

False Belief and the Modified Aviary Model: Plato's *Theaetetus* 199e1-200c6

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Plato, *Theaetetus* 199e1-200c6, tr. M. J. Levett:

THEAET. Well, perhaps, Socrates, it wasn't a happy thought to make the birds only pieces of knowledge. Perhaps we ought to have supposed that there are pieces of ignorance [unknowing, *anepistêmosunê*] also flying about in the soul along with them, and what happens is that the hunter sometimes catches a piece of knowledge and sometimes a piece of ignorance concerning the same thing; and the ignorance makes him judge falsely, while the knowledge makes him judge truly.—SOC. I can hardly refrain from expressing my admiration of you, Theaetetus; but do think again about that. Let us suppose it is as you say: then, you maintain, [1] the man who catches a piece of ignorance will judge falsely. Is that it?—THEAET. Yes.—SOC. But presumably [2] he will not think [*hêgêsetai*] he is judging [*doxazei*] falsely?—THEAET. No, of course he won't.—SOC. [2'] He will think he is judging what is true; and his attitude towards the things about which he is in error will be as if he knew them. —THEAET. Of course.—SOC. [3] He will think [*oiêsetai*] he has hunted down and 'has' a piece of knowledge and not a piece of ignorance.—THEAET. Yes, that's clear.

SOC. So, after going a long way round, we are back at our original difficulty. Our friend the expert in refutation will laugh. 'My very good people,' he will say, 'do you mean that [4-1] a man who knows both knowledge and ignorance is thinking that one of them which he knows is the other which he knows? Or [4-2] is it that he knows neither, and judges the one he doesn't know to be the other which he doesn't know? Or [4-3] is it that he knows one and not the other, and judges that the one he knows is the one he doesn't know? Or [4-4] does he think that the one he doesn't know is the one he does? Or [5] are you going to start all over again and tell me that there's another set of pieces of knowledge concerning pieces of knowledge and ignorance, which a man may possess shut up in some other ridiculous aviaries or waxen devices, which he knows so long as he possesses them though he may not have them ready to hand in his soul—and in this way end up forced to come running round to the same place over and over again [*eis tauton peritrechein muriakis*] and never get any further?' What are we going to

say to that, Theaetetus?—THEAET. Oh, dear me, Socrates, I don't know what one ought to say.

With one exception, the Second Part of the *Theaetetus* argues whether false belief² is possible or not. The exception is the final 'jury' section. There Socrates refutes the second definition of knowledge, namely that knowledge is true belief, by citing the jury who has true belief of, but does not have knowledge of what the witness knows. Just before this jury section and just after the 'wax tablet' section, Socrates suggests the 'Aviary Model' (195b9-200c6) for possibility of false belief without perception because the 'Wax Tablet Model' explains false belief by a mismatch of perception with the object in the memory but fails to tell us how one has the false belief that $5 + 7 = 11$ since neither the number 5 nor the number 7 is perceptible. So the 'Aviary Model' tries to solve this difficulty by distinguishing between 'owning knowledge (*ktasthai tēn epistēmēn*)' and 'having knowledge in hand (*echein tēn epistēmēn*)' in the aviary in one's mind (*psuchē*). There are many pieces of knowledge in it and let me call them 'knowledge-birds'. One difficulty for this model is that one does not know something by one's very knowledge of itself³ (199d1-2). So Theaetetus further extends this aviary, in which, he suggests, not only are there knowledge-birds but also ignorance-birds (*anepistēmosunai*). This seems a hopeful solution, but Socrates goes on to say the difficulty that there is some other false belief which is about belief and the first puzzle about knowing and not-knowing arises here again. So in order to explain this false belief there need to be 'knowledge-of-knowledge-birds' and 'knowledge-of-ignorance-birds' in another aviary.⁴ In this way the argument leads to an infinite regress⁵ (*eis tauton peritrechein muriakis*, 200c3).

In this paper I will consider the passage in which some other false belief appears and the first puzzle arises again. Through this task, I will give two points about problems for false belief in the *Theaetetus*.⁶ One point is that there are two types of false belief sentences. The first type is like 'he believes that the man who is coming to him is Socrates' ('just disquoted sentence'⁷) and the second type is like 'he believes that *Theaetetus* is Socrates' ('transformed sentence'⁸); the other point is that in the *Theaetetus* there are not only false beliefs of identity statements but also of other kinds, such as 'he believes that he has a knowledge-bird in hand' in our passage. The second point is explicit evidence against the interpretation of John McDowell.

