Plato – mystic or sceptic?

Talk in Torun 10/10/01

0. Introduction
First of all, I would like to thank Dr. Nerzcuk for his kind introduction. I am glad to be here, and I’m glad to see how the exchange between Torun and Rostock is developing. The opportunity to speak in a session of the Polish Philosophical Association is, I feel, a great honour.

My talk is on Plato, and I am afraid it is a pretty global talk. I have to apologize for having had little time to prepare it, so I have not been able to have a look at much of the secondary literature I wanted to have a look at. This especially applies to Julia Annas’ article „Plato, the Sceptic“, which is probably relevant to the topic. My main question is:

Was Plato rather a mystic or a sceptic?

There is one exoteric reason for asking this question: it is the research project on the tradition of scepticism in European thought initiated by Dr. Nerczuk and myself, in collaboration with Ms Zwoliska, and kindly funded by a joint fund of DAAD and KBN. There is, of course, also an intrinsic reason for the existence of the research project in the first place: the three of us think that scepticism is a fascinating and important feature of European thought.

I will not try to suspend the answer to my question until the end of my talk. Instead, I will even have to tell you the answer in order to explain the structure of my talk. It is: both. If you are asking yourself how this is possible I should say: Plato shows how, and the position might even be systematically attractive. So I have to show how, as I think, Plato combines mysticism and scepticism. This, again, means that

(1) I have to explain why I think Plato is a mystic, and then
(2) I have to explain why I think that in a way he is a sceptic. At the end of my talk I will
(3) briefly try to examine what kind of systematic position this combination leaves us with.

While the main thesis of my talk is not very surprising I hope I can present some analyses of central bits of text which support it and which are perhaps not as obvious.

In order to stress the mystic side of Plato I would like to
(a) give a few hints why the 7th letter is rather a document of mysticism than of esoteric doctrines by linking it to Diotima’s paradigmatic speech in the Symposium
(b) provide a reading of the introduction to the simillé of the sun that stresses the mystic side of Plato;
(c) have a look at the conception of knowledge in the Meno and give an analysis of the famous geometry lesson in the Meno that draws attention to a fact which has – to my knowledge – not received the attention it deserves;
(d) connect this to the end of the Theaetetus;
Of these points, (b) and (c) will take most of the time in that section.

In order to exhibit a sceptic side of Plato I will
(a’) point towards a well-known passage from the *Apology*;
(b’) have another look at Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium* by comparing it to a passage from Sextus Empiricus’ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.
(c’) have another look at the *introduction to the similé of the sun* from a different angle;

So the idea is to present some central passages as *Kippbilder* which, like Wittgenstein’s famous duck-rabbit in the „Philosophical Investigations“, look different at different times. The main purpose is to stress the sceptical side which has, in my opinion been slightly underrated, and that both the mystical and the sceptical side can be better motivated systematically than I have seen so far.

What I take to be the real, and actually rather simple and good motivation for the sceptical bit of Plato links him to very recent philosophy, e.g. Wittgenstein and Robert Brandom and makes possible the elucidation of some things that are happening here by means of epistemic logic.

Since in a talk of this somewhat daring scope there are unavoidably sketchy bits in between, I am very much looking forward to the discussion.

1. Plato as a mystic
   1.1. the controversy

   The mystical side of Plato has to be argued. The reason for this is that someone who interprets Plato as a mystic has to position himself in the discussion about Plato’s unwritten doctrines which has been going on for at least 40 years.¹ Let me just remind you what it is roughly about. It cannot be disputed that Plato held certain views which we do not find anywhere in his dialogues, but for which we have got hints, e.g. in Aristotle who mentions so-called „unwritten doctrines“ (agarapha dogmata) of Plato (Phys. IV 2, 209b14f) and explicitly contrasts them with the dialogues. So Aristotle seems to have listened to things Plato said but did not write down or publish. Since some people report part of what he said in their published and surviving writings it is of course a very interesting task for historical research to see whether one can reconstruct these allusions into a coherent doctrine. This line of research is fascinating and has yielded substantial results, and it looks as if the views Plato held were some rather obscure speculations on the One and on Duality as ideal numbers. The trouble starts if you add the following thesis:

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¹ If we take the central chapter of Krämer’s 1959 book on virtue in Plato as its starting point. Of course, I am not giving an overview of this discussion now.
**Esoteric doctrine thesis**
When, in central passages of his dialogues, Plato says that what is essential about his philosophy, has not been written down and won’t ever be, he is alluding to the „unwritten doctrines“. Therefore what he himself thought to be essential about his philosophy may be reconstructed by reconstructing them rather than by reading the dialogues as Plato’s last word on philosophy.

The esoteric doctrine thesis is trivially incompatible with the following view:

**Mysticism thesis**
When, in central passages of his dialogues, Plato says that what is essential about his philosophy, has not been written down and won’t ever be, he is not alluding to the „unwritten“ doctrines but to a mystical experience which is ineffable by means of speech and can *a fortiori* not be written down. We have to distinguish the unwritten from the unwritable.

As I think that Plato is, among other things, a mystic I think that the mysticism thesis is correct and that the esoteric doctrine thesis is not. The mysticism thesis has, in my view, received extremely strong support by the work of Rafael Ferber, and if I am to recommend one small text on the whole discussion to those of you who read German I would like to recommend:


I agree with a lot of what Ferber says and I will tell you where I disagree in some details in what follows. Moreover, I am looking forward to the publication of the following book:


The description of the book that I have seen points towards an original new interpretation that supports the mysticism thesis. Now let’s have a look at some texts by Plato.

