

Plato's and Smith's
differing
epistemologies:
assessing "Phaedrus"
and "rereading..."



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To figure out the nature of knowledge, one must ask what it means to know, or fail to know something. This involves understanding what knowledge is, and determining cases in which one knows something, and cases in which one does not know something. When acquiring knowledge, people try to increase their supply of true beliefs, and in turn minimize their false beliefs. In *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, epistemology is defined under the definition of feeling: epistemology is “ the theory of how we come to know” (Childs 85). It is the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of knowledge, and what makes knowledge knowable. Between the two processes involved in knowing, “ traditionally, reason and feeling,” (85) philosophy concentrates on reason. Plato's *Phaedrus*, and Zadie Smith's, *Rereading Barthes and Nabokov*, analyze epistemology and discuss the nature/extent of human knowledge. Both philosophers use reason, for Plato's Socrates does not mention feeling at all, and Barthes eliminates feeling entirely. In Smith's reading of Barthes, she struggles to eliminate feeling. According to Plato's Socrates, knowledge is already known before one is born, and life requires recollecting these concepts, thus learning the “ real” truth. Plato calls these true beliefs *mneme*, signified by a capital letter. *Mneme* is the “ best” knowledge that can only be accessed through the soul. Plato uses epistemology to stress the importance of the autonomy of the knowledge in one's soul. He states: “ The place beyond...What is in this place is without color and without shape and without solidity, a being that really is what it is, the subject of all true knowledge, visible only to intelligence, the soul's steersman” (Plato 247C). This “ place beyond” refers to an afterlife, where one is rid of their physical body. Plato dislikes the physical body as it

is a jail cell for the soul (the "original sin"). This "intelligence" is truth, or absolute knowledge, and "steers" one's soul, for the soul is self-made, self-ruled, and without origin or source. He warns people to trust their mind and soul, not their senses, to recognize these absolute truths, because senses are produced by the world around them (Barnes). The world taints the absolute knowledge and possesses the soul, so one is not fully themselves, which is Plato's ultimate fear. He does not want to look towards the world and outside for knowledge; he looks inward for finding that absolute knowledge.

Plato continues to praise the revelation of reality through the soul by saying:

But a soul that never saw the truth cannot take a human shape, since a human being must understand speech in terms of general forms, proceeding to bring many perceptions together into a reasoned unity. That process is the recollection of the things our soul saw when it was traveling with god, when it disregarded the things we now call real and lifted up its head to what is truly real instead (249B).

Before birth, in the past, people acquired knowledge outside of our current sensible life on a spiritual level. In life on earth, learning is the way that they recall that knowledge, or anamnesis. Reminders of absolute concepts are signified by a lowercase letter, as in Beauty vs. beauty, or real beauty versus a reminder of beauty. Everyone recollects, and combined with observation, people form a universal knowledge, which is the "reasoned unity" Plato is talking about. This quote also comments on the extent of human knowledge, where people cannot access absolute knowledge in their earthly bodies.

Thus, Plato agrees there is a limit to human knowledge, and until people can access the truthful intelligence exclusively in their souls, skepticism is a legitimate concern.

Smith determines Barthes' epistemology by re-examining "The Death of the Author." In her rereading, she informs the reader of her initial concern:

Barthes spoke with the pleasure of the text, Nabokov of asking his students to read 'with your brain and your spine...the tingle in the spine really tells you what the author felt and wished you to feel.' Barthes, though, had no interest in what the author felt or wished you to feel, which is where my trouble starts (44).

Barthes speaks of pleasure in "From Work to Text," specifically *jouissance*, where there is "pleasure without separation". What makes the knowledge knowledgeable here is the death of the author, and thus the birth of the reader. Unlike Nabokov, his disinterest relates to the intentional fallacy, a faulty interpretation of what the author intended, or "what the author felt," and the affective fallacy, where the reader makes an error based off of their emotions. Often incorrect analysis surrounds what the author "wished you to feel," or the feeling the author intended his or her reader to feel. This puts a limit on how much the reader can actually know, since any personal aspects or feelings about the author in conjunction with his work are falsehoods.