At 199e1 Theaetetus introduces ignorance-birds (*anepistēmosunē*) in the aviary to explain false belief about calculation ($5 + 7 = 11$), avoiding the difficulty Socrates raises. Here is a relation between false belief and ignorance:

- [1] to believe truly =_{def.} to have knowledge in hand, and
to believe falsely =_{def.} to have ignorance in hand.⁹

Then Socrates makes Theaetetus admit the following about the person who believes falsely (let 'a' stand for the person who believes falsely):

- [2] a does not believe that a believes falsely, and
a believes that a believes truly,¹⁰ but
in fact a believes falsely.

Socrates substitutes the expression 'to believe truly/falsey' in the second and third lines in [2] by using the equations [1]:

- [3] a believes that a has knowledge in hand, but
in fact a has ignorance in hand.¹¹

[2] means that a has false belief about a's belief (let me call this false belief 'the second order belief'). That this belief about belief is false is inevitable as long as a's first order belief about calculation is false. The inferential particle *ara* (with an acute accent, 200a8) shows that we get [3] by substitution. [3] (and also [2]) is clearly false belief but the content of false belief ('a has knowledge in hand') is clearly not an identity statement but a binary predicate or relation.¹² This is explicit evidence against McDowell,¹³ who interprets that in the *Theaetetus* there are only false beliefs whose contents are identity statements.

Socrates goes on to ask which is the case that a believes ignorance to be knowledge [4-1] both known, or [4-2] neither known, or [4-3] the one known and the other not known, or [4-4] the one not known and the other known. I pick up a's false belief mentioned here without these four alternative conditions in order to make my point clearer:

- [4] a believes ignorance to be knowledge.¹⁴

This expresses the same situation of a as [3]. [3] is transformed into [4]. Not only Socrates but also we as belief ascribers usually transform 'just disquoted belief' with a fact outside a's belief into a single belief sentence like [4], picking up two terms,¹⁵ the one of which a mistakes for the other, and connecting them as an identity statement. Note that although a assents to [3], a himself does not assent to [4].¹⁶ This is a key for impossibility of false belief in the whole Second Part. The first formulation of false belief at the beginning of the Second Part and the formulation of this aviary section are of the same form. The general statement is the following (188b3-4):

- [4'] a believes the one not to be the one,¹⁷ but
a believes the one to be the other.

The content of this belief is an explicit contradiction. The examples for 'the one' and 'the other' at the beginning of Part II are 'Theaetetus' and 'Socrates' while the examples here are 'knowledge' and 'ignorance' respectively. In Plato's text we see this type of belief ascription, ascription which is after the

transformation. Here is also an example of transformation: The belief sentence

[4''] **a** believes Theaetetus to be Socrates

is the one into which the following is transformed:

[4'''] **a** believes that the man who is coming to **a** is Socrates,¹⁸ but
in fact the man who is coming to **a** is Theaetetus.

From **a**'s point of view (let me call it 'the first person approach'), **a** cannot have such a false belief as [4] or [4''] because one can't believe any explicit contradiction (**a** himself says confidently, 'I do not believe that Theaetetus is Socrates!' or 'I do not believe that ignorance is knowledge!'). But on the other hand from the others' point of view (let me call it 'the third person approach'), **a** can have such a false belief as [4] or [4''] because [4] and [4''] are so made (or transformed) as to express **a**'s false belief by the belief ascriber (therefore the content of [4''] is *evidently* false, unlike [4''']).¹⁹

Thus I would comment on the puzzle about false belief in the *Theaetetus*:

A Socrates can claim that there is no false belief because he interprets transformed belief sentences ([4] or [4'']) from the point of view of the false believer, **a** himself.

B Socrates treats all kinds of belief contents (in the 'just disquoted belief sentences'), not only identity statements though of course all kinds of belief sentences are transformed into belief sentences like [4] or [4''], whose belief contents are always identity statements.