**1.2. 7th letter, simile of the cave and Symposium**
Naturally, representatives of the esoteric doctrine view must be especially interested in Plato’s 7th letter just because it is no dialogue. I take it for granted that the 7th letter is genuine, which seems to be *communis opinio* again today. In the 7th letter, Plato writes these famous words about what really matters:
Plato, 7th letter 341c – e: You can’t write it down

(i) There is no written text of mine about these matters, neither will there ever be one. They can nowise be pronounced [rheton] like other information [mathemata].

(ii) But only when, from often being together for the sake of this matter and from living together, it has suddenly emerged – as light emerges from a spark carried away from a fire – [I say], only when it has emerged in the soul [in this way] it will keep nourishing itself from itself. ...

(iii) I think that an attempt in the described manner [epicheiresin legomenen] would not be good for men, except for a few of them who would be capable of finding out themselves after some small hints [smikras endeixeôs] anyway...

The esoteric doctrine interpretation of point (i) would be that Plato is not saying that what really matters cannot be pronounced full stop, but that he is merely saying that it cannot be pronounced like other things you would learn, i.e. exoterically, while it can be pronounced esoterically. I don’t see that this is compelling since the view that you cannot pronounce what really matters in the way that you can pronounce other things clearly leaves open the possibility that you cannot pronounce it at all.

Neither is point (iii) a point in favour of the esoteric doctrine view as one might think at first: it is clear from the context that the „described manner“ of writing down what is essential is what Plato wrote himself (341d), and Plato describes it as an experiment. Now what did Plato write? Dialogues. And indeed, at the time when they were written, they were an experiment. They are, one should recall, designed to be recordings of philosophical conversations, in all their refinement, formally something like cassette tapes or video tapes of philosophizing, and only for this reason they might produce similar effects to those philosophizing itself produces. So I read the sentence as saying that the dialogues themselves are esoteric texts whose reading should at least be accompanied, and may even be replaced by active philosophizing with others. Interestingly, what produces these effects are mere hints, actions of showing (endeixis).

This fits very nicely with no less than three central descriptions of in what way, in Plato’s view, words and verbal education works towards the discovery of what really matters: words play a role, but not as a vessel for taught doctrines, but as a device for guiding the pupil into the right direction, so that he may see for himself.

The first description is point (ii) in the 7th letter itself (on this point, I think, Ferber is over-cautious, cf. Ferber 1991, p.36): Philosophers are to spend time together philosophizing. But what happens then in lucky cases is not that a pupil receives some worded doctrine from his master, but that he is enlightened in the most concrete sense: a spark that jumps over in philosophical discussion and sets to fire some – immaterial - fuel in the pupil’s soul that had already been there. The teacher’s task is just being a match or lighter.

This is of course just what Plato provides as his own interpretation of the similé of the cave where he describes education as a conversion (periagôgê) of the soul in contrast to just putting new pieces of knowledge into a pupil’s mind (Pol. VII, 518 b.-d).
And it fits in with the most clearly mysticist passage Plato ever wrote, the passage in the in the *Symposium* where Diotima describes the right kind of education towards grasping Platonic ideas in different steps (Symp. 210a-211a) proceeding from appreciating beautiful bodies, to beautiful souls, beautiful customs and laws and further on:

**Plato, Symp. 211a**

[4th step] After custom and law it is necessary to proceed to the results of *scientific knowledge* in order that one may see again what is beautiful in them, and, looking upon a diversity of what is beautiful, ... set out for the sea of beauties; and looking around, many and beautiful words, is what one will produce, and magnificent ones, and thoughts likewise, in one’s foolish craving for wisdom [en philosophia aphasis], [sudden revelation] until strengthened and grown from all those [activities] one ... [will] suddenly behold something wonderful, by its nature beautiful: just that, o Socrates, for the sake of which all the training before was there...

What is especially interesting here is the description of what happens in the course of step 4. After having gained full access to a whole range of different examples of what is beautiful, and thereby enabled to abstraction, the first impulse is to produce *kalous logous* (210d3) - *beau discours*. After so much occupation with beautiful things it is no wonder that beautiful words emerge, and this is certainly not a bad thing, but I cannot help finding some irony in this description (I have tried to convey this by sticking to the Greek word order where the rhetoric device of *hyperbaton* seems exaggerated even by Plato’s standards).

Surprisingly, the foolish behaviour is subsumed under the title of „philosophy“, and one should not forget that the person being described here is on the right way. So philosophical verbalisation is a necessary stage, almost like a cure that seems to worsen a patient’s condition or perhaps like labouring (this would fit Socrates’ self-description as a midwife). But it leads to something qualitatively different from what can be said.

1.3. The introduction to the simélé of the sun, 1st reading

1.3.1. Why the text is crucial

In order to appreciate the introduction to the simélé of the sun in the *Republic*, some preliminary points are necessary in order to see why the passage is a culmination point of a problem not only of the first six books of the Republic but of Plato’s entire work written up to then. The problem provides a good reason for Plato’s mysticism, i.e. mysticism is one possible solution to a serious philosophical problem (this is again something I miss in Ferber’s work. He seems to take for granted that words are defective if it comes to fundamentals, but he does not really say why).

What really matters in the *Republic* is, of course, the idea of the Good. Now, as we all know, the problem of Plato’s early dialogues is how to define evaluative terms such as "brave", "pious", "prudent" or "virtuous". Plato tells us in the *Euthyphro* (7d) why he thinks this is a problem. He says this is a problem because whether any of these terms apply cannot be decided by weighing, counting or measuring. The early dialogues develop a very sensible
methodology of definition: e.g., definitions have to be not only extensionally, but also intensionally adaequate.

