

**PLATO ON THE RATIONALITY OF BELIEF.
THEAETETUS 184-7**

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Abstract. This paper offers an explanation of why Plato, in his later dialogues, begins to view the capacity of belief formation as necessarily involving the reasoning part of the soul. I will argue that the standard explanation, according to which for later Plato forming beliefs requires cognitive access to intelligibles (Forms), is unsatisfactory. My focus will be on the passage from Plato's *Theaetetus* (184B-187A), which is crucial for understanding Plato's notion of belief. I will argue that this passage does not support the standard explanation, and develop an alternative reading of the passage, according to which forming a belief is a goal-directed activity aiming at truth. In other words, it is the epistemic goal of forming beliefs that matters for Plato, not the cognitive preconditions.

Keywords: Plato, *Theaetetus*, belief formation, rationality, epistemology

DOI: 10.3176/tr.2011.4.02

1. Introduction

Christopher Bobonich (2002) and Hendrik Lorenz (2006) hold that an essential difference in Plato's later work from that of his earlier dialogues is that what it is to form a belief (*doxa*, *doxazein*¹) is later understood to be a rational capacity, i.e. a capacity necessarily involving the rational part of the soul. In elucidating Plato's notion of 'rationality', Michael Frede (1996:6–14) points out that the Greek notion of reason and rationality differs from our modern conceptions in two important ways. First, the Greeks thought of reason as endowed with pre-existing knowledge, and second, as having desires and aims of its own (most notably the desire

¹ *Doxa* and its cognates mean both 'judgment' as an occurrent activity of the mind and 'belief' as a dispositional state. I have translated *doxa* as 'belief' (and 'belief formation'), although 'judgment' (and 'judging') are just as accurate. See Sprute (1962), Lafrance (1981) for a discussion of the meanings of *doxa* in Plato's dialogues.

for truth and the desire for good). Both aspects of rationality are particularly prominent in Plato's philosophy. Bobonich and Lorenz focus on the first aspect of rationality, suggesting that Plato, in his later writings, thinks that the formation of beliefs requires a prior grasp of intelligibles (Forms², concepts). In focusing on this second aspect of rationality, I will argue for an alternative account of the nature of belief formation in Plato's later work, namely that the formation of a belief is a rational activity because it is a goal-directed activity aiming at truth.

First, I lay out the standard view of the nature of belief formation and argue that it fails to explain certain features of the notion of belief in Plato's later dialogues and show that it lacks sufficient textual support. *Theaetetus* 184B-187A³ is most often cited to justify the standard view. The bulk of this paper consists of an analysis of this rather difficult passage. This passage is predominately interpreted in one of two ways. The Conceptualist Reading of *Theaetetus* 184B-187A supports the standard view of belief formation, whereas the Realist Reading, I will argue, supports the view that belief formation is an intrinsically truth-directed activity for Plato. The standard view is correct in that later Plato indeed regards belief formation as a rational activity, but it is mistaken as to *why* belief is rational for later Plato. Even in later Plato, Forms should not be understood as semantic entities, apprehension of which enables belief formation. It is the goal, rather than the cognitive preconditions, that makes belief formation a rational activity. That is to say, the truth-directedness of forming a belief explains certain significant features of Plato's characterization of belief in later dialogues; most notably, it helps to explain why Plato thinks that belief formation includes a surprising amount of reasoning and deliberation.

2. The standard view

Bobonich and Lorenz are by no means the first to hold a version of the standard view of belief formation, as a classical version of the standard view was held in the Old Academy by Xenocrates, and then later in antiquity by Proclus.⁴ The classical version of the standard view maintains that already in the middle dialogues (e.g. in the *Phaedo*) belief formation and ordinary (non-philosophical) thinking require the grasp of the intelligibles (Forms). For example, when a non-philosopher forms a belief that something is beautiful, she is grasping, albeit confusedly, the Form of Beauty (say, by recollection). The classical version of the standard view has been challenged in recent decades by Dominic Scott (1995) who argues, I believe correctly, that Platonic recollection is a demanding activity in that

² It has become common in Plato-literature to refer to Plato's *idea* or *eidos* or "the F itself" as *Form* (with an initial upper-case letter).

³ Throughout the paper my references to Plato's text will be based on the Oxford (1995) Greek edition. I will use the *Stephanus* pagination.

⁴ As to Xenocrates's position of belief as a blend of *episteme* and *aisthesis*, (see Dillon 2003: 124–5) and as to Proclus, see his commentary on the *Timaeus*, 248, 14–22.

it can only be accomplished by philosophers. Furthermore, Gail Fine (esp. 1993 and introduction to 2003) has argued that Forms, in Plato's middle dialogues, are not introduced for semantic reasons at all, but rather for epistemological (and metaphysical) purposes. Forms are thus real definitions (as opposed to nominal definitions) or corresponding explanatory properties and are apprehended by someone who has the relevant knowledge. That is to say, Forms remain outside the cognitive reach of non-philosophers, just as the underlying structure of water is outside the cognitive reach of one never introduced to the study of chemistry. The beliefs of the rational part of the soul of non-philosophers have content, but are cognitively independent of Forms.⁵

Bobonich and Lorenz admit that this claim applies to Plato's middle dialogues, where the grasp of Forms is not a necessary condition of thought.⁶ This is where their views differ from the classical version of the standard view. However, they maintain that in later writings Plato starts to view belief formation as an activity that presupposes cognitive access to intelligibles. So what used to be the distant aim of philosophical thinking in the middle dialogues becomes a necessary condition of belief formation in later dialogues. Bobonich and Lorenz, therefore, represent the standard view in a developmentalist form⁷. In what follows, I will refer to their view simply as 'the standard view'. Their argument is as follows:

- (i) For Plato, any capacity that involves a grasp of intelligibles necessarily belongs to the reasoning part of the soul;
- (ii) Plato starts to think of belief formation as involving a grasp of intelligibles;
- (iii) Thus, Plato commits himself to the view that belief formation is a capacity that belongs to the reasoning part of the soul.

The first premiss, well established as having strong textual support (e.g. at *Phaedrus* 247D, it is only reason (the charioteer) that is said to be able to view the

⁵ I use 'cognitive independence' in the sense that Forms do not contribute to the cognitive lives of non-philosophers – neither as representational instruments nor as objects of thought. Ordinary thought is, of course, dependent on Forms in the ontological sense, if Forms are taken to be causes of things in the world.

⁶ It is clear that Bobonich is committed to the view that the thinking of non-philosophers is cognitively independent from Forms in the middle dialogues. According to Bobonich (2003: 328), Plato's later dialogues differ from the middle dialogues in that now non-philosophers, too, are in 'cognitive contact' with Forms (although the *kind* of contact they have is different from philosophers' grasp of Forms). This implies that, in the middle dialogues (at least in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*), non-philosophers are taken to be cognitively separated from Forms. It is more difficult to define Lorenz's position on this matter, as he does not introduce intelligibles into his description of the reasoning part of the soul in the *Republic* (see Lorenz 2006:13-73). According to Lorenz, later Plato makes 'cognitive access' to intelligibles necessary for belief-formation and that this "perforates the *Republic's* careful distinctions between 'the visible' and 'the intelligible' and between the corresponding modes of cognition (509D1-511E5)" (2006:91). In the *Republic*, non-philosophers remain on the level of "the visible", and thus presumably do not have cognitive access to intelligibles.

⁷ An older version of the developmentalist version of the standard view can be found in Stenzel (1917).

‘truly real reality’), states a sufficient condition for a capacity to involve reason. However, the grasp of Forms is by no means *necessary* for reason to function.⁸ In the *Republic*, Plato does not make the reasoning part cognitively dependent on Forms either in describing the parts of the soul (Book IV) or different souls (Books VIII and IX) or in explaining why reason believes that the oar remains straight even if it looks bent (Book X). In fact, Plato says that the virtue of reason “never loses its power“, even in the most uneducated and wretched (*Rep.* 518D-519B). Further, the distinctive feature of reason that Plato mentions most often in the *Republic* – namely, “always wholly straining to know where the truth lies” (581B) – does not require prior grasp of Forms in order to be exercised. This finds support also from the *Phaedrus*, where *all* souls are trying to view reality (regardless whether or not they have seen it before), since this is the “pasture that has right food for the best part of the soul” (248B, 248D). It seems that the cognitive desire to view reality is a primitive feature of reason that cannot be explained by anything more fundamental (e.g. previous acquaintance with Forms).

