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An Apology

1. ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΕΑΥΤΟΝ! Who cannot remember the very first time when he or she heard these words uttered? KNOW THYSELF! I know that I can distinctly recall when a high school chum announced to some fellow classmates and me that this pronouncement, together with the injunction NOTHING IN EXCESS, was the most famous and the most important utterance of the Delphic oracle.

Nor can I forget the quizzicality that immediately followed this revelation. NOTHING IN EXCESS surely appeared to be a reasonable, if at times a difficult, maxim to follow. But KNOW THYSELF? This great injunction rang hollow. Know thyself, when there are so many other intriguing things seemingly waiting to be discovered? Not to mention the ingenious things no doubt waiting to be invented? How could a nostrum seemingly so empty be the summation of ancient Greek wisdom?

You may imagine our consternation when this same friend kindly informed us in almost the same breath that the Greeks highly esteemed a playwright who wrote a play about a man who murdered his father and married his mother. They had even given him a prize for it, he claimed. We were apoplectic! The Greeks, we had been taught, were the very paragons of our culture. They had fought so valiantly against so many at Marathon and Salamis.¹

Yet what better inspiration for philosophy than these ancient paragons who appear so paradoxical! Who better to invoke for my present undertaking than these haunting spirits? Whether we will or not, we are all obliged to concede that the Greeks present paradigms that overshadow our culture. Every philosopher – nay, every person – must somehow come to grips with these ancient ones. We may ponder them, we may applaud them, we may deplore them, we may attempt to ignore them, but escape them we cannot.

¹ The mischievous friend was Michael Jay Williams, Esq., and his language was more colorful than my own. This incident remains indelibly engraved in my memory.

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And so I must ask, Why? Why must every philosopher explicitly, and every person implicitly, grapple with these Greeks? Could the phenomenon be a cultural conundrum of some intransigent sort? Or does it have its origins in human nature itself? I wish to suggest that this chronic problem has its origins within our very nature, which we share with the Greeks. If they were anything, the ancient Greek philosophers were surely astute observers of the human frame and fabric. More particularly, I believe that they may serve to remind us, despite ourselves perhaps, of an important fact about ourselves. This fact, we soon shall discover, is an organicism that lies deep within us as well as without us.

We also know that these Greeks claim to be the children and the grandchildren of the gods. This claim alone, I should think, would be sufficient to render them worthy of our attention. Who are we to doubt their word? They surely ought to know who their own ancestors are, to paraphrase an ancient argument. At the very least, one ought not to dismiss their claim out of hand. We might even find, should we deign to give it serious consideration, that we ourselves are nearer and dearer to the gods than we may have imagined. We do, after all, trace our lineage back to the ancients.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Before we can hope to fathom them, we must first make an effort to become better acquainted with these ancient ones. And with ourselves.

2. The divine injunction to know myself, I confess, I did not take as seriously as one ought for a time considerably longer than I would care to admit. But I did early on make a concerted effort to get to know the Greeks, and Socrates quickly became a focus of my endeavors. His claim that the unexamined life is not worth living was a source of many spirited discussions among my college classmates and me (*Apology* 37e–38a).² I well remember that our debates almost always ended in frustration, though I no longer recall why they did. Nor am I entirely sure that we divined a connection with the Pythian oracle. But I would like to think that we did.

Even now an examination of the *Apology* can be an occasion for philosophical frustration. One would think that a reasonable procedure for considering this monologue would be to ask, How does Socrates himself implement his claim about the unexamined life? After all, he does give us an account of an examination that he made regarding his life. But this procedure, ingenious though it appears, soon gives us additional grounds for reflection. What we discover with it initially seems not terribly profound and not a little puzzling.

When we approach the *Apology* with our question in mind, we find Socrates recounting at his trial his attempt to understand another

² More literally Socrates asserts that an unexamined life is one not to be lived by a human being (οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ). The implication is that an unexamined life is less than human!

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pronouncement made by the oracle at Delphi. He explains that a bold friend of his had asked the oracle whether someone was wiser than he, and the oracle had responded that no one was (*Apology* 20c–21a). He found this response to be less than credible, and he decided to undertake an inquiry and to see whether he could not find someone wiser. He actually thought, he tells us, that he might refute the oracle (21b–c).

