

STUDIES IN THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

Apprehension and Argument

Ancient Theories of Starting Points for Knowledge

Miira Tuominen

If we know something, do we always know it through something else? Does this mean that the chain of knowledge should continue infinitely? Or, rather, should we abandon this approach and ask how we acquire knowledge? Irrespective of the fact that very basic questions concerning human knowledge have been formulated in various ways in different historical and philosophical contexts, philosophers have been surprisingly unanimous concerning the point that structures of knowledge should not be infinite. In order for there to be knowledge, there must be at least some primary elements which may be called 'starting points'.

This book offers the first synoptic study of how the primary elements in knowledge structures were analysed in antiquity from Plato to late ancient commentaries, the main emphasis being on the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition. It argues that, in the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition, the question of starting points was treated from two distinct points of view: from the first perspective, as a question of how we acquire basic knowledge; and from the second perspective, as a question of the premises we may immediately accept in the line of argumentation. It was assumed that we acquire some general truths rather naturally and that these function as starting points for inquiry. In the Hellenistic period, an alternative approach was endorsed: the very possibility of knowledge became a central issue when sceptics began demanding that true claims should always be distinguishable from false ones.

Apprehension and Argument

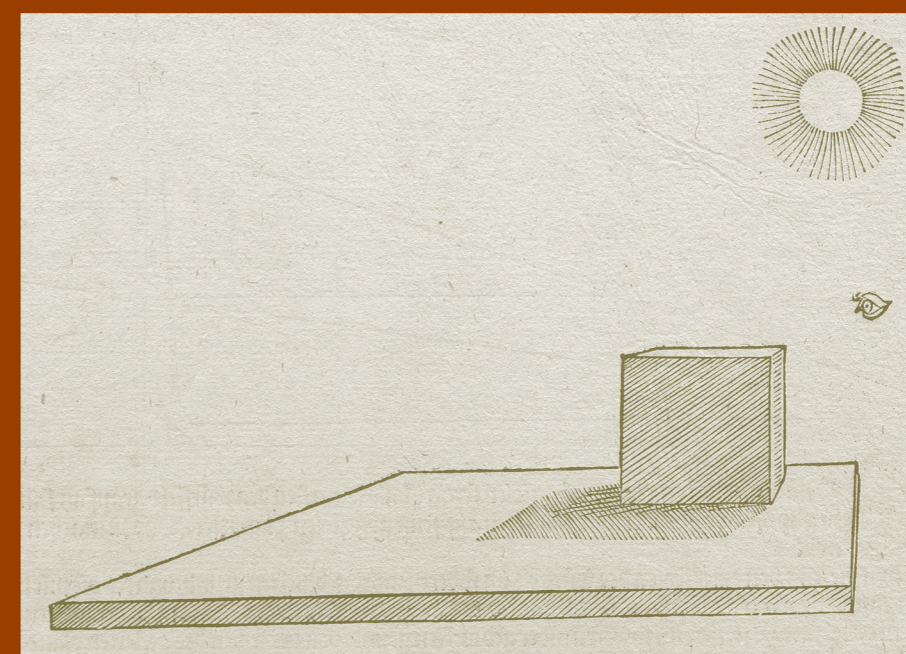
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APPREHENSION AND ARGUMENT

Ancient Theories of Starting Points for Knowledge

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ix

Abbreviations and a Note on the Texts xi

Introduction **1**

The Topic, Scope, and Aim of this Book 2

The Structure of the Book 6

A Brief Survey of the Existing Literature 12

PART I: PLATONIC-ARISTOTELIAN TRADITION

1. Theories of Argumentation **17**

1.1 Plato 17

Arguments as Socratic Discussions 18

The Method of Hypothesis 22

Collection and Division 32

Philosophical Cosmology 35

1.2 Aristotle 37

1.2.1 Aristotle's Inheritance from the Academy 38

Dialectical Syllogisms 38

Induction 59

Conceptual Analysis 65

1.2.2 Science 68

Being Better Known 69

Premises of Scientific Proofs 72

Proofs and Definitions 86

Do the Sciences Have Something in Common? 89

Remarks on Aristotle's Scientific Practice 96

Knowledge of the Premises 102

1.3 Later Developments 112

1.3.1 Some Developments in Platonism 113

Galen 113

Alcinous 118

Plotinus 122

1.3.2	Greek Commentaries on Aristotle	126
	Alexander of Aphrodisias	127
	Themistius	138
	Philoponus	142
	Simplicius	149
2.	Intellectual Apprehension	155
2.1	The Connection between the Two Contexts	155
2.2	Perception	162
2.2.1	Receptive Theories	163
	Causation through Medium	164
2.2.2	Projective Theories	168
2.2.3	Co-affection: Plotinus	170
2.2.4	Perceptual Realism and the Reliability of Perceptions	171
	Plato: Realism without Reliability?	172
	Aristotle's Realism: Perceptibility as a Modalised Notion	173
2.3	From Perception to Intellection	175
2.3.1	Intelligible Forms	176
	Plato	176
	Aristotle	181
2.3.2	Later Developments	194
	Galen, Alcinous, Plotinus	194
	Alexander, Themistius, Philoponus	199
PART II: ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES		
3.	Hellenistic Philosophy	219
3.1	Is there a Starting Point for Knowledge?	222
	The Notion of a Criterion of Truth	222
	Perceptions and Cognitive Impressions	228
	Preconceptions	238
	The Problem of Vagueness	251
3.2	Is There a Transition from the Evident to the Non-Evident?	254
3.2.1	Epicurus	255
	Witnessing and Counter-Witnessing	255
	The Method of Elimination and the Method of Similarity	260
3.2.2	Stoics and Sextus	265
	Indemonstrable Argument Forms	265