Since (i) does not state a necessary condition of rationality, one cannot conclude from Plato’s assigning beliefs exclusively to the reasoning part of the soul that he *must* think that belief formation involves the apprehension of intelligibles. Therefore, the crucial premiss for the standard view is (ii). Bobonich and Lorenz express this premiss in the following way: “Soul is capable of such conceptualization and beliefs only by drawing on its awareness (perhaps quite dim and indistinct) of Forms” (Bobonich 2002:332) and “even as humble an achievement as forming a belief about a perceptible object requires a contribution from reason and understanding, in part because it requires cognitive access to intelligibles such as difference and opposition” (Lorenz 2006:91). From (ii) it is easy to draw the conclusion (iii) that belief involves reason and requires apprehension of intelligibles.

However, Plato does not mention intelligibles when offering his descriptions of belief formation in the *Theaetetus* (189E-190A), *Sophist* (264A), *Philebus* (38B-E) and the *Timaeus* (37B-C). Of course, he could still think that the whole process of belief formation implies a grasp of Forms but chooses not to mention it for dialectical reasons. But this suggestion invokes another problem. What is this ‘awareness’ (Bobonich) or ‘cognitive access’ (Lorenz)? It cannot be knowledge (*epistēmē*) of Forms, since the *Timaeus* makes it clear that even true belief, let alone belief *simpliciter*, is separate from knowledge of Forms. Plato never refers to any cognitive relation to intelligibles other than knowledge (*epistēmē*) and understanding (*nous*), which are very demanding activities, imply infallibility, and are difficult to achieve (see *Timaeus* 51E). Neither knowledge nor understanding could be the ‘dim aware-

⁸ In a certain sense grasping Forms is necessary for the functioning of the reasoning part. The reasoning part of the soul has to grasp Forms, when it functions in the best possible way, e.g. when it is unhindered by the irrational parts of the soul and properly educated. In other words, Forms are necessary for the normative account of reason. However, reasoning part of the soul of less than perfect soul (i.e. the soul of a non-philosopher) still performs actions peculiar to it, e.g. searching after truth, means-ends reasoning, etc. The descriptive account of reason does not refer to Forms.

ness of Forms' that, on the standard view, is required for belief formation on the level of ordinary thought. Further, the awareness of Forms could not consist in having true *beliefs* about Forms, if the awareness of Forms is supposed to explain the ability belief formation as such. In this case the explanation would be viciously circular. It seems that Plato simply lacks the relevant concept for 'dim awareness' or 'cognitive access'.

The standard view faces another problem since it fails to explain why Plato stresses that belief formation involves reasoning and deliberation (esp. *Theaetetus* 189E-190A and *Philebus* 38B-E). In forming a belief, the soul carries on a discussion and weighs evidence pro and contra. When it finally comes to a decision, this is called a belief. Any account of the rationality of belief would have to explain why Plato takes reasoning and deliberation to be a necessary component of belief formation. The standard view fails in this respect. According to Bobonich, belief is rational since it requires conceptualization and this in turn requires awareness of Forms. Lorenz takes the distinctively rational aspect of belief formation to be predication, which requires cognitive access to intelligibles. Neither Lorenz nor Bobonich present arguments as to why conceptualization or predication would require the amount of deliberation Plato is insisting on.

Further, in order to justify the standard view, premiss (ii) needs independent textual support. However, a clear statement of (ii) is nowhere to be found in the Platonic corpus. The passage that comes closest is *Theaetetus* 184B-187A.⁹ Here Socrates, at least on the first sight, implies that intelligibles are grasped by the soul in every act of belief formation. The following sections will focus on this crucial passage and challenge the widespread assumption that this passage supports the standard view. I will argue that this passage is compatible with the view that belief formation and ordinary thought do not require a prior grasp of intelligibles. I begin by giving an overview of this passage by distinguishing between three stages of the argument.

3. Overview of *Theaetetus* 184B-187A

Allan Silverman calls this passage 'bewildering argument' (1990:148). I will not even attempt to deal with most of the difficult issues it raises. Here I will focus primarily on the question of whether the passage licenses the conclusion that intelligibles are grasped in every belief and every act of thought. My answer to this question will be negative. Nonetheless, although this passage does not support the standard view, it does help to explain why Plato starts to think of forming a belief as a rational capacity.

⁹ See also Fine (1993:129–138). She discusses many passages in late Plato that seem to support the view that grasping Forms is necessary for ordinary thought (and belief). She comes to the conclusion that on a closer reading these passages do not imply that Forms have to be involved in ordinary thinking at all. Her conclusions about *Theaetetus* 184B-187A, however, are different from the reading defended in this paper.

At stage one (184B3–186A1) Socrates argues that there are certain things or features of things that are common (*koinon*, *koina*) to proper objects of senses (colours, sounds, etc). These so-called commons include being (*ousia*), sameness (*tauton*), and difference (*heteron*). Theaetetus infers that the commons cannot be perceived at all since senses are restricted to their proper sensibles.¹⁰ Yet the soul has some sort of access to these features in thinking that sound and colour both are, or are different from each other, etc. These features are revealed to (*deloi soi*) or grasped (*lambanein*) by the soul, when it has a relevant thought or asks a relevant question (185B4-5). Socrates says:

Well now, by means of what do you think all those things about them [sound and colour]? Because it's impossible to grasp what they have in common either by means of hearing or by means of sight. /--/ But what about the power which reveals to you that which is common to everything, including these things: that to which you apply the words 'is', 'is not' and the others we used in our questions just now? (185B6-C8)¹¹

Theaetetus then says that since the commons cannot be perceived, they have to be grasped by a different activity, viz. when the soul operates 'itself through itself' (*aute di' hautes*) and not by means of any of the bodily senses. Socrates agrees. At this stage being is simply one in the long list of the commons and no special importance is attached to it.

Stage two (186A2–C5) opens by Socrates drawing Theaetetus' attention to being as a special common that 'goes with everything' (186A). Theaetetus adds that in case of the beautiful and ugly, the same and different, etc. the soul tries to judge or discriminate (*krinein*) their being (i.e. the being of the commons). Socrates then goes on to point out that the soul tries to judge being not only in case of features like sameness and difference, but even in case of perceptual properties like hardness and softness (that are not commons). He asserts that by means of bodily senses soul has access to perceptual features but not to their being (186C). Stage Two shows that being is more than simply one of the commons – it is somehow involved in all cognitive acts performed by the soul itself by itself, both concerning commons and concerning the perceptibles. Socrates adds that the grasping the being of even perceptual features requires 'long and arduous education' (186C5) involving comparing and reviewing of things past and future (186B1):

But their [hardness and softness] being, and that they both are, and their oppositeness to each other and the being, in its turn, of this oppositeness, are things which the mind itself tries to decide for us, by reviewing them and comparing them with one another. – That's quite right. – So there are some things which both men and animals are able by nature to perceive from the moment they are born: namely the experiences which reach the soul by means of

¹⁰ Good reasons why senses must be restricted to their proper sensibles if the argument is to be valid are offered by Holland (1973), Modrak (1981) and Bostock (1988). Burnyeat (1976 and 1990), Silverman (1990) and Lorenz (2006) on the other hand (each for different reasons) think that the argument is valid without this (unargued and probably false) premiss.

¹¹ Here and in what follows I will use McDowell's (1973) translation with slight modifications.

the body. But as for calculations about those things, with respect to being and usefulness, they're acquired, by those who do acquire them, with difficulty and over time, by means of a great deal of troublesome education. (186B6-C5)

At stage three (186C6-187A8) Socrates argues that attaining being is necessary for attaining truth, and attaining truth is necessary for having knowledge. He concludes that since perception cannot attain being, it cannot be knowledge. After reaching this conclusion, Theaetetus identifies the activity of the soul, 'busying about the things that are' by itself, with believing (*doxazein*) (187A7-8). And Socrates agrees.