But that is only part of what is interesting about definitions although it is by no means a small achievement to be clear about these features. What else would you teach your students about definitions? Well, there is something else. You might draw attention to the fact that any definiens will again consist of words and that one might ask in turn what the words in the definiens mean. So one definition might show the need for several others. But you will also teach your students that it would be pointless to go on like this forever. If there is a point to definitions they have to stop somewhere. If you want to stop defining concepts again once you started doing so, you should assume that there are primitive concepts which you need not define. Primitives may be self-explaining. Their meaning might be selbstverständlich... In German or French you can point towards this by using "understand" as a an impersonal reflexive verb: Das versteht sich von selbst - cela s'entend. If this happens in your area of definition, then, lucky you are.

There might, however, arise a rather more uncomfortable situation. You cannot do without primitives - ok. Perhaps you see that in the area of definition you are interested in there is one single primitive concept. You see that this concept is so basic that you cannot define it. So far so good. But unfortunately, the concept is not self-explaining - at least it is not self-explaining in such a way that everybody attaches the same meaning to it. Instead, intuitions about what the term applies to differ enormously. Perhaps you have a pretty clear idea about the meaning of the term but since it's undefinable you can't communicate it. I think this is the situation Plato thought he was in. In order to see why, it is useful to have a look at the typical structure of an early Platonic dialogue such as the Meno, the Laches or the Euthyphro.

1.3.2. The structure of an early Platonic dialogue
At the beginning a definiendum is proposed, which is an evaluative term. Socrates' interlocutor thinks he knows what the term means and can, thus, easily define it. He proposes a definiens. Socrates does not say straightforwardly that the definiens is inadequate - because, in contrast to his interlocutor he is uncertain from the very beginning. He simply exposes the proposed definiens. However, as a result of his exposition it usually turns out that the proposed definiens does not fit the definiendum.

The interlocutor still thinks definition of an evaluative term is an easy task. So the same procedure is repeated two or three times. (It is worth noting at this point that the analogy Socrates draws between himself and a midwife is only fully understood if one remembers that the main task of a midwife in Ancient Greece was infanticide.)

After some unsuccessful attempts the interlocutor is highly frustrated. He is in the state of aporia. The most impressive characterization of this state is, in my opinion, the one Meno gives once he has reached aporia: He is comparing Socrates to a ray, a kind of fish that paralyses its prey by electric shocks (79b-80d). For the interlocutor, usually a wealthy citizen or one of his sons, this is an uneasy state. But for Socrates aporia is progress. For finally the
interlocutor is just as uncertain about the meaning of the definiendum as he himself has been from the very beginning.

Only when the interlocutor has realized his aporia – sometimes with another interlocutor, but one who has followed the conversation up to then -, the real search begins, usually on a higher level of argumentation. Sure enough, it leads to problems, but the situation does not look so hopeless. Unfortunately, the interlocutor starts running out of time. So the conversation is ended for some more important business.

I am telling you this well-known story once again because of a small detail which is often overlooked: The aporia does not occur at the end of an early Platonic dialogue, but in the middle. For some reason the early dialogues come to an inconclusive end. But I would not agree with the commonplace judgement that they end aporetically.

This is important once you have a closer look at how far the discussion has got at the end of, for example, the *Laches* and the *Meno*. In fact, it has developed extremely well once the aporia was overcome. The result at the end of the Laches is this: one might think that bravery is a kind of knowledge, namely knowledge about what is good and what is not good. But this definiens is too wide. Bravery is a kind of knowledge about what is good and not good in certain circumstances. which are not easy to specify. Instead of bravery it is virtue that is knowledge about what is good and not good in any circumstances (197e-199e).

And at the end of the *Meno*, although Socrates is not explicit about it, it is pretty clear that virtue, according to the *Laches* knowledge about what is good and not good, may be innate and that a teacher of virtue could only be someone who helps to rediscover this innate knowledge instead of trying to teach something by instruction.

If you call these results aporetic I don't know what you expect. The impression I get here is that, according to Plato, evaluative terms can be defined, but that the correct definiens always contain an evaluative primitive - the term "good". It remains unclear, however, if the term "good" is the sort of easy-to-grasp primitive which is self-explaining or if it is rather uncomfortably difficult. The early dialogues never get far enough to answer this question - perhaps on purpose.

1.3.3. The *Republic*

Unlike in the earlier dialogues, in the *Republic* the task of defining an important concept seems to be explicitly accomplished: after four books of dialogue with extraordinarily patient interlocutors, justice is defined. Unfortunately, the definition abounds with evaluative terms, and understanding them requires some knowledge of what is good. So one might say that the task of defining justice has not really been accomplished: true, you have a definiens that looks quite sensible, but you cannot claim to really understand it as long as you are not clear about the Good. And if you don’t understand the definiens it doesn’t help you for understanding the definiendum.

So in book VI of the Republic a point of no escape is reached: the interlocutors ask Socrates to define "good". Socrates‘ answer is very evasive. He doesn’t straightforwardly say that "good" is undefinable. He rather says that this would probably take very, very long and
be very, very difficult. For the time being, he continues, he can only offer, as a kind of ersatz, some similes (505d-507a):

**Plato, Republic book VI, 506b – 507a, introduction to the simile of the sun based on Cornford’s translation, replacements in ⟨…⟩**

[1] [Soc.:] ⟨… what the Good itself might be, let us leave that aside for now.⟩ To arrive at what I at any rate believe it to be would call for an effort too ambitious for an inquiry like ours. However, I will tell you … what I picture to myself as the offspring [tokos], ⟨and indeed resembling it⟩.

[2] [Glauc.] Well, tell us. ⟨The description of the father is your debt for some other time.⟩

[Soc.:] I wish I could pay it back and you could receive it, and not, just like now, only what it produces. For now take this offspring and product of the Good itself.


In my opinion, this is one of the most exciting passages in the history of philosophy. To a great extent this depends on a pun on the Greek word „tokos“, which I will come back to later on. For the moment, let us simply read „tokos“ as what it might mean, namely „child, son (of a father)“. The Greek word sounds a little more abstract, so that „offspring“ is not a bad translation. Thomas Mann, in his breathtaking implicit commentary on Plato’s philosophy at the climax of his four-volume novel „Joseph und seine Brüder“, the dialogue on religion between Joseph and Akhnaton in vol. IV, has found the perfect German translation: „Zeugnis“.

