1. Introduction

This paper argues that Plato's theory of forms, specifically as it is presented in the middle dialogues, ought to be considered a viable candidate for describing knowledge. This will be done by briefly examining the chronological development of Plato's theory, explicating the main epistemological arguments, and then evaluating the theory by considering an objection to it.

2. Chronological Development

In Plato's earlier dialogues, constructive epistemic arguments are lacking, but there is a clear denial of knowledge (at least of a certain type). For example, in the Euthyphro, Socrates' main argument concludes, by attempting to show inconsistencies in Euthyphro's thinking, that Euthyphro does not have knowledge of piety, but no work is done toward discovering knowledge after denying its presence.

In Plato's middle dialogues, the presence of epistemology in Socrates' arguments becomes more prevalent. Unlike in the early dialogues, Socrates in the middle period makes his own constructive arguments alongside his questioning of others. In the Phaedo, Socrates argues for the theory of forms explicitly through knowledge, both with his argument against strong empiricism and then with his argument from imperfection. It is with these that an epistemic position becomes clear: that Socrates rejects a strong empiricist notion of knowledge and believes that we must have knowledge (in a way, innately) by some entity that transcends the visible world. Then, in the Republic, Plato's focus on epistemology fleshes itself out even more. Looking at book V, Socrates makes another explicit argument about knowledge – this time that perfect knowledge, while
possible, cannot be of any perceptible object itself, again putting forth the view that emerged in the
Phaedo. Moreover, this view is again argued for with the analogies Socrates presents in book VI of
the Republic, with the epistemic portion most notably present within the line analogy. By using the
analogy of the line, Socrates makes the case for a distinction between levels of knowledge and their
respective objects, all in the context of the view that has been developing since the Phaedo.

Lastly, one final shift is seen in Plato's later dialogues. Beginning with the presence of
serious, unresolved objections like the third man argument in the Parmenides, Plato first draws our
attention to the flaws in the view that was developed throughout his middle dialogues, then, in the
Timaeus, shifts our attention yet again in order to build his theory back up (with a very strong focus
on metaphysics over epistemology). In the Timaeus, Plato no longer uses Socrates as the vessel for
his arguments, instead focusing on the words of Timaeus. This strongly suggests that the view put
forth by Timaeus is not only an improvement on but also distinct from the view put forth by
Socrates in the middle dialogues.

3. Arguments

With a sense of the chronological development in Plato's dialogues established, the
arguments which build up the epistemology in the middle period should be examined more closely.

First, we have the two direct arguments about knowledge in the Phaedo, the first which
attacks empiricism and the second which supports Plato's view, that naturally fit together. Against
empiricism, Socrates employs a reductio ad absurdum which proceeds as follows:

1) Suppose that strong empiricism is correct, that is, our concepts are derived from sensory
experience, and

2) One such concept is similarity. Then,

3) According to (1), we acquire the concept of similarity through the perception of similar
objects by noting their similarity. But,
4) (3) can't be true, since the acquisition of a concept cannot presuppose possession of that same concept. So,

5) (1) must be false; strong empiricism is not correct.

This rejection of empiricism is followed by a constructive argument, which says:

6) When one judges that a perceptible object has a given property, \( F \), they judge that it contains this property imperfectly so. But,

7) In order to judge that the object has property \( F \) imperfectly, one must have in mind what is completely and perfectly \( F \) for comparison. So,

8) One often has in mind something that is perfectly \( F \), which implies the existence of something that is perfectly \( F \). But,

9) No perceptible object is perfectly \( F \). Therefore,

10) There exists something that is perfectly \( F \) which is distinct from any and all perceptible objects by which we judge an object to be imperfectly \( F \).

Once the sequence of arguments reaches line 10, we are given somewhat of a full picture of Plato's epistemic standpoint; not only does he reject the empiricist view, he also proposes the existence of perfect things which are distinct from perceptible objects (though it is not at all clear what these sort of things could be). Then, while the argument from lines 1-5 is important because it motivates the argument from lines 6-10, it is really this second argument which forms the basis of the epistemological arguments seen next in the Republic.

The argument in book V of the Republic clearly proceeds along the same lines as the argument from the Phaedo given in lines 6-10. Now arguing from knowledge instead of imperfection, Socrates presents a stronger argument for the existence of perfect things distinct from perceptible objects:
1) Suppose one knows that object x is $F$. Then, x must be purely and completely $F$. So,

2) If nothing is purely and completely $F$ then knowledge is not possible. But,

3) It is possible to have knowledge. So,

4) Something exists which is purely and completely $F$. But,

5) No perceptible object is ever purely and completely $F$. Therefore,

6) For all $F$, there exists something that is purely and completely $F$ which is distinct from any and all perceptible objects that is the subject of knowledge.

While the argument in book V very closely matches the second argument from the *Phaedo* in terms of structure, there is a significant difference in strength between Socrates' early claim about judgements of properties and his later claim about knowledge itself. While the epistemic conclusion that we obtain knowledge via these still undefined non-material objects or entities is easily inferred from the argument in the *Phaedo*, this position on knowledge specifically is not explicitly argued for until the *Republic*. Then, with the argument that these ambiguous, non-perceptible things (which come to be called “forms” in the dialogues) are the objects of knowledge having been established, Socrates uses analogy in book VI of the *Republic* to better explicate the view that these arguments support.