At first glance this passage seems to offer strong support for the standard view. Even though the text leaves the exact nature of the commons underdetermined, it is reasonably clear that the commons are non-sensible entities: either Forms, some subset of Forms, concepts, or intelligibles. Plato has been interpreted as claiming that the soul has to grasp certain intelligibles, primarily being, in order to form beliefs. Argument at stage one implies that grasping intelligibles (e.g. 'being') is simply a matter of entertaining a random thought involving the word 'is' (185D-E). This suggests that the commons are like concepts – items of thought representing abstract features.¹² At stage two, in particular, Plato seems to suggest that grasping being is necessary for forming any belief, which supports the standard view, esp. premiss (ii). However, things are not as simple. After securing Theaetetus' assent that the commons cannot be grasped by means of perception, Socrates and Theaetetus all of a sudden start talking about the soul 'yearning after' and 'trying to' grasp the being of something or other (186A-C). This suggests (as will become clearer as I proceed) that being is not grasped simply by virtue of entertaining a relevant thought and that being is not concept-like at all, but rather designates instantiation of properties of things. On this suggestion it is understandable why Socrates continues to argue at 186C that it takes education for the soul to determine how things are, e.g. to correctly answer the question whether a given person is beautiful or just (or whether a given thing is hard or soft). If commons are like properties of things, then *Theaetetus* 184B–187A fails to support the standard view since the properties of things are not grasped simply in virtue of being represented by the soul (whereas concepts are).

¹² Although the use of 'concept' (or 'notion') is rampant in the scholarly literature, its precise meaning is usually left unexplained. Is concept a mental or linguistic or abstract entity? Is it the same as 'meaning'? It seems, however, that all authors would agree that in order to use a word 'is' one needs to have some sort of grasp of the concept 'being', and that concepts can be applied even when the properties they represent are not there. Unlike properties, concepts are *representational* entities. The notion of representation is, in turn, intimately connected with the possibility of *mis*-representation. The only commentator who gives something like a definition of 'concept' in connection with the *Theaetetus*-passage is Silverman: "By 'concept' I mean nothing very elaborate. Concepts are the mental analogues of words, the elements of the language of thought. The guiding force behind the notion that thought is language is that the aboutness or meaning of words and the aboutness or intentionality of thought are either the same relation or so closely connected that to understand the one relation is to understand the other" (1990:148).

Whichever reading one adopts, there is a tension between stages one and two.¹³ These stages seem to tell different stories about what Socrates and Theaetetus are trying to establish in this passage. Stage one can be seen as offering support to the standard view: belief and thinking are rational because they presuppose a successful grasp of intelligibles. Stage two, however, supports a different reading: belief formation is rational because it involves *trying to* grasp the being of the properties of things. That is to say, it tries to grasp whether or not these properties are instantiated. Which notion of belief formation does the text support, then? The ‘characteristically brief and cryptic’ (Cooper 1970, 369) stage three offers no help because it remains systematically ambiguous between the two readings. However, since these ambiguities swirl around the notion of being, it seems reasonable to start by analysing this difficult notion.

4. The notion of being (*ousia*)

The activity dubbed ‘believing’ at 187A differs from perception in that it has something to do with *ousia*. *Ousia* is a difficult notion, with a wide range of meanings. Two of its meanings are particularly relevant in the context of *Theaetetus* 184B-187A: *ousia* as reality and as copula.¹⁴ Sometimes Plato implies that when a property or a thing ‘shares in being’, it is real or genuine, rather than

¹³ One could perhaps say that the question is whether the commons are universals in the realist or semantic sense (see Fine 1993:21–22). Universals in the semantic sense are grasped whenever there is a thought involving the universal (semantic universals are representational entities), whereas this is not the case with universals in the realist sense. Universals in the realist sense are genuine explanatory properties of things.

¹⁴ In connection with our target passage, *ousia* was traditionally understood as a shorthand for Platonic Forms or essences. Consequently, the other commons are taken to be Forms or essences as well. This view was held by German scholars of the nineteenth century (Schleiermacher *et al.*) and in the twentieth century by Cornford, who takes *ousia* to refer to Forms (1934:105–110) and by Modrak (1981) and McDowell, (1973:185–193), who take *ousia* to designate essences. Cornford’s view is criticized, to my mind decisively, by Cooper (1970:366–367). The best arguments against interpreting *ousia* as essence are found in Bostock (1988:137–142). Modrak’s view is extensively criticized in Shea (1985).

Ousia as reality is defended by Crombie (1963, 13–14, 28), Cooper (1970), Heitsch (1988), Kanayama (1987) and, most recently, by Gerson (2003:204–212): But see also Kahn (1981), who he seems to think that at stage two *ousia* refers to facts or reality. *Ousia* as copula is the most widespread interpretation. The first scholar to hold a version of this interpretation seems to be Natorp (1902). This interpretation became orthodoxy after Burnyeat’s influential article “Plato on the Grammar of Perceiving” (1976). See also Kahn (1981), Fine (1989), Bostock (1988:110–145), Shea (1985), Silverman (1990), M. Frede (1987), Bobonich (2003:295–231), especially Lorenz (2006:74–95), and, most recently, Nielsen (2008).

There are also interpretations that in some way or another try to preserve different readings of *ousia* and the commons. See, e.g. Sedley (2004:105–114), who differentiates between the Socratic text and the Platonic subtext in the *Theaetetus*. He reads being and commons at stage one as a priori concepts, whereas the second stage is hinting at the Platonic Forms. Another scholar who emphasizes the *double entendre* in the passage is D. Frede (1989), who thinks that the passage serves as an interpretive key to the rest of the *Theaetetus*.

apparent. Occasionally, however, ‘sharing in being’ implies nothing more than ‘x is something’ without a further qualification ‘is real’. The latter use of *ousia* is rather common in Plato’s later writings, especially in the *Sophist* and *Parmenides*. This has led scholars to conclude that *ousia* can function as the nominalization of the copula use of *einai*.

These aspects in the meaning of *ousia* result in a different account of belief formation in *Theaetetus* 184B-187A. Is the soul in contact with (stage one) or yearning after (stage two) reality (of something), or is it trying to form a thought involving a copula? In order to cash out the difference between these meanings of *ousia* it is helpful to appeal to Charles Kahn’s distinction between the syntactic and semantic role of the verb ‘to be’. Kahn argues that the syntactic role of the verb is its role as a copula, whereas a semantic use of the verb is an “expression of extra-linguistic reality” and “includes existence for subjects, instantiation for predicates, and truth or occurrence for the sentence as a whole” (2009:10). In other words, the syntactic role of the verb ‘to be’ is a linguistic copula that connects the noun to the verb thus creating a sentence (or a thought). The verb in its semantic role, on the other hand, connects the subject (the extra-linguistic object) to a predicate (the property), expressing that a given property *really* belongs to the object in question (including whether the object really, actually, exists and whether the property is really, actually, instantiated).

Recent work on Plato’s use of the verb ‘to be’ (Kahn 1981 and 2009, Brown 1990) has shown that it is a complex concept. Firstly, there is a continuum between the complemented and uncomplemented uses of the verb. If the complement is missing it can be supplied from the context. And the existing complement can often be omitted in the sentences that immediately follow or when the author wants to leave it indeterminate. This is also clearly the case in *Theaetetus* 184B-187A, since Socrates makes no difference between the being of a colour and sound (185A9) and colour being salty (185B10). Secondly and relatedly, being can be attached to both the subject and the predicate (M. Frede 1993, Lorenz 2006), e.g. Socrates does not distinguish between the being of colour and sound (185A9) and the being of beautiful or hard (186A10). But even if the complexity in the notion of being is acknowledged, one still has to decide whether Plato focuses on the syntactic or semantic role of being.

The defenders of the standard view also adopt the reading of being based on its syntactic role. A minority reading (that I will defend in this paper) takes being in its semantic role to be central for the argument. Accordingly, I will refer to the Conceptualist Reading and the Realist Reading of *Theaetetus* 184B-187A. These two readings can be distinguished as follows (taking into account the inherent complexity of the Greek verb *einai*):

The Conceptualist Reading:

- (a) Stage one: grasping the *ousia* of x indicates grasping the concept of x’s being (F). For example, the ability to form a belief ‘colour *is* (salty)’.
- (b) Stage two: grasping the *ousia* of F indicates grasping the concept of being F

(about an unspecified *x*). For example, the ability to form a belief ‘beauty is (of or about the person)’.

The Realist Reading:

- (a) Stage one: grasping the *ousia* of *x* indicates correctly apprehending a state of affairs of *x being* (*F*). For example, the ability to apprehend whether colour is in fact (salty).
- (b) Stage two: grasping the *ousia* of *F* indicates correctly apprehending a state of affairs of *F being* (about *x*). For example, the ability to apprehend whether beauty is in fact (of or about the person).