With this meaning of „tokos“ in mind, it is simply impossible to understand what I have labelled section 2 of the passage. But never mind for the moment - the rest makes enough sense: the idea of the good cannot be directly described by words, but it can be described by analogy; so Socrates has to tell similes if he wants to say anything on the topic. The methodological metaphor of father and child also tells us why the simile of the sun is informative. If you know that X is the father of Y, and that Y is the kind of child that looks „just like his father“, then by describing Y you automatically describe X, too, but unavoidably in an indirect and not quite adequate way. In fact, in the simile of the sun, we learn a lot about the role the idea of the good plays, and the content of simile itself nicely justifies its own methodology: if the idea of the good produces what is good, either directly or indirectly via sustaining other ideas, and if the sun is something extraordinarily good (by making people see, letting plants grow etc.) then no wonder it extraordinarily resembles its „father“ and may therefore be used for indirect description.

However, although by analogy we obtain a description of the role the idea of the good plays and although we are very movingly told that it must be wonderful we learn nothing about its essence. That is no wonder, since all an analogy can provide are structural similarities. So the message of the simile of the sun and, later on, the cave is that fully grasping what "good" really means is a sort of mystical experience: becoming acquainted with the form of the good. The story of the freed prisoner from the Cave stresses the point that everyone has to make this experience for himself, although with some assistance.
Reading a book cannot replace an actual experience (in the worst case it makes some readers think they experienced what they in fact only read a - metaphorical - description of (Phaedrus 275a/b)). The sort of experience Plato thinks of here cannot be communicated. Of course its content cannot be taught by any sort instruction which aims at enabling the student to talk about the subject he has learnt (Pol. 517a-518d).

If you find this too mystical I will tell you what the simile reminds me of. It reminds me of the film "Leningrad Cowboys Go America" by the Finnish film director Aki Kaurismäki. The film is about a terrible Finnish folk band on a tour through America. After the first complete failure in New York City, the band’s manager, a real tyrant, goes to a music shop, buys some sheet music, and presents it to the band, saying: "You must learn Rock’n Roll – Study this book!". Indeed, mystical knowledge, if it exists, must be much closer to knowing how than to knowing that. And here music might even be a good example: it is clear that you can learn how to play a certain style of music and that, after that, you know how to play it. A teacher is usually of some help, but remember how different teaching a musical instrument is from teaching a science! A style of music may also be described, and the description might even be fitting or beside the point. But you cannot tell until you know the style, and clearly the description doesn’t define the style. Otherwise you should know what Rock’n Roll sounds like and perhaps even be able to play Rock’n Roll after reading a history of pop music even if you have never heard any Rock’n Roll. This is clearly absurd.

1.5. The end of the Theaetetus and Meno 97
If words are of so relatively little use when it comes to grasping fundamentals in the sense of knowing about them then it is hardly surprising that the last attempt to define knowledge in the Theaetetus fails, for the last attempt is:

Knowledge is true judgement (alethes doxa) + verbal explanation (logos)

And indeed the most refined attempt to define logos makes the whole project circular, because the kind of logos that is required can only be defined by using the word „knowledge“ in the definiens. So also the unsuccessful end of the Theaetetus again may be read to support the mysticism thesis.

In my opinion so does the passage where the difference between true judgement by coincidence and knowledge is first discussed, and it would be very surprising if Plato so much changed his mind on that issue. But the point has to be argued. This takes us to the Meno:

Plato, Meno 97d – 98b: Daedalus' statues
Meno: ... I wonder ... why knowledge is held to be so much more valuable than correct opinions ...
Soc.: Do you already know why you wonder? Or shall I tell you?
Meno: Please tell me.
Soc.: Because you haven’t paid much attention to Daedalus’ statues. Perhaps you haven’t got any of them here.
Meno: What are you up to?
Soc.: Because they, too, go away and flee if they are not tied [to a peg], whereas, if they are, they’ll stay.
Meno: So what?
Soc.: It’s no great use to have an untied work of him ... since it won’t stay, but a pegged one is of great use; they are really very beautiful. What I’m up to? True opinions! True opinions, as long as they stay, are something beautiful and effect good things. But they are not used to staying very long and flee from a man’s soul, so that they are no great use unless someone pegs them by some insight of the reason why [aitias logismô]. And this, Menon my friend, is recollection [anamnêsís], as we have agreed before (cf. 85c-d). Only after they have been pegged they become knowledge and sedentary. ...

At first sight, this looks as if Plato is still full of optimism that the definition of knowledge as true judgement + verbalized logos is adequate. Doesn’t Socrates refer back to the famous geometry lesson that has just taken place as an example of knowledge in the making? Instead of logos, Plato says aitias logismos, insight of the reason why, but that seems to be an even clearer indication of epistemic optimism: if you look up logismos in a dictionary you will learn that it often means something extremely intersubjective and communicable, namely „account“ in the sense of a calculation that may be checked. I admit that such an optimism would rule out the mysticism thesis as a correct interpretation for dialogues before the Republic and that it would be clearly present if the slave boy, on careful interrogation, presented a calculation. My reading of the geometry lesson is that just the opposite is the case, and that therefore what seems to be optimism is just camouflage. We see a hint towards this when, of all things, Socrates identifies the „insight of the reason why“ with Platonic anamnesis.

