it knows or things it does not know. The Stoics explain it by *natural concepts*. If these are potential, we shall say the same thing; if they are actual, why are we seeking what we know? If we start off from these for other things we do not know – well, how, since we do not know them? The Epicureans appeal to *preconceptions*: but if they say that these are articulated, searching is unnecessary; if they are not articulated, how can we seek for something beside the preconceptions which we have not previously conceived?

N. PLUTARCH, *Platonic Questions* 3, 1001C–1002A (in the sequel, Plutarch also considers the case for making the intelligible segment the larger)

In the *Republic* [509d–511e] he [Plato] represents everything as a single line cut into unequal portions, one for the class of things that are perceived and one for the class of things that are the objects of intellect; and he cuts each portion again into two in the same ratio. So he divides everything into four: he says that the first part of the intelligible is what is associated with primary forms, the second what is mathematical; the first part of the visible comprises solid bodies, the second images and representations of these. And he assigns to each of these four its own criterion: [1001D] intellect [*nous*] for the first, thought [*dianoia*] for the mathematical part, faith [*pistis*] for perceptibles, and conjecture [*eikasia*] for things associated with images and representations. What did he have in mind when he cut everything into unequal portions? And which portion, the intelligible or the visible, is the larger? He does not say himself.

At first the visible will seem to be the larger: after all, the indivisible substance of the intelligibles, which is always just the same, keeps itself close and pure, while erratic dispersal about bodies characterises the perceptible. Again, incorporeality is a property of limit, while body is, as far as its matter is concerned, indefinite and uncircumscribed – it only becomes perceptible [1001E] when it acquires definition by partaking in the intelligible. Again, just as each of the perceptibles has many images and shadows and representations – and, in general, very many copies of a single paradigm can come about whether by nature or craft, so of necessity things in this world numerically exceed those in the other, according to Plato, who makes the intelligibles paradigms and forms of perceptibles, which are

as it were images and impressions. Again, he leads⁴ us to intellection of forms by abstraction from and removal of body, following a path through the mathematical sciences from arithmetic to geometry, then after that to astronomy; [1000 F] on top of the rest he places harmonic theory. For geometrical objects are produced when quantity acquires extension; solids when extension acquires depth; astronomical bodies when solids acquire movement; harmonies when sound is produced by something in motion. So abstracting sound from things in motion, motion from solids, depth from planes, extension from quantity, [1002A] we shall arrive among the intelligible forms themselves, which are not distinguished from one another by any differentia, as single and unique objects of intellection.

O. Numenius fr. 2, quoted from *On the Good* book 1 at Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 11.22.1–2

[1] We can apprehend bodies [by induction] from similar things and from the distinctive marks shared by things that are juxtaposed. But there is no way of apprehending the Good from juxtaposition, or from some perceptible similarity. This is what we need: imagine someone sitting at the top of a lookout: he catches a quick glimpse of a small fishing boat – one of those solitary light skiffs, alone, in solitude, caught between waves – and he recognises it. So must one retreat far from the objects of perception to join alone with the Good which is alone, where there is no human, nor other animal, nor body large or small, but an ineffable, a completely indescribable, divine solitude. There are the haunts of the Good, its pastimes and festivals; but it, in peace, in benevolence, the calm, the gracious ruler, rides upon being [*ousia*]. [2] And if someone, intent on objects of perception, should imagine the Good flying towards him, and preen himself with the thought that he has come across the Good, he is completely mistaken. In fact, to get to it requires a divine methodology, one not easy. It is best employed by someone who does not care for the things of perception, applies himself with enthusiasm to the mathematical sciences, contemplates numbers, and thus learns to master this subject: What is *being* [*to on*]?

P. CELSUS, quoted from his *True Account* at Origen, *Against Celsus* 6.3

‘Wise men of antiquity made themselves clear to those capable of understanding, so let Plato too, the son of Ariston, set out the facts about the first

4 *epagei*, perhaps suggesting a procedure of ‘induction’: see Chapter 14 Section 14.5.