According to the Conceptualist Reading, *ousia* and the rest of the commons are similar to the *meanings* of words or concepts that are grasped in all beliefs involving the commons as terms. According to the Realist Reading, the commons are real *properties* of things. The former reading says that *ousia* is grasped in all beliefs, whether true or false, the latter insists that *ousia* is grasped in true beliefs.

5. The Conceptualist Reading

According to this reading, the line of argument in *Theaetetus* 184B-187A is the following. The argument at stage one shows that perception does not have access to being, sameness, etc. which are construed as concepts ‘sameness’, ‘being’, etc. The argument at stage two shows that the concept ‘being’ has a special status: it is necessary for forming all beliefs (including beliefs about sensible qualities, e.g. ‘this is hard’) regardless of their truth value. This is so because the concept ‘being’ is necessary for (in Kahn’s sense) syntactic predication. Argument at stage three concludes that perception is incapable of predication without which the soul cannot reach truth, and therefore perception cannot be knowledge. Thus, the message of the whole argument is that perception lacks a necessary condition for knowledge – propositional structure or, in other words, subject-predicate complexity.

The concept ‘being’ thus designates predicative structure of thought.¹⁵ Every belief can be rephrased into a subject-predicate sentence involving a copula (e.g.

¹⁵ This idea is nicely expressed by Bostock: “His [Plato’s] argument is that in order to make any judgment one must grasp the notion of being, for every judgment involves this notion” (1988: 128). See also Kahn: “But in the context of a rejection of sensation as incompetent here, and in view of the grounds cited for that rejection, it is more appropriate to interpret *ousia* in the second sense: as a shorthand expression for the propositional structure of thought, provided by or modelled on language, and entailing reference, predication, and assertion” (1982:119–120). And Burnyeat: “... the inability of perception to grasp being stems, we said, from an inability to frame even the simplest proposition of the form ‘*x* is *F*’. In his final proof that perception is not knowledge Plato is interested in the perfectly general point that true judgment involving the verb ‘to be’ is a necessary condition for knowledge” (1976, 49).

‘Theaetetus sits’ into ‘Theaetetus is sitting’).¹⁶ The point of the Conceptualist Reading is that a successful grasp of the concept ‘being’ is necessary for all beliefs. Most conceptualists go even further (with the exception of Burnyeat 1976) and also claim that one has to grasp the being (of something) in order to identify or refer to a subject or a predicate of the sentence. Thus, in order to form a belief „Socrates is just“, one has to grasp the being of justice (i.e. to identify justice). In fact, most commentators systematically confuse (this is especially clear in Lorenz 2006) the ability to (successfully) identify something and an ability to use the copula. The underlying assumption seems to be that, for Plato, in order to predicate a property of an object, one has to be able to recognize or identify the property (below, in Section 8, I will contest this assumption). According to the Conceptualist Reading, perception is not complex enough to frame a propositional structure or to identify objects or properties. The strength of the Conceptualist Reading is that it seems to give to Plato a good argument to the conclusion that knowledge is not perception.

Nevertheless, I believe there are problems with the Conceptualist Reading that can be avoided in the Realist Reading. Some scholars (e.g. Burnyeat 1976) think that the very complexity of the notion of being licenses the syntactic reading of being. If being is a complex notion and perception does not (according to Socrates and Theaetetus) grasp being, then Plato’s point must be that perception is not cognitively complex enough to grasp being, that perception is non-propositional. The problem with this argument is that it rests on an undisputed assumption that Plato recognizes the propositional complexity in the notion of being. Conceptualist Reading suggests that Socrates and Theaetetus are aware that having beliefs involves a complex mental activity of predicating something *about* something. But ignoring this is precisely one of the reasons why the subsequently discussed puzzles concerning falsity arise (*Theat.* 187B-200C). Socrates seems to ignore the complexity of belief: “Well now, what if someone believes? Doesn’t he have in belief some one thing? And if one has in one’s belief some one thing, isn’t it the case that one has in one’s belief a thing which is? So if someone has what is not figuring in his belief, he has no one thing in his belief. But if one has nothing in his belief, one isn’t believing at all” (189A6-A12). It is hard to understand this passage on the assumption that Plato recognizes the complexity of belief¹⁷.

¹⁶ In a more contemporary language, since recombability is a necessary feature for all concepts, and since for Plato all combinations of concepts somehow involve the copula, concept ‘being’ enables conceptuality and thought as such. As Evans says: “Thus, if a subject can be credited with the thought that *a* is *F*, then he must have the conceptual resources for entertaining the thought that *a* is *G*, for every property of being *G* of which he has a conception. This is the condition I shall call ‘The Generality Constraint’” (1982:104). For a similar interpretation of Plato, see Silverman (1990).

¹⁷ The puzzles of falsity can be (and have been) read as an indirect critique of Theaetetus’ second definition that knowledge is true belief (Fine 1979, Benson 1992). This is quite plausible in case of paradox of knowing and not-knowing (and the corresponding *allodoxia* paradox). However, with the paradox of being and not-being things are more complex. Fine’s “acquaintance model” (that she takes to be sufficient for the truth of Theaetetus’ second definition) explains only the paradoxes of knowing

Further, the Conceptualist Reading commits Plato to a position that soul is grasping *ousia* even in having a false belief (for being as a copula is involved in all beliefs, either true or false). I cannot find a single passage in Plato where the term *ousia* is used in this sense. In the *Sophist*, the Eleatic Visitor is careful to say that the false statement ‘Theaetetus flies’ is false because it says things that are *different* from the ‘things that are’ (*ta onta*) (263B3-9). In the *Sophist* Plato does not say that one needs a concept ‘being’ in order to say something about something ‘that is’ (the Visitor can perfectly well formulate a sentence ‘Theaetetus sits’ without using the concept ‘being’).¹⁸ There are no passages (other than the supposed statement of this theory at *Theaetetus* 186A-C) suggesting that one needs a concept ‘being’ in order to state or believe something about the things that are.

Most importantly, the argument at stage two does not support the Conceptualist Reading. First of all, Theaetetus says that soul ‘yearns after’¹⁹ (*eporegetai*, 186A4-5) being of sameness and difference, etc. Socrates adds that also in case of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ the soul is ‘trying to’ (*peiratai krinein*) decide the being (of hard and soft) and the being of sameness and difference (of hard and soft) (186B6-9). The Conceptualist Reading claims that grasping the being of hardness is a matter of forming a belief (judgment) that ‘x is hard’, and grasping the being of beautiful means forming a belief ‘x is beautiful’. The problem is quite obvious: in what sense is the soul trying to grasp something that it *already* has grasped (in order to form a belief)? Is the soul trying to grasp and yearning after the concept ‘being’? More natural is to read *ousia* as reality or instantiation of properties beauty and hardness, rather than a concept.

The second consideration is related to the first: Theaetetus says that considering the being of beautiful and ugly, the soul is “calculating/reasoning in itself things past and present in relation to things in the future” (186A10-B1). Socrates adds that considering bodily affections (*pathemata*) in accordance with being (*pros ten ousian*) requires “a great deal of education” (186C3-5), and involves “reviewing them and comparing them with one another” (186B7), an activity that not even all mature humans are capable of, let alone animals and newborns (186B11-C1). According to the Conceptualist Reading, Socrates is explaining how

and not knowing. It does not help much to explain why Socrates ignores the propositional nature of belief in paradoxes of being and not-being. Benson reads the falsity puzzles as a straightforward *reductio*. According to Benson’s reading the puzzle of knowing and not-knowing is generated by combining genuine Platonic principles about knowledge and belief with the false assumption that knowledge is true belief. That this results in a falsehood (false belief is impossible) shows that Theaetetus’ second definition is false. In that case, the characteristics attributed to true belief should really be characteristics of knowledge, and the paradoxes arise because of the false identification of true belief with knowledge. True belief is taken to be a non-propositional direct grasp of its object (state of affairs), at 189A. If this is because of the equation of knowledge with true belief, then it seems that Plato takes knowledge to involve non-propositional direct grasp. However, in that case the message of 184B-187A cannot be that propositionality (or subject-predicate complexity) is a necessary condition for knowledge, as the Conceptualist Reading claims.

