

Is Plato a Coherentist? The Theory of Knowledge in *Republic* V-VII

In *Republic* VII, Plato sets out two necessary conditions for knowledge. The first condition is that one must “be able to give a *logos*” for what he knows (533c1-2). In order to count as knowing something, Plato believes that one must be able to give an explanatory account of it. Plato then adds a second necessary condition. A number of commentators, Gail Fine in particular, have characterized this condition as the view that “knowledge must be based on knowledge.”¹ Fine reads Plato as claiming that a *logos*, if it is to be an adequate explanation must itself be a piece of knowledge. Taken in unison, these two conditions give rise to a particularly vicious version of what philosophers have come to know simply as the “the regress problem.” The regress problem can be put roughly as follows: Knowing something requires a *logos*. Yet, because knowledge must be based on knowledge, each *logos* must itself be a piece of knowledge. It follows, then that each *logos* must have some further *logos*. And the same will be true of each further *logos*; the demand for explanation continues this way seemingly *ad infinitum*—substantiating a single claim seems to require an infinite string of *logoi*.

Does Plato recognize this problem in the context of *Republic* V-VII, and if so, how does he resolve it? In answer to this question, commentators have put forward two general strategies. The first strategy for dealing with the regress problem is the “foundationalist” solution. Foundationalism, at least the version I shall consider in the paper, appeals to something like a basic belief or first principle, which is in need of no further explanation.² In the *Republic*, the form of the good appears to serve this role, explaining other beliefs without requiring any further explanation—it is the highest point on the divided line and the “unhypothetical principle of everything” (511b). However, a number of commentators have put forward an alternative

¹ Fine (1999) 238.

² Cornford (1965) 61-95; Cross and Woosley (1964) 230-61 give a foundationalist reading.

reading. The “coherentist” interpretation suggests that Plato might regard the chain of explanations as ongoing but *circular*. Gail Fine reads the analogies of the Sun, Line, and Cave as suggesting that, instead of being the highest principle and the last thing the philosopher must understand, the form of the good is but one “link” in a circular explanatory chain.³ On her view, the philosopher cannot be said to have knowledge of the good itself until he descends from the world of the forms and considers the relationship of the good to sensible particulars.

The foundationalist view has enjoyed significant support over the last century, and yet few if any have responded to the challenges raised by the coherentist alternative. My arguments in this paper are intended to do just this: I shall argue that the structure of knowledge in the Sun, Line, and Cave is incompatible with the coherentist reading. Instead, these analogies provide us with ample evidence that Plato holds something, at the very least, approximating a foundationalist first principle. I shall also put forward a foundationalist solution to the regress problem that is fully consistent with the text of this part of the *Republic*. Because the form of the good serves as a “measure” by which the philosopher is able to determine the goodness, fittingness, beauty and truth of *all* that he encounters (517b), it seems reasonable to conclude that the philosopher’s ultimate explanation—what it is that justifies his *logos* of goodness and puts an end to the regress problem—might be the form of the good itself.

³ See also: Gentzler (2005) 469-96; Sayre (1995) 177-81; Nehamas (1984) 11-36; and Burnyeat (1980) 173-20; (1990) 216-7.

Works Cited

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