1.6. The geometry lesson in the Meno
The geometry lesson in the Meno (81b-85b) is the one passage in Plato’s works where Socrates himself comments on the typical structure of an early Platonic dialogue. Everyone knows what the passage is about: Socrates, by intelligent questioning, makes a slave boy without any training in maths solve a non-trivial geometrical problem in order to convince Meno of the doctrine of recollection. Not everyone pays attention to the form of the passage. However, the form is very interesting. Formally, the geometry lesson in the Meno is a complete small early Platonic dialogue of its own with its typical structure – it is a dialogue within a dialogue, so in this respect the Meno is like a Russian doll. While the Meno is inconclusive, the geometry lesson in the Meno is conclusive: the boy finds the correct solution. Now Socrates comments to Meno on his dialogue with the slave boy while talking with the boy. So we get something like a live report of a Socratic dialogue and the reporter is Socrates himself.
The problem is as follows: The length of each side of a square with a surface of 4 square feet is 2 feet. What's the length of each side of a square with a surface of 8 square feet? (82c1-3) The slave’s first hypothesis is ("concluding" from doubled surface to doubled length): 4 feet. Socrates comments: He doesn’t know, but he still thinks he knows (82e). Socrates then exposes the hypothesis: If the length is 4 feet, the surface of the square is 16 feet (83a5). The boy realises that his proposed solution was too large. He sees that the solution must be somewhere between 2 and 4 (83b1). So his second hypothesis is: 3 feet (83e1). Socrates again exposes the hypothesis: If the side’s length is 3 feet, then the square’s surface will be 9 feet. The boy realises that his proposed solution is still too large. Socrates urges him to have another try. And in order to encourage the boy, he says something very peculiar:

**Plato, Meno 83e – 84a: Geometry lesson**
Soc.: ... so the three-feet-base won’t give us a square of eight square feet either.
Slave boy: No.
Soc.: Now which base will? Try to tell [eipein] us exactly. And if you don’t want to count [arithmein] just show it to us. [...] 

For a while the boy does not know how to go on. So Socrates has some time to play the reporter again (84a): Look, he says to Meno, now the boy is in the state of aporia. That’s a good sign. From now on he will no longer think he knows the solution although he doesn’t know it yet. Only from now on he is really looking for a solution.

The boy doesn’t give up; he overcomes the state of aporia (84d). After a little further assistance from Socrates he suddenly points towards a diagonal line which had happened to be there from the very beginning, but to which he hadn’t attached any importance.

**Plato, Meno 85b: Geometry lesson**
Soc.: So from which base?
Slave boy: From this one. ...
Soc.: This is what the experts [sophistai] call the diagonal. ...

The slave boy points towards the solution, he just shows it to Socrates, he does not "count" it. Why? Well, "counting" here obviously means "describe the solution by a natural number or by a ratio of natural numbers". And in this sense the solution of the geometry lesson simply cannot be counted. It is ineffable in terms of rational numbers. The solution is "square root of eight" and that’s an irrational number – as we would say today. I doubt whether any ancient Greek mathematician would have been willing to call "square root of eight" a number. And I am not sure if even with the best mathematical training available at the time the slave boy could have communicated his insight by means of speech. It is true that Socrates describes the line which presents the solution as the diagonal. But this is again only a description of functional role and does not state what is essential about the line, namely its length (and just look which people, in his opinion, seem use this terminology as if it were informative!).
There is some terminology for irrational lengths in the Theaetetus (148a/b), but it seems to be a great novelty there (they are called *dynamai*), and the Theatetus was probably written several decades after the Meno. But even much later on, in Euclides elements we find an interesting hint, just how unsayable the Greeks found irrational magnitudes:²

**Euclides, The Elements, book X, Def. 4**

Both the square over a given base and what may be measured by it be called sayable [rheton], what cannot be measured by it unsayable [aloga] and its bases [dynamenai] likewise unsayable [alogoi]...

So Plato chose a problem for the geometry lesson which has a solution but a solution which is ineffable in terms of rational numbers. If I am right about the development of terminology the solution could not be communicated by means of speech at all, at the time when the Meno was written. It could only be shown. I cannot believe this is merely a coincidence. It just fits the mysticism thesis too well. The geometry lesson is itself a sort of simile. The Meno is about virtue, i.e. – according to the Laches - about the knowledge of what is good and what is not good. So the ineffability of the solution (at least: ineffability in terms of rational numbers) stands for the ineffability of the meaning of "good". The geometry lesson shows what kind of solution is to be expected to the problem of how to really grasp the meaning of "good" – and what kind of solution is not to be expected. A definition of the term "good" is not to be expected. For a definition would consist of words. If there were a definition it would be possible to say what "good" means. But this, Plato thinks, is impossible. What "good" means, can only be shown. If you are on the right track it will reveal itself to you what "good" means, and again this is put more naturally in German by using "show" as an impersonal reflexive verb: Es zeigt sich.

This is, by the way, strongly reminiscent of the expressions Wittgenstein used to answer the question what the the relation between language and world is like.³

I am sure you realize now why I think Plato, when writing the *Meno*, knew exactly what he was not going to write in the *Republic*. And you might see why the mythical solution is a serious systematic solution:

The systematically good thing about mysticism is that it makes fundamentals independent of words and thereby avoids an infinite regress of either definition or premises.

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³ Cf. TLP 2.172, 4.022, 4.12ff, 4.461. He held the view that this relation is nothing you can talk about, because once you talk about it, you are again inside the realm of language. So the difference between "zeigen" and "aufweisen" (to reveal itself, to show) on the one hand and "sagen" (say) on the other hand was rather important to him in his early period.
2. Plato as a sceptic
2.1. General idea and Apology
Let me now come to the second part of my talk. It is much shorter than the first one, since I have already presented much of the material which I would now like to interpret once more from a different point of view.
If you had to explain to some students or pupils at school who have heard of scepticism – whom would you choose as a paradigmatic sceptic in the intuitive sense of the word? I would choose Plato’s Socrates. And I would start with passages like this one from Socrates’ defense speech:

Plato, Apologia Sokratous, 21 d
When I went away [from some interlocutor] I said to myself: „Well, I am in fact wiser than this man. Perhaps none of us knows about anything beautiful or good. But he believes to know without knowing. I, however, as I don’t know, neither believe I do. So I do seem to be just a little bit wiser than he is insofar as what I don’t know I don’t believe to know.

