



## Protestant Theological University

### 'Say goodbye to opinions!'

Sierksma-Agteres, Suzan

*Published in:*  
Natural Spectaculars

*DOI:*  
[10.2307/j.ctt1b9x1h4.7](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1b9x1h4.7)

Published: 01/01/2015

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Sierksma-Agteres, S. (2015). 'Say goodbye to opinions!': Plutarch's philosophy of natural phenomena and the journey to metaphysical knowledge. In M. Meeusen, & L. van der Stockt (Eds.), *Natural Spectaculars: Aspects of Plutarch's Philosophy of Nature* (pp. 57-71). (Plutarchea Hypomnemata). Leuven University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1b9x1h4.7>

#### **Copyright**

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons). You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

This publication might have been made available through the PThU Research Portal under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the PThU website: <https://www.pthu.nl/over-pthu/bibliotheek-pthu/diensten/article-25fa-taverne-amendement-end-user-agreement.pdf>

#### **Takedown policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright, please contact us providing details, and we will investigate your claim and remove access to the work if necessary: [bibliotheek@pthu.nl](mailto:bibliotheek@pthu.nl).

Downloaded from the PThU Research Portal (Pure): <https://pure.pthu.nl>.

Chapter Title: 'Say Goodbye to Opinions!' Plutarch's Philosophy of Natural Phenomena and the Journey to Metaphysical Knowledge

Chapter Author(s): Suzan Sierksma-Agteres

Book Title: Natural Spectaculars

Book Subtitle: Aspects of Plutarch's Philosophy of Nature

Book Editor(s): MICHIEL MEEUSEN, LUC VAN DER STOCKT

Published by: Leuven University Press. (2015)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1b9x1h4.7>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>



Leuven University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Natural Spectaculars*

# **‘Say Goodbye to Opinions!’ Plutarch’s Philosophy of Natural Phenomena and the Journey to Metaphysical Knowledge\***

SUZAN SIERKSMA-AGTERES

## ***1. Introduction***

There are a few basic assumptions concerning Plutarch’s epistemology that are rarely questioned yet are difficult to reconcile. First, Plutarch is said to have made a clear ontological distinction between the sublunary world and the metaphysical realm. Second, this ontological distinction is extrapolated to Plutarch’s epistemology: sense-perception, on the one hand, supposedly results in mere opinion (*δόξα*) about the always changing world, and real knowledge or intellection (*ἐπιστήμη* or *νόσις*), on the other hand, is restricted to the world of Forms. In his article on Plutarch’s epistemology in the *De primo frigido*, George Boys-Stones explains:

The sublunary world is to be carefully distinguished from a superior, metaphysical realm on which it depends (...). But this ontological distinction has obvious consequences for Plutarch’s approach to questions of epistemology (...). The position we arrive at, then, is this: Plutarch thinks that true philosophical knowledge is available in respect of the metaphysical realm, but only in respect of the meta-

---

\* I would like to express my gratitude to Prof. G. van Kooten and Prof. L. Roig Lanzillotta for their careful reading of this paper and their useful comments and corrections. Furthermore, special thanks is due to Prof. J. Opsomer and Prof. G. Roskam for their helpful remarks and suggestions at the Meeting of the *Réseau thématique Plutarque*. The research for this paper has been undertaken as part of the project *Overcoming the Faith-Reason Opposition: Pauline Pistis in Contemporary Philosophy* (Project number 360-25-120), carried out at the Radboud University Nijmegen and the University of Groningen, and enabled by funding from The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO).

physical realm. So, to the extent that he denies the possibility of true knowledge of the sensible world, Plutarch is, indeed, a sceptic<sup>1</sup>.

These assertions concerning Plutarch's upholding of both a strict ontological and a strict epistemological distinction need not be problematic; however, they are usually accompanied by a third thesis: that, according to Plutarch, the task of natural philosophy is to somehow move beyond the sensory world to metaphysical knowledge and in doing so 'say goodbye to opinions'<sup>2</sup>. Plutarch's positive attitude towards the analysis of natural phenomena, well attested to by the extensive corpus of treatises on *quaestiones naturales*, supposes an epistemological progression from the one realm to the other. The natural philosopher is the person *par excellence* to supplement natural causes with the highest causes, thus transcending the 'great divide'.

This combination of views on Plutarch's position raises many questions. How strong is the separation of opinion and knowledge in Plutarch's thought? Are these two forms of cognition actually limited to their specific ontological objects, sensibles and intelligibles? How can an ascendance from the one to the other be depicted? May we assume that Plutarch's thinking on these issues is consistent and well developed?

Since the latter question should only be answered with a 'no' as a last resort, I intend to explore other possibilities of aligning these three basic assumptions. I will do so first by outlining several epistemological models that have recently been argued for in a lively discussion on Plato's conception of knowledge and opinion in the *Republic*. At stake is what has come to be called the 'two-worlds theory', according to which a strong separation between sensibles and intelligibles and their related forms of cognition is unavoidable. Second, I will try to position Plutarch's ontology and epistemology somewhere on this scale by analysing crucial passages from several of his treatises. I will conclude with what I believe may be the key to a better understanding of Plutarch's positive attitude towards natural philosophy. This key, as I understand it, consists of Plutarch's conception of Being as an underlying unity and ultimate principle, as the highest cause of nature and as the proper subject of philosophy.