¹⁸ The paradigmatic formula of judgment that is attributed to Plato by Conceptualist Reading (‘x is’ or ‘x is F’) is, in effect, Aristotelian, as suggested by Bostock (1988:132).

¹⁹ That this is indeed the right translation of *eporegetai* is argued in Kanayama 1987:39.

all beliefs ('this is hard') are formed. But this is implausible. The terms referring to the work that the soul is doing when trying to reach *ousia* (*analogizomene*, *syllogismos*, *epaniousa*, *symballousa*) are too weighty to simply mean 'attach a predicate to a subject'.²⁰ The adherents of Conceptualist Reading have different strategies to overcome these problems, but it would be beyond the limits of this paper to go through all of them.²¹ I will consider the most recent approach to address these problems offered by Lorenz (2006:83–91).

According to Lorenz, applying any perceptual predicate demands a successful application of abstract terms like sameness and difference. For example, to be able to form a belief 'this is hard', one needs to grasp the opposition of hardness and softness (that is, to grasp that they are opposed to one another). Lorenz *assumes* that in order to predicate, say, hardness of anything, one has to recognize hardness 'for what it is'. Hence, applying a predicate (any predicate) turns out to be a demanding activity that involves a grasp of abstract notions. This would indeed explain why a 'great deal of education' is needed for the process of forming beliefs. Lorenz's move is similar to many twentieth century conceptualists (beginning with Natorp 1902) who take the argument at stage two to elucidate the conditions of the possibility of predication. The candidates for conditions of propositional thought (other than Lorenz's application of abstract terms) include language-learning²² (Burnyeat 1990, Bostock 1988), ability to reflect (Heidegger 1988, Silverman 1990), the ability to tell the difference between appearance and reality (Cooper 1970), etc. However, apart from this particular passage I see no justification for attributing any of these positions to Plato.²³ Plato often refers to the holistic character of knowledge but, as far as I know, he never says that the ability to form a belief (even a false one) requires a network of true beliefs. It is a modern (rather than Platonic) position that in order to

²⁰ *Syllogismos* occurs only twice in the Platonic corpus. In the second occurrence it is connected to *knowledge*: "Comprehension (*synesis*), in turn, seems to be a kind of summing up (*syllogismos*), and whenever one says 'comprehends' (*synienai*), it's exactly as if one has said 'knows' (*epistasthan* for *synienai*, lit. 'goes along with') means that the soul 'journeys together' with things" (*Cratylus* 412 A-B). The related verb *syllogizomai* usually means 'to draw a conclusion from an argument', e.g. *Philebus* 41C or *Gorgias* 498E. The weightiest occurrence of *syllogizomai* can be found in a celebrated passage from the *Republic*: "Finally, I suppose, he'd be able to see the sun, not images of it in water or some alien place, but the sun itself, in its own place, and be able to study it. Necessarily so. And at this point he would infer and conclude (*syllogizoito*) that the sun provides the seasons and the years, governs everything in the visible world, and is in some way the cause of all the things that he used to see" (*Republic* 516 B-C). I have found no occurrence of *syllogizomai* where it simply refers to predication or belief formation.

²¹ It has sometimes been suggested (e.g. Bostock 1988) that Plato simply slips from talking about beliefs (*tout court*) into talking about true beliefs. But this is surely an explanation that is better avoided, if possible. It leaves hopelessly unclear what the argument at stage three is supposed to show: is Socrates saying that grasping *ousia* is a necessary condition for reaching truth, or is he saying that it is sufficient as well?

²² This is correctly criticized by D. Frede (1989).

²³ For a direct attack of this sort of conception of thought and especially perceptual content, see Burge (2010).

have a belief one needs a large set of true beliefs, involving abstract notions.²⁴ In general, three important claims Plato makes at stage two, viz. the soul's yearning after being, the difficulty of grasping being, and the necessity of education strongly point towards the Realist Reading.

6. Introducing the Realist Reading

The difference between the Conceptualist and Realist Readings is that the former appeals to the concept 'being', necessary for the complex structure of thought, whereas the latter takes *ousia* to be expressing the states of affairs or facts in the world. Or, put in another way, the Conceptualist Reading focuses on conditions that enable beliefs to have representational content (full stop), whereas the Realist Reading focuses on how beliefs can represent the world *correctly*. It certainly seems more natural to read the argument at stage two as referring to 'reality' (Cooper 1970) or 'objectivity' (Gerson 2003) or simply to 'fact' (Kanayama 1987), or 'So-sein' (Heitsch 1988) – how things *really*, actually are. According to the Realist Reading, the argument at stage two shows that soul, in 'reasoning and calculating', tries to find out whether abstract properties like sameness and beauty (186A2-B1) or perceptual properties like hardness (186B2-9) really apply to given objects. In other words, Socrates is not referring to being as a copula enabling predication (or 'propositional content') but rather to facts and states of affairs in the world. The Realist Reading avoids many pitfalls of the conceptualist reading. First, when Socrates says at 186B11 it is necessary to compare and review the past and future when determining the *ousia* of, e.g. good, this means that it is necessary to compare and review the past and future to determine whether, e.g. a person is (really) good, i.e. whether goodness is in regard to or about a person. This helps to explain why grasping being of, e.g. good, requires education and involves 'reviewing and comparing', for it is intuitively clear that to determine whether or not someone is really good is much more difficult than forming a simple thought that a given person is good. Second, it does not commit Plato to the view, otherwise unattested in the dialogues, that being is grasped in false beliefs. Being, i.e. how things really are, is grasped only in true beliefs (and knowledge). This means that, at stage three, grasping being is not only necessary for truth but sufficient as well. Thirdly, it makes much more plausible the talk of

²⁴ See Davidson: "As remarked above, there may be no fixed list of beliefs on which any particular thought depends. Nevertheless, much true belief is necessary. Some beliefs of the sort required are general, but plausibly empirical, such as that cats can scratch or climb trees. Others are particular, such as that the cat seen running a moment ago is still in the neighborhood. Some are logical. Thoughts, like propositions, have logical relations. Since the identity of a thought cannot be divorced from its place in the logical network of other thoughts, it cannot be relocated in the network without becoming a different thought. Radical incoherence in belief is therefore impossible. To have a single propositional attitude is to have a largely correct logic, in the sense of having a pattern of beliefs that logically cohere" (2001:99).

soul's 'yearning after' being: the soul is simply trying to find out whether or not the states of affairs obtain.

Of course, there are problems for the Realist Reading as well. Most of these are addressed in the relevant literature.²⁵ I will focus on the following question: how should the Realist Reading explain the argument at stage one? Socrates seems to be implying that the commons are grasped in every thought. This strongly points to commons as concepts (and being as copula). If this is indeed what Plato has in mind then the Realist Reading has little hope for success.

7. The Realist Reading of stage one

In order to see the possible solution to this problem it is necessary to understand our target passage in its dialectical context, which is something scholars often tend to ignore, treating the passage as a separate treatise on perception and thought. Two features of the preceding discussion are especially relevant: Socrates' self-description as an intellectual midwife, and the notion of perception (*aisthesis*) as it is used in the discussion that precedes the target passage. In this section I will suggest that these features explain why Theaetetus and Socrates take commons to be involved in all thoughts.

Socrates says at 184A9-10: "What we must do is to try, by means of my midwifery (*maieutike techne*), to deliver Theaetetus of what he had conceived on the subject of knowledge". Midwifery is Plato's metaphor for Socratic method in the *Theaetetus*. Socrates repeatedly claims that he is someone with no knowledge (179B2-3), that he only questions and does not make any pronouncements himself (148E-151D). He says, emphatically, that anything worthwhile does not originate from him but from his interlocutors, Socrates only helps to deliver and test the ideas that the interlocutors offer ((161A-B). The crucial feature of midwives is their intellectual barrenness (150C, 179B, 210C). It is difficult to determine what Socrates means by this notion,²⁶ but the general tenor of his remarks on the methodology in the *Theaetetus* suggests that intellectual barrenness implies that Socrates is required to perform his role as the midwife, to withhold any beliefs that he has about the matter discussed. The interlocutor should not accept anything Socrates says simply because of Socrates' authority. If the interlocutor acquires new beliefs in the course of the discussion, it is only because he himself has come to see the inconsistencies within his framework of beliefs. Hence, the Socratic method is necessarily dependent on the interlocutor's framework of beliefs.²⁷

²⁵ Especially thoroughly argued version of the Realist Reading is Kanayama (1987).