He soon discovered, however, that the oracle was in fact irrefutable. He was forced to conclude that he was the wisest of all because he was unable to find anyone who was wiser. What was this great wisdom of his? His wisdom was merely that he did not know and did not think that he did (ὥσπερ... οὐκ οἶδα, οὐδὲ οἶομαι)! But this meager knowledge was sufficient to make him wiser than all the others. He sought out and tested numerous people who had a reputation for wisdom, among them politicians, poets, and handicraftsmen. He found that he was wiser than they were because they each thought that they knew something though they did not (21c–22e).

Socrates, then, demonstrated with his examination that he was indeed wiser than anyone else. But he also showed that his wisdom was merely ignorance! This ignorance we have in fact come to know as Socratic ignorance. His example thus suggests that an examined life is worth living because it is one that we knowingly live in ignorance. I suppose that a life of this sort might be a smidgen better than an unexamined life, which, presumably, one ignorantly lives in ignorance. Yet one cannot but wonder, How worthy is any life of ignorance?

What is more, you may perchance have noticed that we again encounter the Delphic oracle and its more troublesome injunction. Our ability to know ourselves would seem to be rather dubious. Through Socrates the oracle is apparently telling us something about human knowledge. To the consternation of his jury, Socrates professes his belief that the oracle meant for him to be taken as an example for us all. What she appears to be saying, he asserts, is that our wisdom is worth little or nothing (*Apology* 22e–23b).

Need I also mention the little paradox of how one might know that one does not know? If we know that we do not know, then we would know at least one thing, would we not? But if we do not know at least one thing, then we would not even know that we do not know. Socrates' discovery, whichever way we take it, seems at best oxymoronic.

Let us persevere, nonetheless. We can learn another fact or two about Socrates and his wisdom even from Plato's account of his trial. Socrates informs us that his knowledge is of one kind only. Eschewing divine wisdom of any kind, he asserts that he does not even know of any wisdom that might be greater than human (μείζω τινὰ ἢ κατ' ἀνθρώπον σοφίαν). The knowledge that he himself claims to possess is merely human wisdom (ἀνθρωπίνη σοφία) (*Apology* 20d–e). Wisdom of our sort it is which is worth little or nothing (23a).

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Unfortunately, he does not bother to explain what the difference might be between wisdom of these two kinds. But we can see that the people whom he examined apparently thought that they had knowledge akin to divine knowledge. At least, they thought that they knew something beautiful and good (καλὸν καγαθόν) (21d or 22b–c). Could divine knowledge thus be to know that one actually knows? And could human knowledge, again, be to know only that we do not know, if we know anything? That is, could our knowledge be to know that we are ignorant?

Perhaps we ought to ask, Have we ever encountered a similar distinction between these kinds of knowledge? I believe that we have. Where? In Plato's *Republic*, of course! When he discusses the qualifications for an ideal ruler, Socrates obviously distinguishes several kinds of knowledge if we take the term in its widest sense. He recognizes a distinction between knowledge and opinion, and he further differentiates understanding from reasoning and belief from conjecture. With these distinctions, if carefully analyzed, we shall see what divine knowledge might be and, more important for us, what human knowledge is.

Consider the famous paradigm of the divided line, which Socrates uses to make his distinctions. With this figure Socrates represents indifferently our intellectual powers and their objects. But we need consider only our powers. Socrates asks us to imagine a line divided into two unequal sections. These two sections, we may say, represent opinion (δόξα) and knowledge (γνώσις) (*Republic* 6. 509d, 510a). Opinion, of course, concerns the multiplicity of visible and audible objects, and knowledge the unity of an intelligible object, which is an idea (*Republic* 5. 476a–b).

He asks us to imagine further each section subdivided into two unequal segments (*Republic* 6. 509d–e). To the lower segments he assigns conjecture (εἰκασία) and belief (πίστις), and to the upper segments reasoning (διάνοια) and understanding (νόησις) (511d–e). Conjecture and belief concern sensible images and their objects, but reasoning and understanding concern intelligible objects and their principles (509e–510c).