Good in one of his letters, and let him say that the first Good can never be expressed, “but after long acquaintance” comes to be in the soul “suddenly, as a light kindled from a leaping flame” [*Ep.* 7, 341 c–d].’

Q. PLUTARCH, *On Isis and Osiris* 382D–E

The intellection of what is intelligible and pure and simple is like a flash of illumination in the soul which gives a momentary opportunity to touch and see it. That is why Plato and Aristotle refer to this part of philosophy as *epoptic* [see *Symp.* 210a]:⁵ those who have exchanged these mixed and varied objects of opinion for reason leap towards what is primary, simple and immaterial; and when they truly touch the pure [E] truth surrounding it as if in an initiation, then they reckon that they have reached the end of philosophy.

R. CELSUS reported from his *True Account* by Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.9

After this, he [Celsus] turns to exhort us to follow reason and a rational guide when accepting doctrines: there is only deception for someone who assents to anything in any other way. He compares such a person to those who believe without reason in the Cybeline priests and soothsayers, in Mithrases and Sabaziuses, or whoever one might come across; or in apparitions of Hecate or some other daimon or daimons. Just as base men among them often target the ingenuousness of those who are easily deceived, and lead them where they wish – this, he says, also happens among the Christians. And he says that some people do not wish to give an account of their beliefs, or to receive one, and trot out: ‘Do not question, have faith!’ ‘Your faith will save you!’ And he claims that they say that ‘the wisdom which is in the world is evil, but folly is good’.

S. PLUTARCH, *Table-Talk* 9.14, 745D–746B (Plutarch’s teacher AMMONIUS talking to a question about the number of the Muses)

‘Homer’s Sirens, in the story [*Odyssey* 12.165–200], frighten us unreasonably: he was properly hinting that their musical capacity was not inhuman

⁵ *Epopteia* is the highest grade of initiation in the Eleusinian Mysteries; etymologically, the word suggests catching sight of something. (There is no mention of the word in surviving Aristotle.)

or destructive. Rather, it seemed to engender a love for things heavenly and divine, and forgetfulness of mortal things, in souls which were leaving this world for the other [745E] and were wandering about after death. They are charmed by the music, which possesses and enchants them; and they joyfully follow them [the Sirens] and are borne along by joy and carried with them in their circuit [see *Phdr.* 248a]. Here, a sort of faint echo of their music reaches us in our discussions and calls to us and reminds our souls of past things. But the ears of most people are smeared and filled up – with obstructions and experiences of the flesh, rather than wax. But a soul whose good nature allows it to hear and remember – its experience is nothing short of the maddest form of love. It longs and yearns to free itself from [745F] the body, although it cannot. Now, I do not go along with absolutely all of this. Rather, it seems to me that, where Plato refers to the axes [of the stars] as their “spindles” and “shafts”, and the stars as “whorls” [*R.* 616 c ff.], in the same place he takes the unusual step of calling the Muses “Sirens”, since they “say” [*eirein*] divine things and speak in Hades – as Odysseus in Sophocles says that he “visited the Sirens, Daughters of Phorcus, shrieking the tune of Hades” [= Sophocles, *TrGF* 861]. [746A] There are eight Muses, who are carried along on the circuits of the eight spheres, and one who is allotted the region of the earth. The eight set over the cycles maintain and preserve the harmony of the wandering stars in respect of the fixed stars, and each other. The one who oversees and travels around the region between earth and moon gives to mortals through speech and song as much grace and rhythm and harmony as they are capable of perceiving and taking on; she introduces persuasion to help with political and social organisation; and she calms our confusion and tendency to stray, as if gently calling us back to the road and setting us straight on it. As Pindar says: [746B] “Whatever Zeus loves not | are made afraid | when they hear the cry of the Pierides” [*Pythian Odes* I.13–14].’

Ammonius, as was his wont, added to this the line of Xenophanes: ‘Let this be our opinion, like the truth’ [= 21 B35], and encouraged each of us to reveal and say what *we* thought.