<sup>1</sup> Boys-Stones (1997) 228–229.

<sup>2</sup> *De prim. frig.* 955C. These lines are usually an object of debate in discussions of the place of ἐποχή, the suspension of judgement, in Plutarch. I will, however, only briefly touch upon this issue, and have taken the vivid expression of waving goodbye to δόξα as a reference to the philosopher's endeavour to attain metaphysical knowledge (cf. *De prim. frig.* 948C, discussed below).

## 2. *The ‘two-worlds theory’ and its alternatives*

According to the ‘two-worlds theory’, forms of cognition are set over different objects of cognition, so there can only be knowledge of intelligibles or Forms, and opinion about sensibles or opinables. The *locus classicus* for this position in Plato is *R.* 5,477a–b, where opinion is said to partake in being and non-being (τοῦ εἶναι τε καὶ μὴ εἶναι), while knowledge is said to be set over what is (ἐπὶ τῷ ὄντι). However, in recent scholarship, questions have been raised about the exact implications of this and other phrases that are taken as statements of the ‘two-worlds theory’. One of the ambiguities that plays an important role is Plato’s use of the verb ‘to be’ (εἶμι). It has been variously interpreted as existential, what (not) exists, or predicative, what is (not) F, or veridical, what is (not) true. I will discuss the difficulties of the ‘two-worlds theory’ here based on the assumption that it helps us to see similar problems with Plutarch’s epistemology more clearly, and I will briefly summarize three alternative suggestions in order to focus on possible solutions.

What makes the ‘two-worlds theory’ so problematic is that, in the first place, Plato does not seem to play by his own rules. In fact, in the *Meno*, true opinion can become knowledge if it is bound by a justification (λόγος). This implies not only that opinion and knowledge are set over the same object, but also that the higher level of knowledge presupposes the previous level of true opinion. Conversely, in the *Republic*, the philosopher who returns to the cave is said to have real knowledge of the things inside the cave, that is, of sensibles. At any rate, apart from these textual inconsistencies, the theory leaves us with a very sceptical Plato, who denies the possibility of real knowledge of anything in this world, including, for example, which actions are just.

In order to escape these problematic consequences scholars have produced several adaptations and alternatives to the ‘two-worlds theory’. In the 1970s, Gail Fine suggested that rather than knowledge and opinion being concerned with specific objects, they concern different propositions. Specifically, opinion is about true and not-true propositions and knowledge only about true propositions. In other words, she advocates a veridical reading of the εἶμι derivatives<sup>3</sup>.

Fine’s interpretation went unchallenged for almost two decades, when the gauntlet was picked up by Francisco Gonzalez. Gonzalez shares Fine’s critique of the ‘two-worlds theory’, yet he sharply opposes Fine’s solution. According to Gonzalez, the bridge between opinion and knowledge has already been provided by the ontological connection: opinion and knowledge are related in the same manner as their objects, that is,

<sup>3</sup> Fine (1990) 85–115. Cf. Fine (1978) 121–139.

through participation and imitation. Gonzalez combines this with an existential/predicative reading of εἰμί:

(...) though belief<sup>4</sup> is assigned to sensible objects that exist and do not exist by being F and not-F, while knowledge is assigned to forms that truly exist as truly and only F, what is imperfectly imitated and perceived in the objects of belief is the same as what is perfectly exemplified and known in the objects of knowledge: what F is<sup>5</sup>.

A third alternative has been offered by Nicholas Smith in his article “Plato on Knowledge as a Power”<sup>6</sup>. As the title already suggests, Smith emphasizes that we ought to keep in mind that knowledge and opinion are powers (δυνάμεις), while their corresponding ‘products’ are cognitive states – an often overlooked, yet essential distinction. Consequently, whereas the object of ‘opinion-as-a-power’ is necessarily about sensibles, the actual ‘opinion-as-a-state’ it produces might well concern one of the metaphysical Forms. In this way, for example, we could form an opinion about the Form of Beauty without the power we used, that is, δόξα, ever coming into contact with the Form but only with a particular example or image of beauty. Hence, Smith can still adhere to a ‘two-worlds ontology’ in Plato, while denying a ‘two-worlds epistemology’<sup>7</sup>.

### 3. *Sensibles and intelligibles: an ontological and epistemological distinction in Plutarch?*

If we turn back to Plutarch with these various options in mind, the first thing to look for are passages that explicitly reveal that he supports a ‘two-worlds distinction’ in the strong, ontological sense. It is remarkable that Plutarch draws heavily and explicitly on Plato in almost every passage that tries to explain the difference or relationship between both worlds. The third of Plutarch’s *Platonic Questions* demonstrates that he was familiar with one of the allegories that Plato uses in the *Republic*, known as the ‘divided line’. Before asking his main question as to which of the sections is larger, Plutarch summarizes the allegory, naming the four segments and the corresponding ‘criteria’ (κριτήρια)<sup>8</sup>: (a) intellect (νοῦς) and (b) thinking (διάνοια), which together form (a+b) intellection

<sup>4</sup> With ‘belief’, Gonzalez refers to δόξα.