TABLE OF CONTENTS

vii

Proofs	266
Arguments Involving a Non-Necessary Conditional	269
Rejection of Proof	271
3.3 What is Left for the Sceptic?	272
Pyrrhonian Scepticism and Non-Dogmatic Beliefs	273
3.4 What Does a Doctor Know? – Medical Empiricism as an Alternative Approach to Scientific Knowledge	276
The Sorites Argument in Medicine	276
Empiricist Expertise	281
 <i>Conclusion</i>	 289
<i>Bibliography</i>	295
<i>Index of Names</i>	313
<i>Index Locorum</i>	317
<i>Index of Topics</i>	325

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Miira Tuominen

ABBREVIATIONS AND A NOTE ON THE TEXTS

The following list contains the abbreviations used in this book. An edition is included in this list if it forms the basis of the reference system I have used. For the works of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, the reader is instructed to consult editions in the Oxford Classical Texts series (OCT). If a specific edition is used and discussed, it will be referred to in the text or in the footnotes.

1. Collections of Fragments and Texts

DK = H. Diels and W. Kranz (eds.), *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 3 vols., 6th rev. ed. (Berlin: Weidmann 1951–1952).

SVF = I. von Arnim (ed.), *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, 4 vols., (Leipzig: Teubner 1905 and 1924).

LS = A. A. Long and D. Sedley (eds.), *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 vols., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987).

2. Edition Series

CAG = *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*

CLCAG = *Corpus latinum commentariorum in Aristotelem Graecorum*

3. Authors and Works

Aët. = Aëtius, a reconstruction of his treatise (*Placita*) is found in H. Diels (ed.), *Doxographi Graeci* (Berlin: de Gruyter 1879).

Alexander of Aphrodisias

De Anima = *Alexandri Aphrodisiensis praeter commentaria scripta minora: De Anima liber cum Mantissa*, ed. I. Bruns (Berlin: Reimer 1887). (CAG Suppl. II 1)

De Mixt. = *Alexandri Aphrodisiensis praeter commentaria scripta minora: quaestiones, de fato, de mixtione*, ed. I. Bruns (Berlin: Reimer 1892). (CAG Suppl. II 2)

in An. Pr. = *Alexandri in Aristotelis Analyticorum Priorum librum I commentarium*, ed. M. Wallies (Berlin: Reimer 1883). (CAG II 1)

in Metaph. = *Alexandri Aphrodisiensis in Aristotelis Metaphysica commentaria*, ed. M. Hayduck (Berlin: Reimer 1891). (CAG I)

in Top. = *Alexandri Aphrodisiensis in Aristotelis Topicorum libros octos commentaria*, ed. M. Wallies (Berlin: Reimer 1891). (CAG II 2)

Arist. = Aristotle

An. Post. = *Analytica Posteriora*

An. Pr. = *Analytica Priora*

Cat. = *Categoriae*

DA = *De Anima*

De Int. = *De Interpretatione*

De Juvent. = *De Juventute*

De Mem. = *De Memoria*

De Som. = *De Somno*

EN = *Ethica Nicomachea*

GA = *De Generatione Animalium*

HA = *Historia Animalium*

Met. = *Metaphysica*

Part. An. = *De Partibus Animalium*

Phys. = *Physica*

Rhet. = *Rhetorica*

Soph. El. = *Sophistici Elenchi*

Top. = *Topica*

Cic. = Cicero

Acad. = *Academica*

Div. = *De Divinatione*

Fin. = *De Finibus*

Nat. deor. = *De Natura Deorum*

Diog. Laert. = Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*

Galen

Plac. Hipp. et Plat. = *De Placitis Hippocrates et Platonis*

Inst. log. = *Institutio Logica*

Meth. med. = *Methodo Medendi*

On Sects = *περὶ αἰρέσεων τοῖς εἰσαγομένοις* (On the Sects for Beginners), *Claudii Galenii Pergamenii scripta minora* vol. 3, ed. G. Helmreich (Leipzig: Teubner 1893).