²⁶ For an overview of how Socrates' barrenness is understood by scholars, see Giannopoulou (2007:59-76).

²⁷ This does not mean that Socrates does not *have* beliefs. In the *Theaetetus* he makes it clear that he does, twice (184C5 and, more conspicuously, at 185E8-9).

Further, Theaetetus seems to have certain entrenched beliefs about human cognition that form the background for the discussion.²⁸ After Theaetetus proposes his definition of knowledge as perception (151D), the discussion quickly turns to Protagoras' statement that all beliefs are true, and Socrates claims that Protagoras' and Theaetetus' positions come to be the same thing (160C). In the subsequent discussion of Protagoras' doctrine, neither Socrates nor Theaetetus make a clear difference between the cognitive acts that require the use of bodily senses and the cognitive acts that do not. Believing (e.g. 161D4, 161E9, etc.), dreaming (158E1ff.), desiring (156B6), fearing (156B6), thinking (158B4) and remembering (163D-164C) are all lumped together, thereby forming a single cognitive faculty that, according to Protagoras' doctrine, is infallible and always about 'what is'. Theaetetus never protests against such an obvious widening of the notion of perception. This suggests that Theaetetus' original definition is meant to cover all kinds of acts of awareness, not only perception in the narrower sense (i.e. by means of bodily senses).²⁹ Theaetetus thinks that perception, in this wide sense, is the same as knowledge, i.e. never false and about 'what is' (152C). It is in this sense that 'knowledge is perception' is discussed throughout the first part of the *Theaetetus*. The Protagorean epistemology, developed at 152A-160E, is built on an intuition that factive mental states involve direct, unmediated awareness of their objects. It seems that although Protagoras' epistemology has been officially refuted (183B-C), Theaetetus still thinks about cognition on the lines of Protagorean model of cognition as direct awareness.

These two features – Socratic method being dependent on the framework of beliefs of the interlocutor and Theaetetus' understanding of cognition as direct awareness of its objects – help to explain why Socrates, at stage one, gives the impression that the commons are concepts. This is so because he takes into account Theaetetus' framework of beliefs, within which cognition is taken to be a direct apprehension of its objects.

The examples Socrates gives at 185A8-B5 state facts about colour and sound. He asks whether Theaetetus is able to think that colour and sound are, whether each (is) one and both (are) two, whether each (is) the same as itself and different from the other. Theaetetus says that the soul grasps and considers those features whenever there is a thought involving the words 'is', 'two', etc. (185E1-3). It is reasonably clear that these are not questions about concepts involved in relevant representations of colours and sound, but about states of affair, properties of sound and colour. This

²⁸ This suggestion is made by Gadamer (1991).

²⁹ *Aisthesis*, in Plato, rarely means 'sense-perception'. The term 'awareness', suggested by M. Frede (1987), captures well the large variety of different cognitive relations expressed by this single word. Plato never characterizes *aisthesis* as being mistaken or false, just like in English one cannot be falsely aware of anything. The variety of different translations of *aisthesis* from other dialogues besides *Theaetetus* includes 'to apprehend', 'observe', 'realize', 'recognize' shows, too, that the thing or a state of affairs realized or apprehended exists or obtains. *Aisthanesthai* is a success-verb, which implies that there can be no false *aisthesis*, and the objects, the states of affair, propositions that are the objects *aisthanesthai* either exist (in case of objects) or are true (in case of propositions).

is confirmed also by how the relation between the soul and the commons is described at stage one. Socrates and Theaetetus use verbs like ‘to think’ (*dianoein*, 185A9, B7), ‘to consider’ (*episkopein*, 185B5, C1, E2, E7), ‘to examine’ (*skopein*, 185B10), ‘to perceive’ (*aisthaneisthai*, 185A6, 185B8, 185D3), ‘to reveal’ (*deloun*, 185C5), ‘to grasp’ (*lambanein*, 185B8). These verbs fall into two categories. The first three verbs refer to non-factive mental states. One can think that ‘x is F’ without the state of affairs ‘x-being-F’ actually obtaining. This holds also of ‘considering’ and ‘examining’ (the representation involved in examining can be false). ‘To perceive’, ‘to grasp’ and ‘to reveal’ are, on the other hand, success-verbs, i.e. they carry an implication that representation is true. I can perceive something only when this something is really there to be perceived. Similarly, I cannot mistakenly grasp something, or something cannot be mistakenly revealed to me.

The interesting aspect about stage one is how easily Socrates and Theaetetus move back and forth between these two types of verbs and corresponding mental states. It seems that Socrates infers from the ability of being able to think about the being of colour to ‘grasping’ or ‘perceiving’ the being of colour. Throughout stage one Socrates and Theaetetus take soul’s relation to the commons to be perception-like (185B8, 185C5, 185D3). Even if the states of affairs that the commons are part of are complex (as is suggested by the repeated use of expressions like ‘thinking’ or ‘grasping about’ (*peri*) or ‘that’ (*hoti*)), there is no sign at stage one that Theaetetus takes soul’s grasping these states of affairs to involve any work or activity on part of the soul. Thinking is, for Theaetetus, similar to ‘picking up’ the properties of or about things (colour being different from sound, etc). This might well be the reason why Socrates, in posing his questions, can easily move from thinking to grasping, assuming that Theaetetus takes all acts of cognition to be perception-like. This creates the *illusion* of being as a concept, somehow ‘there’ or operative in every act of thinking. But it is only an illusion, since, as the argument at stage two goes on to show, Theaetetus thinks that it is the *real properties of things* that are grasped directly, not *concepts* ‘sameness’, ‘difference’, and ‘being’. It is the job of stage two to show that grasping being and other commons involves more than entertaining a thought about them, and that there is ‘a great deal of education’ required for getting things right.

8. The Realist Reading of stage two

At stage two Socrates starts to emphasize that the soul only *tries* to judge (*krinein*) the being of beautiful, ugly, good, bad, hard and soft. According to the Realist Reading this means that the soul tries to determine whether something or someone is, in fact, beautiful, ugly and so forth. Nothing at stage two suggests that the colour, for example, ‘reveals itself’ in simply thinking about it.

At the beginning of stage two Socrates seems to recapitulate the results of stage one, asking Theaetetus whether being belongs to the list of commons, and then adding beautiful, ugly, etc. to this list as well (186A2-9). This is surprising, since Theaetetus has already agreed that being is outside the reach of perception (and this

is all that is needed for the final refutation of Theaetetus' initial definition 'knowledge is perception' at stage three). The reason why Socrates repeats this question (whether being is one of the commons) becomes clear from Theaetetus' answer: "I put it [being] in the class of things that the soul itself yearns after, by means of itself" (186A4-5). Theaetetus now says that soul's relation to being is more like desiring than grasping. What has he seen now that he has not seen earlier? Socrates' next questions make it clear: he asks about goodness, badness, beauty and ugliness. Are they perceptual objects or intelligibles? Theaetetus' answer is significant: "They [the good, beautiful, etc.], too, seem to me to be pre-eminently things whose being the mind considers in relation to one another, calculating/reasoning in itself things past and present in relation to things in the future" (186A10-B1). Theaetetus has got the hint: being is simply not one of the many commons but plays a decisive role in every act of judging. The soul tries to determine whether a common (say, goodness) *really* belongs to a given object, e.g. whether a given human being is really good, the statue beautiful, etc. That deciding these matters is difficult has been made clear earlier in the dialogue (177-179), where Socrates says that deciding whether something is good or useful demands expertise and requires taking into account future events. Socrates adds now that education is necessary also for determining the being of (at least some) perceptual properties. "It [the soul] will perceive the hardness of what's hard by means of touch, won't it, and the softness of what's soft in the same way. – Yes. – But their being, and/i.e. what/that they both are, and their oppositeness to each other, and the being, in its turn, of this oppositeness, are things which the soul itself tries to decide for us, by reviewing them and comparing them with one another" (186B2-9).