<sup>5</sup> Gonzalez (1996).

<sup>6</sup> Smith (2000).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Smith (2000) 152.

<sup>8</sup> Plutarch uses the word κριτήριον (*Quaest. Plat.* 3,1001C), while Plato uses τέτταρα ταῦτα παθήματα ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ γιγνόμενα (*R.* 6,511d). Κριτήριον was also used as a term for a cognitive faculty, see Striker (1996) 26–27.

(νόησις); (c) belief (πίστις) and (d) imagination (εἰκασία), which together form (c+d) opinion (δόξα)<sup>9</sup>. It is clear that he follows the general Platonic scheme of an intellectual and a sensible realm. However, it remains to be seen what exactly Plutarch meant by ‘criterion’, and whether he limited the use of each to their respective segments of reality.

Based on the further treatment of this same Platonic question, it appears that Plutarch thought of a criterion as a faculty or, in his own words, as an ‘instrument’ (ὄργανον) that was by nature (πέφυκεν) connected with a specific object<sup>10</sup>:

It is because of the simplicity and similarity of the intelligible, however, that its sole criterion is the intellect (κριτήριον δὲ τοῦ νοητοῦ μόνον ἐστὶν ὁ νοῦς) as that of light is vision (ὄψις); but, since bodies have many differences and dissimilarities, different ones are naturally apprehended by different criteria, as it were by different instruments (ἄλλα ἄλλοις κριτηρίοις ὡσπερ ὄργανοις ἀλίσκεσθαι πέφυκεν)<sup>11</sup>.

Thus, according to this reasoning, the intelligible realm only needs one mental instrument, namely the intellect (ὁ νοῦς), because it is singular, whereas bodies need different faculties because of the plural nature of the created world. The comparison with the faculty of vision makes it quite clear that these faculties or powers are connected to specific objects. Therefore, the Fine model, which presents these objects as propositions, seems an unlikely candidate to describe Plutarch’s epistemology.

Nevertheless, the above passage from Plutarch does suggest that he is strongly committed to an ontological ‘two-worlds theory’. A similarly strong distinction is made in the *Adversus Colotem*, a treatise in which Plutarch refutes the charges of Epicurus’ disciple Colotes against various philosophers and schools. In the section on Parmenides, Plutarch counters what was presumably Colotes’ claim, namely that Parmenides denies the plural and perceptible by saying that being is one<sup>12</sup>. Plutarch holds, however, that Parmenides did acknowledge a plural and sensible part

<sup>9</sup> Plutarch does not render the same name as Plato for the top section, which is called ἐπιστήμη at Plato, *R.* 534a and νόησις at Plato, *R.* 511d.

<sup>10</sup> This is what we might call the ‘classical understanding’ of a criterion. On the introduction of criterion as a more technical philosophical term after Plato and Aristotle, see Striker (1990) 144.

<sup>11</sup> *Quaest. Plat.* 3,1002D. Cf. *ibid.* 1002AB. All translations have been taken from the Loeb edition of the *Moralia*, translated by Harold Cherniss and/or William C. Helmbold, but are modified to suit the need of a consequent epistemological vocabulary in accordance with the Greek terms.

<sup>12</sup> See *Adv. Col.* 1114F.

of nature alongside his concept of ‘one’ and ‘being’, and he bases this judgement on two lines from Parmenides’ *On Nature*: “The unerring heart of most persuasive Truth (ἡμὲν ἀληθείης εὐπειθέος ἀτρεκέες ἦτορ), and man’s opinions, that lack all true persuasion (ἡδὲ βροτῶν δόξας αἷς οὐκ ἔνι πίστις ἀληθείης)”<sup>13</sup>. Plutarch argues that if Parmenides apparently does leave us with opinion (δόξα), he must also have believed in an object of opinion (δοξαστόν). That he is not only defending Parmenides’ position but also his own is clear in the way in which he frames him as a predecessor of Plato and Socrates:

But since even before Plato and Socrates he saw that nature has in it something that we apprehend by opinion, and again something that we apprehend by intellection (ὡς ἔχει τι δοξαστόν ἢ φύσις, ἔχει δὲ καὶ νοητόν), and the opinable is inconstant (ἔστι δὲ τὸ μὲν δοξαστόν ἀβέβαιον) and passes through a wide range of accidents and changes, since for sense-perception (τῇ αἰσθήσει) it grows and decays and differs for different persons and is not, even for the same person, always the same: whereas what belongs to intellection (τοῦ νοητοῦ) is another kind of thing, for it is ‘Entire, unmoving, and unborn’ to quote his own words, and is like itself and enduring in what it is<sup>14</sup>.

Here again we see a separation of the objects of opinion and intellection, in other words, an ontological ‘two-worlds theory’.