Lucr. = Lucretius

Rer. nat. = *De Rerum Natura*

Philoponus (?)

in An. Post. = *Ioannis Philoponi in Aristotelis Analytica Posteriora Commentaria cum anonymo in librum II*, ed. M. Wallies (Berlin: Reimer 1909). (CAG XIII 3)

in An. Pr. = *Ioannis Philoponi in Aristotelis Analytica Priora commentaria*, ed. M. Wallies (Berlin: Reimer 1905). (CAG XIII 2)

in Phys. = *Ioannis Philoponi in Aristotelis Physicorum libros tres priores commentaria*, ed. H. Vitelli (Berlin: Reimer 1887). (CAG XVI)

in De An. = *Commentaire sur le De Anima d'Aristote*, lat. traduction de Guillaume de Moerbeke, ed. G. Verbeke (Louvain: Publications universitaires de Louvain 1966). (CLCAG)

Plato

Ap. = *Apology*

Prot. = *Protagoras*

Rep. = *Republic*

Tim. = *Timaeus*

Plutarch

Adv. Col. = *Adversus Colotem*

Comm. not. = *De communibus notitiis adversus Stoicos*

Sext. Emp. = Sextus Empiricus

Math. = *Adversus Mathematicos*

Pyr. = Πυρρώνειοι ὑποτυπώσεις (Outlines of Pyrrhonism)

Simplicius

in Phys. = *Simplicii in Aristotelis Physicorum libros quattuor posteriores commentaria*, ed. H. Diels (Berlin: Reimer 1895). (CAG XVI)

Themistius

in An. Post. = *Themistii Analyticorum Posteriorum paraphrasis*, ed. M. Wallies (Berlin: Reimer 1900). (CAG V 1)

in De Anima = *Themistii in libros Aristotelis De Anima paraphrasis*, ed. R. Heinze (Berlin: Reimer 1890). (CAG V 3)

in Phys. = *Themistii in Aristotelis Physica paraphrasis*, ed. H. Schenkl (Berlin: Reimer 1900). (CAG V 2)

INTRODUCTION

Every human effort aiming at improving, deepening or clarifying our conceptions of the world – at best to provide us with knowledge – involves some kind of starting point. One has to start from somewhere, end somewhere, and in the course of the inquiry, take something for granted. This means that an inquiry involves a distinction between two classes of statements: those for which the truth is questioned and those which are taken as accepted without further proof. The latter class includes the general principles of valid inference as well as the specific principles concerning the subject matter. In addition to these, we need some criteria which indicate that the inquiry is sufficient. All of these can be called starting points for knowledge in a broad sense.

To talk about starting points or principles of any kind entails one thinking about a structure in which some components are prior to others. In the characterisation of starting points for knowledge just presented, the relevant priority is determined by whether or not a statement is accepted immediately in the context in which it occurs. The existence of starting points for knowledge is often established through a regress argument. Many philosophers, who discuss knowledge in different frameworks and whose general views on human knowledge differ a great deal, share the common conviction that knowledge claims cannot form an infinite structure. Basically this means that if we give reasons for the statement we claim to know, the chain of reasons must not be infinite.

It is important to note that the mere fact that we consider the theme of starting points for knowledge does not necessarily commit us to any particular epistemology. It might easily come to mind that when we talk about the starting points for knowledge, we assume at the same time an epistemologically foundationalist framework. When the starting points are interpreted in a broad sense, as characterised above, this does not follow. The theme of

starting points for knowledge is thus to be taken as being independent of any particular epistemological theory.

THE TOPIC, SCOPE, AND AIM OF THIS BOOK

The topic of this book is how ancient Greek and Roman philosophers¹ treated the question of starting points for knowledge. In the Greek context, a term that was often used for such a starting point is *archê* (ἀρχή), which can be translated as ‘starting point’ or ‘principle’. ἀρχή is one of the central philosophical terms of Greek philosophy. It is also one of those terms that have several philosophically relevant meanings. Its most literal meaning is beginning or origin and it has political connotations of leading and ruling. The basic metaphor in connection with knowledge would be a leading or guiding principle from which other things follow. As such, the connotations of the word in the Greek context differ from contemporary metaphors in epistemology. In the contemporary context starting points for knowledge are often compared to the foundations of buildings. Such an idea of an underlying structure is not central in the connotations of the Greek ἀρχή.

I have often used the more flexible and more literal translation ‘starting point’ for ἀρχή, because ‘principle’ typically refers to general truths or logical rules and these are propositional. In antiquity, however, we do find examples of starting points for knowledge which are not propositional in a straightforward sense. These include basic notions corresponding to natural kinds or to metaphysical structuring factors of reality. In the Neo-Platonic tradition we also find a form of immediate intellectual apprehension, which involves understanding a complex whole instantaneously. Such apprehension is not propositional either.

There are also methodological reasons for formulating the topic loosely. As is well known to any scholar and student working on the history of philosophy, philosophical questions have not necessarily been formulated in quite the same terms and within the same conceptual framework in different periods. However, some crucial themes, such as basic questions concerning existence, the nature of good, and the nature and structure of human knowledge reappear in different periods even though the framework in which they are studied changes.

It is inevitable that any reading of historical texts is influenced by the general intellectual climate and the more precise philosophical theories of

¹ From this point onwards by the phrase ‘ancient philosophers’ I shall refer to Greek and Roman philosophers. The Asian philosophical tradition is outside of the scope of this study.