It might seem odd to say that determining adequately whether a given perceptual property really applies to a given thing requires education (and taking into account future and past, etc.). After all, it does not appear to be overly difficult to determine whether something is hard. However, although this claim seems odd to the contemporary reader, its underlying assumption is Platonic. Socrates is not referring to *all* properties but to properties that have *opposites* (this aspect is usually neglected in the scholarly literature): good and bad, hardness and softness, beautiful and ugly, etc. It is well attested in the dialogues (e.g. *Rep.* 522E-524D) that Plato is inclined to think that determining whether these kinds of properties are instantiated is especially difficult since they are contextual in at least two senses: a given thing is beautiful compared to one thing but ugly compared to another thing; and a given thing seems ugly to some but beautiful to others. The same applies to other opposites, including hard and soft, etc. Therefore, determining whether a given thing really is beautiful or hard, does involve intellectual effort (comparing, reasoning, etc.).³⁰

³⁰ In other words, in order to correctly decide the being of hardness and softness one has to correctly decide whether certain abstract properties are instantiated. Thus, in order to decide even in the case of perceptual features that have opposites whether something is really hard or soft (i.e. in order to reach, e.g. the being of softness) one has to decide whether abstract (but nevertheless real) features such as oppositeness are instantiated.

I would like to end this section by considering an important objection to the Realist Reading, concerning the mental resources necessary for entertaining thoughts about abstract properties like sameness and difference. It seems appealing to think that in order to think of such abstract features, one needs concepts and hence conceptualists are right after all. I believe that this is not Plato's position on the matter, as is revealed by something Socrates says at 185C4-6: "But what about the power which reveals to you that which is common to everything, including these things: that *which you call by the name of (eponomazeis)* 'is', 'is not' and the others we used in our questions just now?" (185B6-C8, my emphasis). Commentators have not sufficiently stressed the act of *naming* in this passage. According to the Conceptualist Reading, to form a belief one has to "grasp the 'terms' employed in it" (Bostock 1988:119) and, consequently, naming is just "a small point" (ibid. 124). However, if, as I have suggested, the commons are not grasped (or revealed) in every thought (Socrates agrees to this only for dialectical reasons), naming becomes more important.³¹ The idea behind Socrates mentioning naming is that one needs words or names to entertain thoughts about commons. Names are different from the commons they refer to. One can misapply a name and, consequently, not grasp the common that it names. It would seem that, according to Plato, one could have a word or name in one's vocabulary without being in contact with the relevant property that the word (in fact) designates. This is confirmed by what Plato says in other dialogues. Non-philosophers systematically misapply the names/words they (think they) know. For example, the Eleatic Stranger thinks that one can have name/word in one's vocabulary without realizing what it refers to: "But with me I think you need to begin the investigation from the sophist – by searching for him and giving a clear account of what he is. Now in this case you and I have only a name in common (*tounoma monon echomen koine*), and maybe we've each used it for a different thing' (*Soph.* 218B-C, trans. White). The prisoners in *Republic's* cave systematically mis-apply the words they use, thinking that the words they use refer to the shadows on the wall of the cave, when in fact they refer to the things outside the cave.: "And if they could talk to one another, don't you think they'd suppose that the names they used applied to the things they see passing before them (*parionta*)?" (*Rep.* 515B, trans. Grube and Reeve)³². Finally, the *Laws* make essentially the same

³¹ In fact, there is an alternative translation of the whole sentence according to which it *stresses* the act of naming. The dative *hoi* at 185B5 can be read as *dativus instrumentalis* (just like the ones at 184B7ff), designating the particular activity of the soul, i.e. the 'with', as opposed to 'by means of' (for an illuminating discussion of how they differ, see Burnyeat 1976). This is Schleiermacher's translation. Most subsequent German translations have adopted it (e.g. Becker 2007). The sentence would then be the following: 'But what about the power which reveals to you that which is common to everything, including these things; *with what* [i.e. the soul] do you apply the words 'is', 'is not' and the others we used in our questions just now?' Deciding between these two translations would require a paper on its own. Grammatically both seem to be possible. Even though Schleiermacher's translation would be helpful to my case, I think that McDowell's translation is the more natural one. It makes it easier to see why Theaetetus, in his answer (185C9-D3), focuses on the features named and not on what does the naming.

³² Following J. Adam's version of *Rep.* 515B4-5 (Adam 1902:91, 179–180).

point: “I suppose you’d be prepared to recognize three elements in any given thing? – What do you mean? – The first point is what the object actually *is*, the second is the definition of this, and the third is the name” (*Laws* 895D, trans. Saunders).

Thus, one does not need to be in contact with intelligibles in order to entertain a thought – all that is needed is having relevant words in one’s vocabulary, words that the agent can use incorrectly in some (most or even all) possible situations. In these cases the soul fails to be in ‘cognitive contact’ with intelligibles.

To sum up, the discussion of *Theaetetus* 184B-187A has given the following result. The passage need not be read in a way that commits Plato to the Conceptualist Reading of the commons. It is rather the case that the commons are real (abstract) properties of things that are grasped in true beliefs whose formation involves a good deal of education. Yet, it is true that later Plato does think of belief formation as a capacity involving reason (see also *Timaeus* 37B-C). If it is not a prior grasp of intelligibles that accounts for the rationality of belief, then what is it? This question will be the focus of the following section.

9. Belief formation aiming at how things are

Socrates and Theaetetus identify belief formation with “what the soul is doing when it’s busying itself, by itself, about the things that are (*pragmateuetai peri ta onta*)” (187A). The activity picked up by the expression ‘*pragmateuetai peri ta onta*’ cannot be anything other than what has been described at stage two, i.e. yearning after being (of something about something) and trying to decide the being (of something about something). Socrates takes belief formation to be a goal-directed activity, forming a belief in some way involves trying to figure out how things are. Further, Socrates makes no clear distinction between ‘trying to decide’ being (of F about x) and ‘reasoning’ (*syllogismos*), ‘reviewing’ (*symballousa*), ‘comparing’ (*epaniousa*), ‘calculating’ (*analogismata*). He takes these activities to fall within the scope of belief formation itself (otherwise it would be difficult to explain the relevance of these activities to the overall argument). Thus, assuming that Socrates’ identification of these activities of the soul with believing (*doxazein*) is to be taken seriously,³³ we can make two observations about belief formation: (i) belief formation is a goal-directed activity aiming at grasping how things are, and (ii) belief formation includes reasoning and deliberation.

The aim of this section is to clarify these rather abstract claims about belief formation. As to (i), it is important to distinguish goals that are intrinsic to (or constitutive for) an activity from extrinsic goals (Vahid 2009:27). For example, one can play chess with the aim of appearing intelligent. This is not an intrinsic or constitutive aim of playing chess, for one could play chess without aiming to appear intelligent. On the other hand, aiming to win the game by means of legal moves seems to be an intrinsic goal of playing chess. Now, assuming that Plato thinks of

³³ This assumption is contested by Sprute (1962) and D. Frede (1989).

belief formation as aiming at how things are (i.e. at representing facts), does he take representing facts to be an extrinsic or intrinsic aim of belief formation? If it is intrinsic, then belief formation is by its very nature aiming at representing facts. If representing facts is an extrinsic goal, then beliefs can be formed having in mind exclusively other goals as well (pleasantness, instrumental value, etc). Stage three makes the connection between being and truth (*aletheia*) very close. Socrates asks, rhetorically, whether it is “possible for someone to attain truth if it does not attain being?³⁴” (186C6-7). Theaetetus says that it is not. For the Conceptualist Reading this means that being (as a copula) is necessary for truth (i.e. for propositional structure as the primary truth bearer). However, for the Realist Reading the connection is closer – only those representations are true which accord with the facts (being). This means that being is necessary and *sufficient* for truth. And this, in turn, means that when the soul is “yearning after being” it is aiming to accord with things as they *are*, i.e. belief formation is aiming at truth.³⁵ I take it that Plato’s point is that when someone forms a belief, this belief is formed with the explicit intention of grasping being (representing correctly). However, it is still not clear whether this aiming at facts or aiming at truth an intrinsic or extrinsic goal of forming beliefs.

I believe that it is intrinsic goal of belief formation. This is confirmed by Socrates’ claim that animals and newborns do not attain being and truth, since they are incapable of calculations in respect to being. “So there are some things which both men and animals are able by nature to perceive from the moment they’re born: namely, all the experiences (*pathemata*) which reach the soul by means of the body. But as for calculations (*analogismata*) about those things, with respect to being and usefulness, they’re acquired, by those who do acquire them, with difficulty and over a long time, by means of great deal of troublesome education” (186B11-C6). This strongly suggests that Socrates and Theaetetus take calculations to be a necessary part of belief formation. Calculations and reasoning, on the other hand, are necessary

³⁴ The common translation (e.g. McDowell’s) is the following: “Is it possible for someone to attain truth if it does not *even* attain being?”. However, already Schmidt (1878:523–524) remarks that the alternative is just as possible. Cornford, for example, translates the sentence in the way I suggest: “Is it possible, then, to reach truth when one cannot reach existence?” (Cornford 1935:107).