I want to focus not on the lower but on the upper portion of this figure. I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the upper segments of the line both concern hypotheses and how to use them in intellectual inquiry. With these two segments Socrates illustrates two ways in which we can so use them. He is at some pains to show that one may use a hypothesis either to establish a conclusion or to establish a first principle.

Consider the use of a hypothesis to arrive at a conclusion. This usage is one familiar to any high school sophomore who has signed up for a geometry course. One starts from hypotheses (ἐξ ὑποθέσεων), assuming them to be true without argument, and then from them one draws a conclusion (ἐπὶ τελευτήν). For example, our geometer might assume the definitions of a triangle and a square and then proceed to make an inference about these

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concepts. When we use diagrams for this purpose, we use them only as images of the concept under consideration (510b, 510c–511b).³

Consider now the use of a hypothesis for arriving at a first principle. We may find this procedure less familiar, but college students who have studied mathematical logic have an inkling of what it is. One goes from hypotheses (ἐξ ὑποθέσεων), such as geometrical definitions, to a first principle that is nonhypothetical (ἐπ' ἀρχὴν ἀνυπόθετον). One then goes back to the original and other hypotheses. We might, for example, go from the postulates of Euclidian geometry to the concepts of set theory and then back to the postulates of Euclidian, Riemannian, and Lobachevskian geometries. We use no images for this purpose. Our thinking is “of ideas, through ideas, and to ideas” (510b, 511b–d).⁴

I would like to emphasize two points about this analysis. Socrates suggests, first of all, that we undertake an inquiry of either type only by hypothesis. We merely assume a hypothesis to be true for the purpose of drawing a conclusion from it. Or we can use a hypothesis as a “steppingstone” or “springboard” in an attempt to arrive at and to establish its truth with a first principle (*Republic* 6. 511b–c). That we can understand a hypothesis by means of a first principle, he explicitly asserts (511c–d).⁵

Second, we use a hypothesis in either way according to Socrates for the purpose of a conceptual inquiry. In the one way we attempt to draw out the implications of a concept, and these implications are themselves conceptual. Images, if used, merely reflect conceptual content. In the other way we attempt to organize our hypotheses with a first principle, but this organization is conceptual, too. Images are not even under consideration (511b–c).⁶

³ Incidentally, the divided line itself functions as a geometric diagram does. It serves to illustrate epistemological and ontological concepts.

⁴ Nagel is a contemporary philosopher who expresses this concept quite succinctly, though he does not connect it with Plato. “An advance in objectivity,” he asserts, “requires that already existing forms of understanding should themselves become the object of a new form of understanding, which also takes in the objects of the original forms” (*View* 5. 74–77).

⁵ Few contemporary translators would appear to translate these passages consistently with the term “hypothesis.” But Reeve did in his recent revision of Grube’s translation (Cooper). So did Lindsay and Bloom before him. Most contemporary philosophers, however, would agree about these two functions of a hypothesis. Irwin does, for example, though he uses both the terms “hypothesis” and “assumption” (*Ethics* 16. 274). Annas also agrees about these functions (*Introduction* 11. 277–278).

⁶ Tait discusses the objects represented by the divided line, and he shows in some detail how knowledge can have this conceptual purity. He argues that Plato is defending what we would call exact science, and that science of this kind is “true of a certain structure which the phenomena in question roughly exemplify but which, once grasped, we are capable of reasoning about independently of the phenomena which, in the causal sense, gave rise to it” (11–12, 15–16).

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We may now distinguish, I think, human from divine knowledge. Divine knowledge I would take to be ultimate, nonhypothetical, knowledge of first principles. If they have any knowledge, would not the gods have knowledge of first principles and not merely knowledge that they assume to be true? Indeed, they would presumably have knowledge of the one and only first principle of anything and everything.⁷

Human knowledge I take to be hypothetical knowledge. Following Socrates, I would argue that our hypothetical knowledge is of two kinds. We can not only reason hypothetically, but we can also understand hypothetically. That is, we can not only use our hypotheses to arrive at conclusions, but we can also arrive at prior principles as best we are able with the aid of our hypotheses. Or dare we presume to do more than to aspire to a knowledge of a principle that is truly first?⁸

If there can be knowledge so wondrous! Socrates himself professes not to know if knowledge of a nonhypothetical sort is in fact possible. He actually expresses some skepticism about any knowledge of an ultimate first principle. His skepticism extends explicitly to the *ne plus ultra* idea of the good (ἡ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέα), which, he states, is “the last to be known and hardly to be seen.” “God only knows if it happens to be true!” he declares. This idea

⁷ Contemporary physicists would call knowledge of this sort a Grand Unifying Theory (GUT) or a Theory of Everything (TOE). In their hope to develop a theory of this sort, they are currently attempting to reconcile the hypotheses of general relativity with those of quantum mechanics. Their general theory would advance a principle concerned with only a single science, however.