Nevertheless, not every description of opinion and intellection is as univocal as the above passages seem to be. In the *De animae procreatione in Timaeo*, we read that reason (λόγος) “becomes intellection in case of intelligibles and opinion in case of sensibles (νόησις ἐν τοῖς νοητοῖς καὶ δόξα γιγνόμενος ἐν τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς)”<sup>15</sup>. Even though a separation between different faculties and objects is hinted at, this separation is far from clear, for reason is further explained as being a mixture of intellect (νοῦς) and sense-perception (αἴσθησις), suggesting a connection between both<sup>16</sup>. It is the difficult task of reason, so we read, “to separate the one and the many”, or to distinguish between the temporary sensibles and the eternal intelligibles, but reason does not succeed in this, “because the very principles have been alternately intertwined and thoroughly intermixed with each other”<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> *Adv. Col.* III4F, also preserved in Diogenes Laertius, 9,22; Theophrastus, *Phys. op.* 6a; Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 7,III; 7, II4.

<sup>14</sup> *Adv. Col.* III4CD.

<sup>15</sup> *De an. procr.* 1024F.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 1024F: μέμικται δὲ λόγος ἐξ ἀμφοῖν.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 1025E.



Other passages present us with similar caveats. When Plutarch explains the relationship between the different Egyptian gods in *De Iside et Osiride*, he refers to the three parts of nature: the intellectual (νοητός), the material (ύλη) and the cosmos (κόσμος) that is formed from these<sup>18</sup>. He explicitly equates them to the terms used by Plato in the *Timaeus*, where the intellectual is named ‘form’ (ιδέα), ‘example’ (παράδειγμα), or ‘father’ (πατήρ)<sup>19</sup>. The *Timaeus*, however, not only distinguishes between the three parts, but also explains their mutual relationship in terms of partaking: the matter is said to “partake in some most perplexing and most baffling way of the intelligible (μεταλαμβάνον δὲ ἀπορώτατά πη τοῦ νοητοῦ καὶ δυσάλωτότατον αὐτό)”<sup>20</sup>. The nature of the product of this union is therefore a combination of intellectual and material; of source, that is, the forms, and recipient, ‘that is devoid of all form’<sup>21</sup>. Thus, the visible cosmos is a combination of these two kinds of nature, with form and matter being brought together in this ‘perplexing and most baffling’ manner. Whether Plutarch himself held this view precisely, cannot be deduced from this passage. Nor, however, can it be considered evidence of an ontological (or epistemological) ‘two-worlds theory’.

Therefore, let us take a different approach to the question of Plutarch’s epistemology by asking whether sensibles could, according to Plutarch, ultimately lead to something more than opinion, namely to metaphysical knowledge. To begin with, it is good to point to the numerous sceptical remarks regarding the deceptive nature of sense-perception<sup>22</sup>. Naturally, the *Adversus Colotem* abounds in criticisms of Epicurean confidence in the senses: “What opinion do they leave unshaken (τίνα δόξαν οὐ σαλεύει)?”, Plutarch laments, while defending the merits of the suspension of judgement<sup>23</sup>.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, in the same treatise we can also find positive evaluations of the senses. In reply to Colotes’ accusation against the academic Arcesilaus that suspension of judgement (ἐποχή) actually impedes action, Plutarch chooses to employ the Stoic distinction between three movements of the soul: sensation (τό φανταστικόν), impulse (τό ὀρηκτικόν) and assent (τό συγκαταθετικόν)<sup>24</sup>. While the first two are pre-requisites for action, suspension of judgement is only needed in relation

<sup>18</sup> *De Is. et Os.* 373EF.

<sup>19</sup> See for the three parts and the designation of ‘father’ Plato, *Ti.* 50c–d.

<sup>20</sup> Plato, *Ti.* 51a–b.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 50e.

<sup>22</sup> Cf., e.g., *De prim. frig.* 952A; *Adv. Col.* 1123AC.

<sup>23</sup> *Adv. Col.* 1123F.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 1122B. Whether this refutation goes back to Arcesilaus himself is uncertain, cf. Opsomer (1998) 91, esp. n. 45.

to the third level of assent, for this involves opinion<sup>25</sup>. Whether Plutarch is merely employing this Stoic theory to disprove the charges of Colotes, or embraces it as part of his own position, is difficult to ascertain<sup>26</sup>. Nevertheless, it does fit nicely with what he defends as the correct view of the Cyrenaics, who were also subject to the scorn of Colotes (1120C–1121E). The Cyrenaics agreed with the Epicureans in trusting the impressions (πάθος) of the senses, but they sharply distinguished these impressions from any truth-claim pertaining to the outside world. As long as opinion keeps within the bounds of the effect of the impressions it remains free from errors; if it reaches beyond and makes truth-claims about the world outside, contradictions arise<sup>27</sup>.

Other slightly more positive evaluations of sense-perception confirm that Plutarch distinguished between a trustworthy and untrustworthy level in the use of the senses. The frequent mentioning of their *ἐνάργεια*, the clarity or plain evidence of sense-impressions, is especially remarkable. George Boys-Stones even deduces that “it is because of this that they can be used in the philosophical endeavour of recapturing metaphysical, or divine, truths”<sup>28</sup>. This, however, is a rather large leap and in need of some further explication. For how is it that the gap between sense-perception and the metaphysical is bridged<sup>29</sup>? Plutarch does grant that the senses are useful in our daily life, yet he explicitly denies that they yield metaphysical knowledge:

<sup>25</sup> *Adv. Col.* 1122C.