In comparing Plato with Barthes, the bound thoughts and language (the work) is the *mneme*, the reader's special relationship (the Text) is the

anamnesis, and any interpretations or feelings based off of the author's
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personal life are hypomnemata. The author's true intention and intelligence would be the soul that is claimed to have the absolute truths, because only the author knows what they really meant, and that is the real meaning of the work. The special relationship, which in this metaphor would be the Text to anamnesis, is somewhat glossed over by Barthes and Plato. The philosophers recognize these concepts, but these are the least touched upon due to their favor for the work or the mneme. The favoritism is more obvious in Plato than Barthes, as Plato is frustrated with the earthly lack of mneme, yet Barthes does not favor the special relationship, because the relationship can be tainted by untrue assumptions. Again, this circles back to the untrue perceptions of truths and absolute knowledge in Plato. The interpretation of the reader and hypomnemata revolve around falsehoods, and are condemned by Barthes and Plato. Nabokov interrupts this philosophical discussion, for he is genuinely concerned with the aspect of feelings of the author and the reader. Smith understands Nabokov's perspective more than Barthes, because he seems to omit feelings completely. Barthes dismisses the author and points out the flaws in his or her readers' common interpretations. Instead, he focuses on the material and the knowledge within the materials, as passed down from the Text to the work to the interpretation. Smith's "trouble" and frustration begins with what Barthes wants from the reader, and what he wants the reader to feel, since their interpretations are futile against the actual intention of the author, which only the author knows.

What constitutes reality and what makes that knowledge knowable ultimately tie Plato and Smith together, as both of their subjects perceive

reality as knowable through strict limits. In her reading, Smith quotes Nabokov:

Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information; and as specialization...you can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it's hopeless (47).

In the context of Phaedrus, "getting nearer" is anamnesis, and Nabokov agrees one can never truly know reality. Anamnesis reminds people of the absolute knowledge, and is the closest they can get to that in their earthly bodies. Plato's Socrates would agree that trying to know all absolutes is hopeless because the process cannot be achieved through life on earth. To know everything, one must access the intelligence of their soul. Smith calls this "a different type of interpretive hopelessness" (47). Hermeneutics and epistemology have been "subjected to a twin crisis" for Barthes, because "there is no there there. With the author dead, no longer the past of his own text, nor its source of nourishment or final meaning, the scriptor merely 'traces a field without origin' - or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins" (48). She then uses an excerpt from the essay where Barthes claims to refuse meaning is to refuse God's reason, science and law, and compares the knowledge of the text to the real world: "Just as we must give up the urge to know the reality of the text, we must also give up the hope of

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knowing the world in its ultimate reality" (48). Despite their desires, people will never be able to know the world in its ultimate reality, because they cannot know everything as it really is. This also relates back to the skepticism of knowledge, since with this realization, people may not know as much correct knowledge that they think they do. Plato and Barthes agree on the fact that people will never know the ultimate reality in their bodies.

Smith then states that Barthes' readers must settle for "disentangling" the text as opposed to "deciphering it, which causes their "power" to be "relinquished" (48). Students are taught to believe that as readers, they have the power to interpret a text however they please, as long as they can provide evidence for that claims. For Barthes, any evidence is irrelevant because their thoughts, interpretations, feelings are immediately and already wrong, for they will never parallel the author's intention. Instead of finding its meaning, readers must disconnect with the text, as in disconnecting their feelings. This is difficult for naturally empathetic students, who try to find a tone or mood in the material to better understand it. Smith describes Barthes' portrait of the reader as "prepotent" and "blissed out, picking her way through a riot of potential meanings.

Both Plato's Socrates and Smith's Barthes refrain from talking about epistemology, but their viewpoints become clear when considering the nature and extent of human knowledge. The author and reader's relationship through language, interpretation, and fallacies can be likened to mneme, anamnesis, and hypomnemata. They agree that humanity cannot achieve all and absolute knowledge, and that epistemology lies more within reason than feeling. Smith cannot find any mention nor recognition of feeling, whether <https://assignbuster.com/platos-and-smiths-differing-epistemologies-assessing-phaedrus-and-rereading-barthes-and-nabokov/>

from the author or the reader, yet this brings Barthes and Plato closer together. Although they wrote centuries apart from each other, their philosophies resemble each other through the lens of epistemology.