⁸ With a different method we thus arrive at a distinction very similar to that which Vlastos makes between knowledge that is certain and knowledge that we attain by elenchus. Vlastos argues that certain knowledge absolutely cannot be otherwise, and that elenctic knowledge depends on our dialectical skill and on our opinions (*Socratic* 2. 48–58). Socrates, Vlastos also points out, relies on an assumption that elenctic knowledge is a consistent set of beliefs. But need Socrates assume that our beliefs, though shown to be consistent on a given occasion, are true, as Vlastos argues (*Socratic* 1. 25–28)? Not in any absolute sense, I would think. Human knowledge, if open to dialectical challenge, can be true only by hypothesis. Our knowledge must remain hypothetical whether we attempt to reason or to understand.

Brickhouse and Smith argue that Socrates does have divine knowledge, revealed to him not only by the oracle but also in his dreams (*Socrates* 2. 105–107). They allege two facts in support of their claim, that Socrates trusts the oracle because a god would not lie, and that he evidenced his trust in divination when he concludes that the poets produced their works through divine knowledge (105–106). I can only respond that Socrates explicitly denies himself any grand claim to wisdom greater than human (*Apology* 20d–e). More particularly, he implies that he did doubt the veracity of the oracle when he undertook to disprove it (21b–c), and he in fact criticizes the poets and others for their very claim to possess knowledge of the beautiful and good (22a–c; see 21c–e).

Brickhouse and Smith agree, however, that Socrates also possesses human knowledge, which they, too, call elenctic knowledge, and that elenctic knowledge is less than certain. Knowledge of this kind has its limitations, they argue, of both an inductive and a deductive nature (*Socrates* 2. 133–135).

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constitutes “for him appearances that thus appear (τὰ . . . ἐμοὶ φαίνόμενα οὕτω φαίνεται)” (*Republic* 7. 517b–c)!⁹

We have to admit, then, that human knowledge does amount to precious little. All knowledge that we might presume to possess is merely hypothetical, whether we use our hypotheses for understanding or for reasoning. Nor may we exempt this very distinction between hypothetical and nonhypothetical knowledge. We can know only hypothetically that we do not know nonhypothetically. Our knowledge is worth little or nothing, as Socrates declared. We cannot truly know a single thing.

We can see, too, that an examined life is more worthy for us than an unexamined one. An examined life is a life not without some diffidence about our intellectual powers, which are rather fallible. At least, a life examined in a Socratic manner is. To know that we do not know is to know that we are apt to err. But an unexamined life is a life of foolish confidence. To think that one knows when one does not is to court disaster. A life of this sort can only be the stuff of tragedy, or, if we happen to be lucky, the stuff of comedy.

Finally, we resolve our little paradox about human knowledge. In one breath Socrates uses the word “knowledge” in two senses. We can know humanly that we do not know divinely. Or we can know hypothetically that we do not know nonhypothetically. This usage is surely pardonable if the resulting paradox garners our attention. And I believe that it did, did it not?¹⁰

We find, then, that Socrates can indeed help us understand the Delphic injunction to know ourselves. We are obliged to conclude that we can know ourselves only by hypothesis. If we had other than hypothetical knowledge, we would know who we are through divine eyes. But only through our own eyes can we come to know who we might be. Our self-knowledge can be only hypothetical.

But we now find that we must accept yet another conclusion. Self-knowledge turns out to be merely self-ignorance. We have seen that we must acknowledge our ignorance about the objects of our intellectual endeavors. But our ignorance about these objects surely entails an ignorance about our very selves. Or may we presume to know ourselves in some way other than that by which we know any and every other thing? Our self-knowledge, too, is worth little or nothing!