<sup>26</sup> Jan Opsomer argues for a purely dialectical refutation: Opsomer (1998) 93–96.

<sup>27</sup> *Adv. Col.* 1120F: ὅθεν ἐμμένουσα τοῖς πάθεσιν ἡ δόξα διατηρεῖ τὸ ἀναμάρτητον, ἐκβαίνουσα δὲ καὶ πολυπραγμονοῦσα τῷ κρίνειν καὶ ἀποφαίνεσθαι περὶ τῶν ἐκτὸς αὐτῆν τε πολλὰκις ταρασσει καὶ μάχεται πρὸς ἑτέρους ἀπὸ τῶν αὐτῶν ἐναντία πάθη καὶ διαφόρους φαντασίας λαμβάνοντας. Cf. Opsomer (1998) 98–100.

<sup>28</sup> Boys-Stones (1997) 229.

<sup>29</sup> Boys-Stones refers to *De soll. an.* 966BC (ἐν δὲ τοῖς πεζοῖς καὶ γηγενέσι λαμπρὰ καὶ ἐναργῆ καὶ βέβαια παραδείγματα τῶν εἰρημένων ἐκάστου λαμβάνειν ἔστι καὶ θεᾶσθαι) and *De E* 392AB. However, neither of these passages explicitly refers to the use of these clear perceptions for the acquisition of a higher level of knowledge. Boys-Stones does offer some explication when he applies this remark to the *De primo frigido*. According to him, a plausible answer to the question of the principle of cold is required in order to progress to the deeper causes on the level of subperceptual elements (233): “precisely because the triangles are subperceptual, we need to infer their mode of operation from the perceptual world of the elements. And the way in which the triangles will be inferred to explain coldness will depend entirely on which element we perceive to introduce coldness into the world.” Nevertheless, this does not, strictly speaking, explain how knowledge based on the senses moves to knowledge of a metaphysical nature. It only explains the necessity, not the ontological foundation.

The inductive argument by which we conclude that the senses are not accurate or trustworthy (ὡς οὐκ ἀκριβεῖς οὐδ’ ἀσφαλεῖς πρὸς πίστιν οὔσας) does not deny that an object presents to us a certain appearance, but forbids us, though we continue to make use of the senses and take the appearance as our guide in what we do, to trust them as entirely and infallibly true (τὸ πιστεύειν ὡς ἀληθέσι πάντη καὶ ἀδιαπτώτοις οὐ δίδωσιν αὐταῖς). For we ask no more of them than utilitarian service in the unavoidable essentials since there is nothing better available; but they do not provide the perfect knowledge (ἐπιστήμην) and understanding (γνώσιν) of a thing that the philosophical soul longs to acquire<sup>30</sup>.

On this basis, I would agree with Boys-Stones that Plutarch ascribes some utilitarian value to the senses, presumably more than the Cyrenaics would, but it remains to be seen if and how they are of further use in providing what “the philosophical soul longs to acquire”.

Plutarch maintains that the acquisition of perfect knowledge is possible for at least the philosophically trained humans, as is shown by the praise he preserves for the intellectual faculty. The Platonic question on the ‘divided line’, for example, ends with the promise that it “transcends all that is perceptible (περίεστι παντὸς τοῦ αἰσθητοῦ) and reaches as far as things divine (μέχρι τῶν θεῶν ἐξικνεῖται)”<sup>31</sup>. He refers to the *Symposium*, where Plato “explains how one must manage the matter of love by diverting the soul from the beautiful objects that are perceptible to those that are intelligible (μετάγοντα τὴν ψυχὴν ἀπὸ τῶν αἰσθητῶν καλῶν ἐπὶ τὰ νοητά)”<sup>32</sup>. Similarly, Osiris, the god that stands for the metaphysical in *De Iside et Osiride*, is unreachable for mere mortals, “except in so far as they may attain to a dim vision by means of the intellection which philosophy affords (πλὴν ὅσον ὀνειράτος ἀμαυροῦ θιγεῖν νοήσει διὰ φιλοσοφίας)”<sup>33</sup>.

To sum up these findings, it seems that Plutarch adheres to the Platonic distinction of two levels of nature, and understood this as a strong

<sup>30</sup> *Adv. Col.* 1118B.

<sup>31</sup> *Quaest. Plat.* 3,1002E.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* Plutarch also mentions some suggestions as to how the ascent to metaphysical knowledge is to be achieved in his treatment of this *Quaestio*. Specifically, he speaks of a process of abstraction or subtraction (ἀφαίρεσις): “Hence by abstracting sound from the things in motion and motion from the solids and depth from the planes and extension from the quantities we shall arrive at the intelligible ideas themselves” (*Quaest. Plat.* 3,1001E). However, it must be taken into account that this exposition is part of the first tentative answer to the question at hand, that is, it is part of the argument according to which opinion makes up the larger section of the divided line. Since this argument does not reflect Plutarch’s own position, the subtraction motive cannot incautiously be ascribed to Plutarch. Cf. on this Opsomer (2007) 394.