The only point that could cast some doubt on whether this is scepticism is Socrates’ claim not to know what is beautiful or good. But mind that he does not say anything like „I know that I don’t know certain things“. He says „I don’t know“ and this might well be just a statement of opinion (this move is made explicit by Sextus Empiricus in the Outlines book I vii 13-15). So there is no self-contradiction in what Plato has his Socrates say, as there would be in a sentence like „I know that there’s nothing I know“.

One might try to make a difference between what position Plato has his Socrates hold and what Plato himself holds to be true in order to resolve the seemingly obvious tension between mysticism and scepticism in Plato’s text. In my view this attempt is hopeless: we find very clear allusions to the view expressed in the apology precisely right within the central passages I have interpreted in favour of the mysticism thesis. I have no idea what kind of text we end up with if, e.g., we try to slice up the passage Meno 97 into sceptical and non-sceptical bits. This strategy won’t work anyway if the very same text allows for a reading in both ways.

2.2. The conversion scenes in the Symposium and in Sextus Empiricus
Before I try to show this, I would like to suggest that mysticism and scepticism are not as far apart in important structural aspects as they might seem. They both rely, and have to rely, on a kind of conversion that is prepared by rational intellectual activity but that constitutes a break with this activity which is at the same time the solution to a quite existential problem – a solution one might have hoped for within the framework of rational intellectual activity before. We have seen how this happens in the course of activities Diotima describes: looking around (thērōn, 210d4) among the diversity of what is beautiful and producing beautiful

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4 Another telling passage for what one would intuitively call scepticism is Phaedo 107b: After putting forward his last very sophisticated argument for the immortality of the soul and with just a last myth to be told, Socrates admonishes his pupils to have a closer look (episkepei saphesteron) at the premises (hypothesēs prōtas) of the argument again even if they seem quite credible (pistai).
words prepares for the vision of the idea, which is, however, a break with words altogether and is not reached by them, but which is no less than the solution of the question how one should live. Although reasoning is a preparatory step for the vision of the idea, there is no reasoning that leads to the claim that the idea exists as its conclusion (good luck, there isn’t: otherwise the reasoning that establishes the existence of the idea would be more fundamental than the idea; but how do you reason for the premises of that reasoning again?).

Now look at this passage from Sextus Empiricus, an author of the 3rd century AD who is our most valuable source of the most sophisticated brand of ancient scepticism, Pyrrhonism. As a sceptic, Sextus holds that, so far, no attempt of proving something has ever seemed to him a real proof. This rules out the claim that he can give a proof of scepticism. But how do sceptics ever get converted to scepticism if not by proof? Here is Sextus’ story:

Sextus Empiricus, Outlines of Pyrrhonism, book I, §12, section 28f
[28] What happened to the sceptic, is just what is told about Apelles, the painter. He wanted, it is said, to imitate a horse foaming [from its mouth] in a painting. He so much failed in this that he gave up and hurled the sponge (with which he used to clean his brush from paint) against the painting. When the sponge landed it produced an excellent imitation of foam.
[29] Likewise, the sceptics hoped to attain calmness of the soul by coming to a decision about the lack of resemblance between the things that appear and the things you can only think. As they could not reach a decision they stood back. But when they stood back, the calmness of the soul started to follow them as if by accident, and just like a body is followed by its own shadow.

The sceptic is, as his name tells us, someone who is looking around (skopein) among the diversity of customs and reasonings. This is what prepares for a break with desperately trying to find proofs and for standing back from a definite decision for some opinion, which is followed by the calmness of the soul; and this is the solution of the question how one should live. Although reasoning is a preparatory activity step for standing back, there is no reasoning that leads to the claim that scepticism is true as its conclusion (good luck there isn’t: if this were the case then scepticism would not be true).

So there is a striking similarity between Plato’s mysticism and scepticism about the way in which, at a crucial existential and theoretical point, rationality is given up. You might say that a difference is that the sceptic keeps looking around, although with a much more relaxed attitude, never excluding the possibility that he might come across a proof, while Plato’s mystic will stop looking for anything else after his vision of the realm of ideas.

I think, the situation is much more complicated, and Socrates might be an example for this. It is curious just how careful Socrates is not to claim knowledge but only opinion about the realm of ideas in all the central passages, and this is something Ferber convincingly shows. Now this leaves open two possibilities:

1) Socrates holds that in order to claim to have knowledge he must have had the all-important mystical experience before; but he has never had it so far. So he doesn’t claim to have knowledge.
2) Socrates has had the all-important mystical experience. But he sees that this does not give him the right to claim that he has knowledge.

I would not know how to decide from the text which alternative is correct. However, I think it is important to see that both alternatives exist. As far as I see, Ferber pays attention only to the first option, and this, again leaves Socrates’ scepticism, which he clearly recognizes, somewhat weakly motivated.

To me, the second alternative looks much more exciting, and I would like to explore it by coming back to the introduction to the similé of the sun once more.

2.3. The introduction to the similé of the sun, 2nd reading

I have already told you that the passage rests on a pun. So far we have read „tokos“ in its concrete meaning as „child“. This matches the somewhat more general idea of „offspring of the same kind“ or „Zeugnis“ in the literal sense of the word. But this idea is matched by something else: if you receive interest for a loan you gave to someone then you receive, so to say, you money’s offspring; and sure enough it’s of the same kind, i.e. money. For this reason, „tokos“ is also the common Greek word for „interest“. This changes the whole metaphorical setting and takes us to business; and this enables us to understand the sentence we could not understand before:

Plato, Republic book VI, 506b – 507a, introduction to the similé of the sun based on Cornford’s translation, replacements in (…)

[2] [Glaucon:] Well, tell us. (The description of the father is your debt for some other time.
[Soc.:] I wish I could pay it back and you could receive it, and not, just like now, only what it produces. For now take this interest and product of the Good itself.