⁹ Shorey wryly remarks that Plato is “much less prodigal about metaphysical ultimates” than his interpreters sometimes are (*Republic*, vol. 2, pp. 130, n. b). He also argues that the nonhypothetical first principle is not to be taken in an ontological sense, but that this principle is for us only an ultimate hypothesis. It is “an unrealized methodological ideal” (*Idea* 229–232). I take his argument to be a reminder that the nonhypothetical can be for us merely a dialectical assimilation of our hypotheses. It only appears to be nonhypothetical, as Socrates says.

¹⁰ Vlastos agrees about the ambiguation (*Socratic* 2. 64–66).

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No wonder Socrates had such a difficult time with his jury! His jurors would appear to lead lives unworthy of human beings, thinking that they know themselves when they do not. He more than once becomes the object of their indignation when he asserts that the certainty of others about themselves makes them less wise than his ignorance about himself (*Apology* 20c–21a, 29b–31c). He must admonish the jury even when he reminds them of his penchant for dialectics (17c–18a, 27a–b).

Perhaps we can now better understand the accusation of impiety (24b–c, 26b–c). What becomes of our traditional gods if we have no divine knowledge of them? Socrates argues that he is following the divine oracle when he practices philosophy. But he also avers that he must test the utterance of the oracle to see for himself whether or not it might be true. Stop and think for a moment. If we have only human knowledge of our gods, we are in effect left on our own with the dreaded dialectical daimon whom Socrates claims to serve (31c–d). A strange divinity, indeed!

3. Contemporary philosophers, I have since learned, long after the late-night debates with my college companions, take an even less sanguine view of our sagacity than does Socrates. Yet these very philosophers, excepting the more obstreperous among them, do frequently present the appearance, at least, of being able descendants of our Athenian. I would like now to draw upon an American philosopher of this able sort for support in our endeavor to understand ourselves. This philosopher exhibits not only the diffidence of Socrates but also the dialectical acumen.

I refer to none other than William James. One might imagine that James would find a life of ignorance, when viewed as a life of hypothetical knowledge, quite familiar and quite possibly congenial. He would surely applaud Socrates for the view that human knowledge is merely hypothetical. In fact, the American and the British philosophers were among the first moderns, if not the first, to observe how successful the hypothetical method is in the natural sciences and to advocate its adoption in the moral sciences. Their hope was to free us from our moral prejudices and to put us on our way toward moral progress.

Nonetheless, James would likely feel a residual discomfort about a Socratic life of ignorance. What would make him uncomfortable, I think, is the purpose for which Socrates employs the hypothetical method. Socrates uses the method in intellectual inquiry exclusively for the sake of our concepts themselves. We understand with a hypothesis, on his account, when we arrive at a first principle for concepts. Or we reason with a hypothesis when we draw conclusions about concepts. In either way a hypothesis enables us only to relate our ideas to one another.

I have, I admit, some sympathy for this philosophical antipathy. You no doubt do, too, if you have any empirical tendencies. Our uneasiness arises from the fact that we are accustomed to using a hypothesis for inquiry not

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about conceptual but about perceptual objects. That is, we tend to make an inquiry about the intangible and invisible objects of our intellectual life a secondary concern. Our primary concern is to inquire about the visible and tangible objects of our quotidian life. Of course, if inquiry about concepts can advance inquiry about percepts, so much the better.

But are we right to indulge our ontological predilection? What reason might we have for supposing that the more rational conceptual entities are less appropriate objects of our cognitive concern than more the ephemeral perceptual entities? Can we defend our decision, if it was a decision, to assess human understanding and reasoning by their bearing upon things apparently physical?

I would suggest that we might mitigate our metaphysical qualm by returning to our ancient dialectician. Curiously, if we can see how Socrates defends the practice of employing a hypothesis in conceptual inquiry, we shall be in a better position to examine how James defends the practice of applying a hypothesis in perceptual inquiry. What I intend to show is that the ancient and the contemporary concepts of knowledge, despite their considerable differences, do have some rather astounding similarities. We shall also see that, despite these similarities, the contemporary concept of knowledge resembles most of all the ancient concept of opinion.