<sup>33</sup> *De Is. et Os.* 382F.

distinction. He also associates these ontological objects with the specific cognitive faculties of intellection and opinion. Nevertheless, both the two ontological natures and the two cognitive faculties are in touch in some fashion, for the cosmos is described as a combination of both, with reason understood as bringing the intellect and sense-perception together within the soul. Furthermore, Plutarch's judgement of the senses is twofold. Sense-perception is by its nature untrustworthy and incapable of providing knowledge, yet it is useful in a very basic way, enabling normal life. Intellection, in contrast, transcends the sensibles and, with the help of philosophy, touches the divine and metaphysical world.

#### **4. From natural to metaphysical causes: the task of the natural philosopher**

The question now arises how we ought to integrate these observations. How might we picture the task of the philosopher in a Plutarchan fashion? How did Plutarch view his own task as a natural philosopher? One of the more insightful hints as to what is the *proprium* of natural philosophy is given in *De primo frigido*, when Plutarch explains why he starts off with accounts of the perceptible elements of the cold. He sets the natural philosopher against the flute player, farmer and physician, who are only interested in the final or most immediate cause (τὰ ἔσχατα τῶν αἰτίων) of a phenomenon:

But when the natural philosopher sets out to find the truth as a matter of speculative knowledge, the discovery of immediate causes is not the end, but the beginning of his journey to the first and highest causes (ἀρχὴ τῆς ἐπὶ τὰ πρῶτα καὶ ἀνωτάτω πορείας)<sup>34</sup>.

The metaphor of a journey (πορεία) conveys a rich image that suggests a continuum between sensibles and intelligibles. Of even more interest is the fact that this link between both worlds revolves around the concept of two kinds of causes (αἰτίαι). The first, direct or material cause concerns elements such as fire and earth; and the second, highest cause, concerns “the smallest amount of seeds (τῶν ἐλαχίστων ὥσπερ σπερμάτων)”, which is found after the sensibles are reduced to intelligibles (ἐπὶ τὰς νοητὰς ἀναφέροντες ἀρχὰς τὰ αἰσθητὰ), for they are not perceptible to the senses<sup>35</sup>. Interestingly enough, Plutarch then chooses to start with a discussion of the elements that are perceptible, which will take up most of the treatise.

<sup>34</sup> *De prim. frig.* 948C.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 948CD. Cf. *Quaest. Plat.* 3,1002AB: καὶ γὰρ ἀρχαὶ τὰ νοητὰ τῶν σωματικῶν (for in fact the intelligibles are principles of the corporeals).

This regard for both the material and the highest cause, is in line with the position he defends elsewhere, when he refutes the charge that he “assigns the discovery and origin” of the Delphic oracle “not to God and Providence, but to chance and accident”<sup>36</sup>. In response, Plutarch again refers to the two kinds of causes (δύο πάσης γενέσεως αιτίας ἐχούσης). He criticizes both the earliest poets, who only recognized Zeus as the cause of all being, and the more recent physicists, who “ascribe everything to bodies and their behaviour”, thereby neglecting the highest cause<sup>37</sup>. However, it is not so much that one cause is inferior to the other, but that both ought to be equally important to the true natural philosopher.

So how does this philosopher, journeying between the different causes of phenomena, manage to cross the border between sensibles and intelligibles? I believe the crucial link between both is best described in Plutarch’s apologetic and polemical treatise *Adversus Colotem*<sup>38</sup>. It is here that he defends Plato against the very fundamental accusation that he “abolishes reality and throws us out of life”<sup>39</sup>. It is difficult to establish whether Colotes actually meant that Plato abolished the sensible world altogether or whether he meant that Plato merely downplayed the reality of this world, in contrast to his appreciation of the intelligible realm<sup>40</sup>. A further specification of Colotes’ accusation is that “Plato says that it is idle to regard horses as being horses and men men”<sup>41</sup>. This alleged saying, whose origin in Plato is denied by Plutarch<sup>42</sup>, confronts Plutarch with the same question we might ask: How is it that we may infer knowledge from anything in the sensible world? For instance, why would we assume that what presents itself to us as a horse via sense-perception is in fact a horse?

In Plato’s defence, Plutarch makes some interesting points:

<sup>36</sup> *De def. or.* 435E.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 436DE.

<sup>38</sup> The advantage of the genre of the *Adversus Colotem* is that it enables us to gain an insight into Plutarch’s own views, and not merely his explication of Plato or an allegorical interpretation. Of course, it is also a polemical treatise, but on this specific issue, Plutarch is forced to present a balanced view. For, on the one hand, he needs to counter the Epicurean claim of the infallibility of the senses, while on the other, he wants to correct the charge that the sensible world, and therefore the possibility of living, is destroyed on the basis of Plato’s premises.

<sup>39</sup> *Adv. Col.* III16E: ὡς ἀναιρῶν τὰ πράγματα καὶ τοῦ ζῆν ἐξάγων ἡμᾶς.

<sup>40</sup> Kechagia thinks the first option the most plausible, see Kechagia (2011) 220.

<sup>41</sup> *Adv. Col.* III15D: ἀλλὰ δὴ Πλάτων φησι τοὺς ἵππους ὅφ’ ἡμῶν ματαίως ἵππους εἶναι καὶ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους.