What is important about this is that Socrates acknowledges a debt and admits that – in all probability – he will not be able to pay it back. A debt is an obligation, and it becomes clear what kind of obligation he is thinking of when one reads the early dialogues in the light of a very recent semantic theory, Robert Brandom’s inferentialism. Brandom stresses that in using concepts we play a „game of giving and asking for reasons“. He traces back this formulation as far as to Wilfried Sellars (Brandom 2000, p. 189). I am rather sure that Sellars translates by this formulation – intentionally or unintentionally – Plato’s phrase „logon didonai kai endechestai“, to give and receive logos. If Socrates goes around and asks people for definitions of terms they use, then in Brandom’s terminology, he asks them to make explicit their semantic commitments. Semantic commitments are at the core of his semantic theory: if you say something, you rule out saying certain other things, you allow inferences from what you say and you are entitled to say certain other things. Understanding a conversation means being able to follow the semantic commitments the interlocutors have undertaken, being
capable of „semantic score-keeping“. If you are not sure what someone means by a phrase then you should be allowed to ask, and it is clear that he is somehow obliged to make explicit how the use of this phrase affects his semantic score. So when Socrates goes around and asks people for definitions he is asking them to fulfil an obligation. Usually they fail, and it remains doubtful if they can even understand themselves on important matters. It seems that they can use their words only on credit, but that they are not able to cash it in.

In book VI of the Republic, Socrates' interlocutors ask him to fulfil his obligation to define what he means by „good“. He, too, was using the concept like money he has only received as a loan from his interlocutors, and he has been spending it, by e.g. using evaluative terms in the definiens for „justice“. He had got semantic credit in book IV. Now the interlocutors want it back. Socrates can just pay back the interest.

Socrates can’t make a definition of the good explicit, verbalize it, although he would actually been obliged to do so. But only if you can do so, you can reasonably claim knowledge to others.

Knowledge, as the end of the Theaetetus tells us, might require something more than being able to give a logos for your true opinion (and this is, interestingly, also the upshot of Edmund Gettier’s famous counter-example which is, contrary what many readres may think, perfectly in line with the end of the Theaetetus). But if you can’t even give a logos for your opinion – how can you claim knowledge to others?

What do you do if someone comes up and tells you he wants to govern your state because he, among very few people, knows what really matters? A sensible reaction would be to ask „How do you know?“. Now what if you get the reply: „I had an experience unlike anything else I ever saw; it has changed my whole life: I had a vision of the realm of Platonic ideas.“? A sensible reaction would be to ask again:

„How do you know? How do you know that it was a vision of the realm of ideas? How do you exclude that there was just something wrong with that last glass of wine you had that night?“

Now it’s hard, but I think fair, to reject the claim in this way even though the person who made the claim might be subjectively fully convinced of what she thinks she saw.

But now assume that the person who made the claim is sensible enough to ask herself:

„How do I know? How do I know that it was a vision of the realm of ideas? How do I exclude that there was just something wrong with that last glass of wine I had that night?“

A possible answer is: „I just feel it; I’m just so sure about it“. But this answer would be quite a scandal for a philosopher. It may be expected that a thoughtful person would either be naturally sober enough or have had enough intuitive grasp of what since Wittgenstein is called the private language argument to say:
If I could not possibly give reasons to someone else why this was really a vision of the realm of ideas then I cannot give reasons to myself why it was, and so I cannot claim to know it was. If I don’t have any reasons which would hold also intersubjectively, I cannot even claim „subjective“ knowledge.

So a sensible person, on some reflection, simply will not come up and claim knowledge on the base of a mystical experience even if she had one. All I have to say now is that I think Plato’s Socrates is quite a sensible person. So he doesn’t do it and is explicit about this. This is compatible with holding a very strong belief in the existence of the realm of ideas and its accessibility by mystical vision. But it takes into account what is problematic about mysticism:

The systematically bad thing about mysticism is that it makes fundamentals independent of words and thereby blocks intersubjective communication and sensible knowledge claims.

3. Options from Plato in epistemic logic
The last thing I want to do in my talk is to try to clarify possible interpretations and consequences of Socrates’ position by means of modern epistemic logic. This is no l’art pour l’art since I think one important question is still open, and it is easier to answer it if some formal device is available. The question is:

Might Socrates have knowledge even though he is so sceptical about it?

It is important to see that it does not follow from Socrates’ explicit renouncement of knowledge claims that he does not know (my impression is that Ferber does not really see this). The answer is:

That depends on what you mean by „knowledge“, i.e. which intuitive principles concerning knowledge you invest.