Plato presents in the *Republic* another paradigm that will prove helpful for addressing our present quandary. This paradigm is the simile of the sun. Socrates uses this simile as an illustration of the good and its role in determining our epistemology and our ontology. Though urged to do so, he admits that he is not able to explain what the good itself might be. His fear is that he would not be of the sort able to succeed in the attempt, and that in his eagerness he would only make himself look ridiculous (*Republic* 6. 506d–e). His reluctance apparently bears no irony (504e–505a).

He argues instead that the good, whatever it might be, has a nature and function in the intelligible world similar to the nature and function of the sun in the visible world. This point is especially worthy of our consideration. The sun, he explains, lavishes its world with light, and its light serves as a medium for human vision (*Republic* 6. 507c–508a). The light of the sun obviously gives vision to our eyes and makes objects visible. Without light our eyes can hardly see and objects can scarcely be seen (507d–e).

The good, too, he continues, causes a medium, but its medium serves human intellection. This medium, he implies, is truth (ἀλήθεια) and being (τὸ ὄν) (508d). In truth and being we now encounter nothing less than the famous idea of the good (ἡ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέα) or the form of the good (ἀγαθοειδές). With its form the good gives both intelligence to a knower and intelligibility to an object known. That is, its form is the cause not only of truth and knowledge as they are known but also of truth and, presumably, being as they are (508e–509a).

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Plato's assumption, which Socrates never quite makes explicit, appears to be that our knowledge, if adequate, would be the same as its object. The good gives rise to a form that we would grasp if we truly knew and that an object would be if it truly were. After all, a form of this type is itself an idea and, hence, at once an epistemological and an ontological entity! That which truly knows and that which truly is share an ideal identity.¹¹

But can we ever know the form of the good? Alas, we cannot. We can, unfortunately, know an object only by means of a hypothesis. Socrates thus assumes that any knowledge of ours can only approximate a form of the good. Our hypothesis might have an object that is a cause of truth and knowledge in our minds and of truth and knowability in an object. But most likely our hypothesis does not have an object of this sublime sort. If it did, we would have stumbled upon the one and only, nonhypothetical, first principle of the all.¹²

Now, I would draw your attention to the fact that with his simile Plato confines the intelligible realm to knowledge and its objects only. This realm is, of course, that of being. The good causes a medium through which we can know concepts and through which concepts can be known, if only hypothetically. Socrates does not devote any attention to opinion and its objects, except to mention them by contrast. The realm of opinion, he states, is that of coming to be and of ceasing to be (*Republic* 6. 508d).

When he develops his simile, Socrates thus concerns himself only with the realm of knowledge and knowable objects. He is obviously concerned with knowledge because it is a necessary qualification, *sine qua non*, he argues, for an ideal ruler, who must be a philosopher as well as a politician (*Republic* 5. 473c–d). He acknowledges, nonetheless, a need for opinion. He asserts that a candidate for political rule must have not only knowledge but also

¹¹ I take this interpretation to be nothing unusual. Annas, for example, would agree with the interpretation in its essentials. She rightly points out that the good is fundamental both in the understanding of things and in the nature of things. But she is quick to caution us not to confuse “the sovereignty of the good with shallow optimism about Providence and all being for the best.” She finds Plato extremely pessimistic “about the amount of goodness to be found in the actual world” (*Introduction* 10. 245–247). I am not so sure how pessimistic Plato is, but the extant world is less than perfect, to be sure.

¹² Irwin would seem to agree. He asserts that we must be able to grasp a form “by some cognitive state, superior to mere belief, that does not require knowledge of the Good” (*Ethics* 16. 271). But he does not indicate that this cognitive state could very well be hypothetical knowledge.

Annas would appear to disagree. She overlooks the possibility that one might have hypothetical knowledge about the good, and she suggests instead that one can have opinion about it. Citing *Republic* 5. 506b–e, she claims that Socrates himself possesses opinion of this kind (*Introduction* 10. 243–244; 8. 194). But Glaucon is the one who suggests in the passage cited that Socrates might have opinion about the good. Socrates himself not only denies that he has knowledge of the good but also replies to Glaucon that opinion without knowledge is shameful. If so, opinion would hardly be appropriate to provide us with an awareness of the good.