The analogy of the line presents a (relatively) simple picture of how levels of thought (the highest of which is knowledge) fit together under this proposed view. Consider a line divided into four parts, such that the first part is one half the size of the second part and the third part is one half the size of the fourth part while the sum of the first and second parts are also one half of the sum of the third and fourth parts (one such division is 1,2,2,4). The first half of the line is divided between appearances (corresponding to imagination) and objects (corresponding to beliefs) such that we assign the smaller value to the appearances. This indicates the relative value of appearances is only half that of actual objects, as appearances can provide no insight into knowledge or reality since
they are not themselves real, but only reflections of the actual, real objects. Now, apply the same line of thought to the second half of the line, which is divided between thought (corresponding to objects) and understanding (corresponding to forms) such that we assign the smaller value to thought. Similarly, this indicates that the relative value of thought is only half that of understanding, as it is more meaningful to understand something generally than to have a thought specifically. Likewise, the relative weights of thought and objects (beliefs) are equal; thus, a thought is no better than a belief, but rather it is separated as being able to become understanding.

This analogy can be understood more completely through the use of yet another analogy. While this is done by Plato using the example of students of geometry, I will attempt to be more clear by using the study of algebra itself as an example. Suppose you are given the function \( f(x) = 2x - 5 \). In the first section of the line, imagination/appearances, this function is merely a series of marks on this paper. However, in the second section of the line, belief/objects, this function becomes associated with the graph of a line on the x-y plane, where the slope is 2 and the y-intercept is \(-5\). Now, moving up to the third section of the line, thought, the image of the graph of this function is retained, but suppose you are now able to recognize the function as a linear one, so you can also point out that it shares common characteristics with other elements in the set of all linear functions. This recognition then allows you to move from the third section, thought, to the fourth section of the line, understanding. Here, you understand the intrinsic properties of all linear functions, and can apply them to \( f(x) = mx + b \) for any (real numbers) \( m \) and \( b \), including \( f(x) = 2x - 5 \). It seems clear that the understanding of linear functions contains the most knowledge, which is precisely what Plato's view advocates: there is absolutely no knowledge in viewing the given function as markings on paper, but there is true knowledge contained in the “form” of linear functions.
While the notion of the “form” itself remains ambiguous still, Plato's epistemic position is rather clear after book VI of the *Republic*. Plato both rejects the notion of strong empiricism and believes that knowledge is only gained through forms, which are perfect, complete, and distinct from any and all things perceptible. However, his view is far from impenetrable.

4. Objection

One very powerful objection can be found within Plato's own writings. In the *Parmenides*, the third man argument against Plato's theory of forms is presented. This argument presents a powerful objection to Plato's epistemology by using the same motivation seen in a general infinite regress argument in epistemology, but relating it specifically to the forms themselves as objects of knowledge. The third man proceeds as follows:

1) Objects x, y, z all share the property $L$. So,

2) There is a form, $L$, which $x, y, z$ all share. And,

3) $L$ is itself $L$. So,

4) $x, y, z$, and $L$ are all $L$. So,

5) There is a (meta-)form, $L'$, which $x, y, z, L$ all share such that $L' \neq L$. And,

6) $L'$ itself is $L'$, so there is a (meta-(meta-))form, $L''$, such that $L'' \neq L' \neq L$ ad infinitum.

While infinite series are not inherently problematic, the damage from this objection comes from the need for a source of knowledge. If, for every form, there is an infinite series of meta-forms, then it is impossible that one would obtain knowledge from a form (or meta-form) because the source of knowledge will also be traced back infinitely. So, even if these forms exist, it is impossible that we would gain knowledge from them, and, consequently, it appears that Plato's epistemology is not exactly plausible.

5. Evaluation

On the surface, the third man argument brought forth in the *Parmenides* is extremely
harmful, so much so that Socrates does not even attempt to answer it in the dialogue. However, the third man does not completely destroy the epistemology that Plato set out in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*. The third man argument can be answered from a few different angles, but the most clear approach to answering this objection is to establish that forms are not subject to the infinite regress outlined above.

Because Plato never gives a definite, concrete account of what the forms really are in the middle dialogues, there are multiple possibilities for defining them in a way that completely avoids the regress in the third man argument. One such possibility is to define forms as being sets. If Plato were to give an account of forms as having the same nature as sets, then it intuitively follows that all things which participate in a form $F$ can be thought of as being elements of the set $F$. Then, because it is a collection instead of a single object, there is no principle which necessitates that $F$ and all of its elements be contained in another set, $F'$, ad infinitum. (In fact, the regress described in the third man appears impossible under this construction). Furthermore, the presence of any infinite series within the forms would be only as problematic as the existence of the natural numbers, as we can still (arguably) have knowledge about the set which contains the infinite series. Under this interpretation, then, Plato's theory of forms maintains its status as a plausible account of knowledge despite the third man argument.

6. Conclusion

Plato develops a clear theory of epistemology with an ambiguous source of knowledge throughout the middle period of his dialogues. While the plausibility of his theory is brought into question by the third man argument in the *Parmenides*, a later dialogue, it certainly should not be abandoned on that basis. Since Plato himself never really defined the exact nature of the “forms” which he claims are the objects of knowledge, there is a large amount of room for interpretation that allows the third man argument to be overcome. Therefore, with some degree of added
interpretation, the epistemic aspect of Plato's theory of forms should still be considered a plausible account of knowledge.

**Bibliography**