I would like to show this by using a version of the most comprehensive system of epistemic logic that exists to my knowledge, the calculus E* from Wolfgang Lenzen’s „Glauben, Wissen und Wahrscheinlichkeit“. E* is defined like this:

Lenzen’s calculus E* (Lenzen 1980, 144)
Mα = X holds it to be possible that α
Wα = X knows that α
Üα = X is convinced that α
Gα = X believes that α
Axiomatics

Axiom schemata:

AL $\alpha$, if $\alpha$ is deducible from the usual axioms of propositional calculus

W2 $W(\alpha \rightarrow \beta) \rightarrow (W\alpha \rightarrow W\beta)$ distribution axiom for modal logic for W
E*2 $W(\alpha \rightarrow \beta) \rightarrow (G\alpha \rightarrow G\beta)$ weakened distribution from W to G

W1 $W\alpha \rightarrow \alpha$ Knowledge implies truth
E*1 $W\alpha \rightarrow G\alpha$ Knowledge implies belief
G1 $G\alpha \rightarrow \sim G\sim \alpha$ Belief consistency

W3 $W\alpha \rightarrow WW\alpha$ Transparency of Knowledge
E*3 $G\alpha \rightarrow W G\alpha$ Transparency of belief
E*4 $G\sim \alpha \rightarrow W \sim G\alpha$ Transparency of disbelief

E*5 $W\sim W\alpha \rightarrow G(\alpha \rightarrow \beta) \lor G(\alpha \rightarrow \sim \beta)$ Special WG axiom

Deduction rules:

m.p. If $\alpha$ and $\alpha \rightarrow \beta$ are deducible, so is $\beta$
RW If $\alpha$ is deducible, so is $W\alpha$ epistemic „necessitation“ rule for W
RGm If $\{\alpha_1, ..., \alpha_m\} I \{\beta_1, ..., \beta_m\}$, deduction rule for G
then $G\alpha_m \& \sim G \sim \alpha_{m-1} \& ... \& \sim G \sim \alpha_1 \rightarrow G\beta_1 \lor ... \lor G\beta_m$ is deducible.

Definitions: $\hat{\alpha} = df. \sim W \sim W\alpha$ (p.145)
M$\alpha = df. \sim \hat{\alpha}$ (p.139, Def. 6).

So being convinced that p is plausibly defined as not knowing that no knowing that p; and
holding it possible that p is defined as not being convinced that not p.

Lenzen’s calculus enables us, besides simple statements like „X knows that p“, to
formalize a statement like „X holds it possible that he doesn’t know that p“, which pretty well renders Socratic scepticism if X is Socrates and p a statement like „the idea of the good
exists“. And the calculus not only enables us to formalize such statements but also to test
them for joint consistency. In discussions with my colleagues Ludger Jansen and Sebastian
Schmoranzer it occurred to the three of us that the following three statements are in fact
jointly inconsistent:

I) M $\sim W p$ socratic scepticism
II) W p knowledge
III) Wp $\rightarrow WW$ transparency of knowledge.
The proof I found for this when preparing this talk is a little longer than expected, but absolutely straightforward:

1. \( M \sim Wp \) 
2. \( Wp \) 
3. \( Wp \rightarrow WWp \) 
4. \( WWp \)
5. \( \bar{U}q \equiv \sim M \sim q \) 
6. \( \bar{U}q \equiv \sim W \sim Wq \) 
7. \( \sim W \sim Wq \equiv \sim M \sim q \) 
8. \( \sim W \sim Wq \rightarrow \sim M \sim q \) 
9. \( \sim \sim M \sim q \rightarrow \sim \sim W \sim Wq \)
10. \( M \sim q \rightarrow W \sim Wq \) 
11. \( M \sim r \rightarrow W \sim W \sim r \) 
12. \( M \sim W \sim W \sim r \) 
13. \( M \sim Wp \rightarrow W \sim W \sim Wp \) 
14. \( W \sim W \sim Wp \) 
15. \( W \sim WWp \) 
16. \( Ws \rightarrow s \) 
17. \( W \sim WWp \rightarrow \sim WWp \) 
18. \( \sim WWp \) 
19. \( \perp \)

It immediately follows from this that the following formulae are theorems of \( E^* \):

A) If X knows that p then he doesn’t hold it possible that he doesn’t know that p

\( Wp \rightarrow \sim M \sim Wp \)

B) If X holds it possible that he doesn’t know that p, then he doesn’t know that p

\( M \sim Wp \rightarrow \sim Wp. \)

However, the proof depends on the transparency thesis: Lenzen’s axiom W3 which says that knowing that p implies knowing that knowing that p. This thesis may be disputed, and we can see one possible reason for disputing it: it makes Socratic scepticism incompatible with knowledge. So two strategies emerge as candidates for coping with the situation:
1) Hold that Socrates has knowledge although he is sceptical about it.
   In this case deny the transparency thesis.
   ("if Socrates’ knowledge were self-transparent, then he would be inconsistent in being
   sceptical about it; let’s assume his position is consistent; then his kind of knowledge is not
   self-transparent")

2) Keep the transparency thesis and Socratic scepticism.
   in that case deny that Socrates has knowledge.
   ("Socrates is sceptical whether he knows what really matters; but knowledge would have
   to be self-transparent; so he can’t have knowledge about what really matters")

The first position is probably best interpreted by holding Socrates’ knowledge to include
visionary experiences about which he has every reason to be sceptical, but about which he
may also be sceptical, since it’s not self-transparent. I must admit that I am not quite sure
what kind of knowledge it leaves us with. But perhaps that’s because I am a logician and it is
very hard to see what kind of epistemic logic it leaves us with, as W3 is the epistemic
exemplification of a pretty general principle of the modal logic S4.

The second position seems to match intersubjective knowledge not including visionary
experiences. Perhaps surprisingly, it is intersubjective knowledge that is self-transparent: if I
know a proof then it seems pretty unproblematic that I know that I know a proof. The second
position allows full use of Lenzen’s E* as a basis for reasoning about epistemology. The
problem is that I don’t quite see why Socrates should be just sceptical about intersubjective
knowledge: couldn’t he even know that he doesn’t have any knowledge in that sense about
the realm of ideas?

If I have to decide I would, despite of the problem I just mentioned, prefer the second
position, but I can very well imagine that other people would opt for the first one.

4. Conclusion
Independently of which answer is given to the last question I addressed, I conclude that by
combining mysticism and scepticism in the way I think he does Plato’s Socrates has a
consistent, sophisticated, intuitively attractive and methodologically mature position.
Thank you very much for your patience and your attention.