<sup>42</sup> Yet, we may not simply assume that Colotes actually attributed it verbally to Plato, for he might only have deduced this from Plato’s teaching. Cf. Kechagia (2011) 218.

I for one in reading them find that he everywhere regards man as man, horse as horse, and fire as fire; indeed this is why he terms each of them an ‘object of opinion’ (δοξαστὸν ὀνομάζει τούτων ἕκαστον). But our friend, as one separated from wisdom by not so much as a hair, took ‘man is not’ to be one and the same as ‘man is non-being’. But in Plato’s view there is a world of difference between ‘is not’ (τὸ μὴ εἶναι) and ‘is non-being’ (μὴ ὄν εἶναι), for by the former is meant the denial of any kind of being, by the latter the otherness of the participant and what it participates in (τοῦ μεθεκτοῦ καὶ τοῦ μετέχοντος) (...). The relation of the partaken in to the partaker is that of cause to matter, model to copy, power to effect (ὄν αἰτία τε πρὸς ὕλην ἔχει καὶ παράδειγμα πρὸς εἰκόνα καὶ δύναμις πρὸς πάθος). And it is chiefly by this relation that the absolute and always identical differs from what is caused by something else and is never in the same state. The former will never be non-being and has never come to be, and is therefore in the full and true sense ‘being’; whereas the latter has no firm hold even on such participation in being as it incidentally has from something else (...)<sup>43</sup>.

By saying that man, horse, and fire are objects of opinion, Plutarch seems to emphasize their existence. By applying a definition of ‘is non-being’ from the *Sophist*, as referring to the ‘otherness’ of opinables (δοξαστά), he rehabilitates their ontological status. Opinables apparently ‘are’ in some fashion, and they are related to what is in a more proper way ‘being’, as partaker to partaken. This does not make sensibles stand on an equal footing with intellectuals, but it does declare them to be ontologically related in ‘being’<sup>44</sup>.

Yet, the triple comparison Plutarch provides in the above quotation, as a further explication of the relationship between partaker and partaken, offers us even richer imagery. Apart from the familiar Platonic metaphor of model and image, the intelligibles are presented in a more Aristotelian way<sup>45</sup>, as causes that act upon matter, which confirms the

<sup>43</sup> *Adv. Col.* III5DE.

<sup>44</sup> Some of these ideas are reminiscent of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, in which he names ‘being as being’ the proper object of philosophy: the philosopher should grasp the first causes and principles of being. See Aristoteles, *Metaph.* 4,1003a–b. Plutarch’s attitude towards Aristotle was complex: depending on the teaching in question, he either interprets him in a Platonizing fashion, or discredits him for adapting Plato’s doctrines. See on this: Boys-Stones (2001) 134–135, n. 12; Donini (1988) 144; Karamanolis (2010). On the probability of Plutarch’s acquaintance with the *Metaphysics* see Sandbach (1982) 222–223.

<sup>45</sup> This ‘borrowing’ of Aristotelian vocabulary was not exceptional. See e.g. Kechagia (2011) 233, esp. n. 40 and 41.

possibility of reaching them through natural philosophy<sup>46</sup>. Because the Forms are causes, their causal relationship to matter provides, in reverse, the epistemological route to knowledge<sup>47</sup>. In the words of Eleni Kechagia:

(...) the sensible things are not simply imitation of the Forms or bearers of a property of which the Form is the ideal exemplar; what’s more, they owe their reality to the Forms since it is the Forms that make them be what they are<sup>48</sup>.

For Plutarch, the intelligibles are not only the paradigmatic causes of the sensibles, they actually bring them into being as *causa efficiens*<sup>49</sup>.

In this passage, this active role of the causes is further confirmed by the notion of power (*δύναμις*) and by the examples of the moon and iron-in-fire: while the moon and the glowing iron derive what they are from the sun and the fire, no one would deny the existence of moonlight or the use of iron<sup>50</sup>. Apart from the occasional references to the sensible world being an image or a mirror of the intellectual world of Forms<sup>51</sup>, these more powerful metaphors of their relationship emphasize the ontological connection, enabling an epistemological journey.

---

<sup>46</sup> Many thanks to Geert Roskam for pointing out to me that there is an interesting passage on the natural philosopher’s and the seer’s approach to the sacrifice of a ram in *Per.* 6. Plutarch does not speak of two causes here, but of the one offering the cause (*αἰτία*) and the other the purpose or meaning (*τέλος, σημείον*) of the same phenomenon. Here as well, Plutarch warns us that to have found the immediate cause of a phenomenon should not keep us from looking for its further meaning. However, the epistemological link between both approaches is less clear in this particular passage.

<sup>47</sup> Jan Opsomer seems to express a similar view on the role of the causes, yet he immediately combines this with a form of epistemic dualism, without any further explanation: see Opsomer (1998) 218: “The essential quality of a philosophical investigation consists in the requirement that it should not be limited to the immediate physical causes, but must penetrate to the highest level of causality. Plutarch remains within the epistemological framework of the *Timaeus*, according to which the two ontological levels, the physical world and the reality of the Ideas, correspond to two epistemological levels, *δόξα* and *ἐπιστήμη*.” Cf. on dual causality, *ibid.* 181–184.