Notes

1. I wish to thank Hugh Benson, Tony Chu, Yuji Kurihara, Terry Penner, Naomi Reshotko, and Satsuki Tasaka for very helpful comments.
2. 'Belief', 'judgement', 'opinion', 'thought', or whatever for Greek words *oiesthai* or *daxazein*!
3. I take *heautou* (199d2) neutral ('of itself'), not masculine ('his own') because all genitives with *epistêmê* around here (and almost everywhere, I think) are the objects of knowledge (knowledge of ..., knowledge about ...), not the subjects. Most translators (Cornford, Fowler, Levett, McDowell, and two Japanese translators) take it masculine except G. Matthews, *Plato's Epistemology*, p. 197, 'but through knowledge of *it*' (my italics).
4. And then with this second aviary extended, there will be 'ignorance-of-knowledge-birds' in it.
5. Literally '(vicious) circle', but 'infinite regress' is more appropriate, I think.
6. For these two points I am in debt to Tomomasa Imai. See T. Imai, 'The Infinite Regress of the Modified Aviary Theory in Plato's *Theaetetus*', *Proceedings of Seminar on Greek Philosophy*, vol. III, March 2006, pp. 48-63, available on web (in Japanese). His

interpretation is since 'Plato on Falsehood and Ignorance, I', *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of Tokyo University*, vol. XXV, 1990, pp. 139-169 (in Japanese). I agree with him on the interpretation of false belief in the *Theaetetus* though I entirely disagree on the interpretation of the infinite regress.

(*Addendum*: Now see his new paper, 'Logical Structure of the Aviary Theory in Plato's *Theaetetus*', *Archive for Philosophy and the History of Science*, No. 9, 2007, pp. 1-36 (in Japanese). In this paper he accepts almost all of my criticism, but goes on to correct my 'false belief' which still remains and to present a revised and most excellent interpretation of the infinite regress.)

7. 'Reported sentence' (Imai's terminology).
8. 'Ascribed sentence' (Imai's terminology).
9. Theaetetus mentions both knowledge and ignorance whereas Socrates mentions only ignorance. Socrates uses a man who has ignorance in hand, but I use a state (to have ignorance in hand) for the purpose of substitution.
10. I translate both second order *hêgeisthai* (*oiesthai*) and first order *daxazein* into 'believe'. It always holds that **a** believes that **a** believes truly. Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, II x, Seite 190: Gäbe es ein Verbum mit der Bedeutung 'fälschlich glauben', so hätte das keine sinnvolle erste Person im Indikativ des Präsens (If there were a verb meaning 'to believe falsely', it would not have any significant first person present indicative, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe).
11. **Ba(La(ε)), La(α)**, where '**Ba(p)**' stands for '**a** believes that *p*'; '**La(x)**' stands for '**a** has *x* in hand (*lambanein*)'; '**ε**' stands for 'knowledge (*epistêmê*)'; and '**α**' stands for 'ignorance (*anepistêmosunê*)'.
12. Cf. McDowell's not literal translation: 'So he'll think that what he has caught, and has, is a piece of knowledge, not a piece of unknowing' (J. McDowell, *Plato: Theaetetus, Translated with notes*, Oxford, 1973, p. 91). According to his translation, the content of belief (thought) is an identity statement even here (like '**a** thinks that the man who is coming to **a** is Theaetetus')!
13. McDowell, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 195, 203-4.
14. The Greek verbs for 'believes' are *oietai*, *daxazei*, or *hêgêtai*. According to Imai, the transformation of [3] into [4] is formulated as follows: **Ba(La(ε)), La(α) ⇒ Ba(α = ε)** (left: [3]; right: [4]).
15. In this case the two terms are 'knowledge' and 'ignorance'.
16. It is true that if **a** does not assent to the theory of the aviary ([1]), then **a** will not even assent to [3]. But my contrast is between this (just disquoted sentence) and the latter belief sentence (transformed one).
17. The Greek is *tauta oietai ou tauta einai*. Namely **Ba(x ≠ x)**.
18. In this case the belief sentence before transformation ([4''']) is also an identity statement.
19. Strictly speaking, even **a** himself can have the latter point of view if **a** has realised that he had false belief: 'Oh I believed falsely that ignorance is knowledge!'. See also Wittgenstein, *PU*, II x, cited in the note 10 above.