³⁵ In the literature (especially Engel 2004) it has been distinguished between three kinds of truth-directedness of belief: (1) Causal truth-directedness. According to this account, truth-directedness is simply a fact about beliefs – belief has a function of yielding true information, and the contents of beliefs can be either true or false. (2) Normative truth-directedness. According to this account, beliefs enter into rational relations and have normative properties – in other words, belief is governed by the Norm of Truth (NT): For all *p* one ought to believe that *p* only if *p*. ‘To think of oneself as believing that *p* involves the recognition of (NT)’ (Engel 2005). The recognition of (NT) is necessary for belief-ascription, but not for having beliefs. Children and animals have beliefs but don’t recognize the norm. (Engel 2004) (3) Teleological truth aimedness: believing involves the *conscious recognition* of (NT), and (b) an intention to respect (NT). (Velleman 2000). According to this account, a cognitive state counts as a belief only if the agent has a concept/conception of what it is for a belief to be true. I think that the notion of truth-directedness of belief in later Plato is probably closest to (3), i.e. teleological account. This fits well with the claim made at *Theaetetus* 186C, namely that infants and animals lack resources for belief formation.

because it is impossible to reach truth without them (186C6-7). Thus, unless calculations and inference making are simply redundant in the discussion, there has to be an internal connection between belief formation and reasoning, inference and calculations.

Consider, for a moment, the possibility that truth and being are extrinsic goals of belief formation. This would mean the soul could form a belief without aiming at truth and objectivity (although the belief in question can, of course, turn out to be true), and inference making and reasoning, being truth-conducive, would be external to belief formation. But this would, again, make inference making and reasoning redundant for the discussion. That is to say, if reasoning is not an internal part of belief formation, then there is no ground for denying belief formation to infants and animals. The position that truth-directedness is an intrinsic goal of belief formation, on the other hand, makes the connection between deliberation and reasoning and belief formation easy to see. If belief formation is, by its very nature, directed at grasping objectively obtaining facts, then belief formation is also an activity that is sensitive to reasoning and inference. This, I maintain, is the message of our target passage – belief formation is by its very nature an activity that tries to reach objective being. Since the Realist Reading insists on the close connection between being and truth, one could say that it is part of the very notion of belief that it aims at being true, i.e. it aims at reflecting objectively obtaining facts ‘out there’. A purely subjective notion of belief just isn’t belief.³⁶

10. Concluding observations

Assuming that the above is correct and Plato, in the *Theaetetus*, takes truth-directedness to be an intrinsic feature of belief formation, how does this relate to the problem of the rationality of belief? First, it is worth noting how well the notion of truth-directedness accords with the notion of rationality from the *Republic* and the related dialogues. The distinguishing feature of reason is it is desire for truth and learning. I argued in section two that this desire is cognitively independent from Forms. The desire for truth accounts for why the reasoning part is never satisfied with how things appear, but uses calculation in order to find out how things really are (Ganson 2009). This is exactly parallel to ‘yearning after’ and ‘trying to decide’ being in the *Theaetetus*. Making truth-directedness responsible for the rationality of belief has the advantage of basing the rationality of belief on a condition that is both necessary and sufficient for rationality, rather than merely on the sufficient condition (apprehension of Forms) like the standard view suggests.

³⁶ The target passage of *Theaetetus* insists on what has been recently called an ‘alethic notion of belief’: “Consider, first, the possibility that Plato endorses what I shall call an *alethic notion of belief*. On this way of thinking about belief, believing that *p* requires more than merely being disposed to act as if *p*; one must also have the aim of believing *p* only if *p* is true. According to the alethic account, beliefs are products of goal-directed behaviour. Part of what makes something a belief is the way it comes about: beliefs are products of the practices we engage in with the aim of determining how things are” (Ganson 2009:184).

If Plato comes to recognize in the *Theaetetus* that belief formation is intrinsically truth-directed, then it is only natural that he would, in the dialogues that come after the *Theaetetus*, assign beliefs exclusively to the rational part of the soul (see *Timaeus* 37C). Furthermore, the intrinsic truth-directedness does not require that Forms or intelligibles should be ‘apprehended’ or ‘grasped’ in forming beliefs at all – an assumption that does not square well with the evidence from the dialogues like the *Timaeus*, where Plato explicitly claims that Forms are grasped only in knowledge and understanding, but not in forming a belief.

Taking intrinsic truth-directedness as the hallmark of the rationality of belief in later Plato has another advantage over the standard view. It explains why Plato, in his later dialogues, tends to hyper-intellectualize³⁷ belief formation (esp. *Theaetetus*. 189E-190A and *Philebus* 38B-E). Truth-directedness makes belief formation sensitive to reasons and evidence. Rational belief formation enters the scene, in the late dialogues, usually when there is indication that something is *wrong* with how things appear. It might be, as in the *Republic* VII, that appearances have conflicting content, e.g. a finger appears large compared to one and small compared to another finger. Or, it might be that the appearances are simply too indeterminate. This is made amply clear by the description of belief formation in the *Philebus* (38B-E). When someone is presented an appearance that is too indeterminate (“when someone cannot get a clear view”) the soul starts a dialogue in himself: “What could that be that appears to stand near that rock under a tree?” (37D). After weighing candidate answers the soul comes to a conclusion: ‘this is a man’, for example. Belief is a result of this kind of an inner dialogue, where the soul tries to find out how things are. Beliefs, for later Plato, formed in an explicitly truth-directed manner. Note that the soul is presented by an appearance (*phantazoumenon*, *Philebus* 37D1) *prior* to forming any beliefs about what it is that it sees. These pre-belief appearances have representational (and, perhaps, propositional) content. But since these appearances are formed in manner that is not explicitly and intrinsically truth-directed, they are not *beliefs*.

If belief formation is by its very nature meant to determine how things are then it is only natural that blind acceptances do not count as beliefs in late Plato (although I suspect that, for him, both would count as ‘propositional attitudes’). This is quite different from how Plato used to understand belief in his middle dialogues. At least on one reading (Lorenz 2006, Ganson 2009), in the *Republic* X, both reason and the parts of the soul below reason (non-rational parts) have beliefs. Non-rational parts blindly accept how things appear whereas the rational part uses calculation and measurement in order to form *its* beliefs about how matters stand, e.g. is the oar in the water really crooked or does it simply appear to be? The rational part forms beliefs in an intrinsically truth-directed manner. Plato, in the *Republic*, does not offer reasons why blind acceptances and rational belief formation should both count as beliefs. I suggest that, at the time of writing the *Republic*, Plato does not yet take beliefs to be results of intrinsically truth-directed

³⁷ I am borrowing this term from Burge 2010.

behavior. Rather, he takes the relation between truth and belief formation to be external – even though beliefs can be true, there is, for Plato, nothing in the nature of belief that would intrinsically tie it to truth and objectivity. Truth and falsehood of beliefs are, in the *Republic*, an external matter – some beliefs simply happen to be true and some false. There seems to be another important novelty in the *Theaetetus*. In the *Republic*, the reasoning part was “wholly straining to *know* where the truth lies” (581B). The *Theaetetus* 186A-187A suggests that belief formation is an activity that is, in itself, truth-directed. This means that the soul can ‘try to decide’ and ‘yearn after’ being in a way that is independent from aiming at *knowledge* of truth. The soul is aiming at reaching true beliefs by means of reasoning.

Thus, *Theaetetus* 184B-187A marks a significant turning point in Plato’s understanding of the notion of belief, especially on the background of the *Republic*. Plato starts to think about belief formation as an intrinsically truth-directed activity. This, in turn, means that belief formation is understood as an activity that is sensitive to reasons and evidence. That rationality of belief consists in its truth-directedness fits well with how Plato understands the nature of reason, i.e. as desiring truth and learning.

Acknowledgements

Research for this paper was supported by the Estonian Science Foundation Grant No. 8715. For helpful comments on the earlier drafts of this paper I am grateful to Riin Sirkel, Roomet Jakapi, Zack Dresben and the anonymous referee of this journal.

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