<sup>48</sup> Kechagia (2011) 234.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Ferrari (2005) 16: “Da Gott zugleich Demiurg und Vorbild (*παράδειγμα*) ist, muss er Wirkursache und paradigmatische Ursache der Welt sein.”

<sup>50</sup> *Adv. Col.* 1116A.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. *De Is. et Os.* 382AB on animals as ‘mirrors of the divine’; *Quaest. Plat.* 3,1002A on mathematical objects as mirrors of the intelligible; and *De Is. et Os.* 372F: *εἰκῶν γὰρ ἔστιν οὐσίας ἐν ὕλῃ ἢ γένεσις καὶ μίμημα τοῦ ὄντος τὸ γιγνόμενον (...)*

## 5. *Conclusions*

Now that we have come to the end of this analysis of Plutarch's epistemology and the task of the natural philosopher, it is time to recall the three models based on Plato's theory of opinion and knowledge as set out in the *Republic*, to select the most appropriate model and to provide a conclusion regarding the possibility of knowledge in Plutarch. As far as the first model is concerned, Gail Fine argued that knowledge and opinion do not have separate objects, but rather different propositions, and thus a different content. That this interpretation was not endorsed by Plutarch is, in my view, demonstrated by his description of objects as instruments, and confirmed by the existential use of being and non-being in the *Adversus Colotem*, which seems to exclude the possibility that Plutarch understood Plato's distinction between 'what is' and 'what is not' in a veridical sense.

As far as Smith's sharp distinction between cognitive powers and cognitive states is concerned, I must admit it is a helpful tool to carefully express *what it is* that is related to either sensibles or intelligibles. However, the sources simply do not provide enough support to apply this hypothesis to Plutarch. In point of fact, while it helps us to bridge the epistemological gap we identified, it also imposes a thought-structure that is, as far as we can see, alien to the author.

In my view, consequently, the most likely model to assess the possibility of knowledge in Plutarch's epistemology is the one that emphasizes the participation/imitation connection, and with it the ontological relatedness of both worlds, such as defended by Gonzalez. Admittedly, as I have shown, this relatedness is not always warranted in Plutarch's works, and is even challenged now and then by descriptions in which the continuity of the realm of opinion ( $\delta\acute{o}\xi\alpha$ ) with that of intellection ( $\nu\acute{o}\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$ ) is brought into question. Nevertheless, as we have seen, through the participation of both worlds in diverse levels of 'being', and through the actual presence of the intelligibles as primary causes of nature, this connection is sufficiently strong. Plutarch judges it strong enough to pave the road for the natural philosopher, enabling him to approach metaphysical knowledge from the sensible side, while saying goodbye to the realm of opinions, happily left behind.

Suzan Sierksma-Agteres  
Rijksuniversiteit Groningen



### ***Bibliography***

- Boys-Stones, G.R. (1997), “Plutarch on the Probable Principle of Cold. Epistemology and the *De Primo Frigido*”, *CQ* 47, 227–238.
- Boys-Stones, G.R. (2001), *Post-Hellenistic Philosophy. A Study of its Development from the Stoics to Origen*, Oxford.
- Donini, P. (1988), “Science and Metaphysics. Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Stoicism in Plutarch’s *On the Face of the Moon*”, in Dillon, J.M. – Long, A.A. (eds.), *The Question of ‘Eclecticism’. Studies in Later Greek Philosophy*, Berkeley – Los Angeles, CA.
- Ferrari, F. (2005), “Der Gott Plutarchs und der Gott Platons”, in Hirsch-Luipold, R. (ed.), *Gott und die Götter bei Plutarch. Götterbilder – Gottesbilder – Weltbilder*, Berlin, 13–25.
- Fine, G. (1990), “Knowledge and Belief in *Republic V–VII*”, in Everson, S. (ed.), *Epistemology*, Cambridge, 85–115.
- Fine, G. (1978), “Knowledge and Belief in *Republic V*”, *AGPh* 60, 121–139.
- Gonzalez, F.J. (1996), “Propositions or Objects? A Critique of Gail Fine on Knowledge and Belief in ‘Republic’ V”, *Phronesis* 41, 245–275.
- Karamanolis, G. (2010), “Plutarch”, in Zalta, E.N. (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2010 Edition), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/plutarch/>.
- Kechagia, E. (2011), *Plutarch Against Colotes: a Lesson in History of Philosophy*, Oxford.
- Opsomer J. (2007), “Plutarch on the One and the Dyad”, in Sorabji, R. – Sharples, R.W. (eds.), *Greek and Roman Philosophy 100 BC–200 AD*, vol. I, London, 379–395.
- Opsomer, J. (1998), *In Search of the Truth: Academic Tendencies in Middle Platonism*, Brussel.
- Sandbach, F.H. (1982), “Plutarch and Aristotle”, *ICS* 7, 207–232.
- Smith, N.D. (2000), “Plato on Knowledge as a Power”, *JHPH* 38, 145–168.
- Striker, G. (1990), “The problem of the criterion”, in Everson, S. (ed.), *Epistemology*, Cambridge, 143–160.
- Striker, G. (1996), *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics*, Cambridge.

