Belief and Investigation in Plato’s Republic

It is surprising that, traditionally, Plato scholars have been content with an interpretation of the Republic according to which Plato cannot allow for beliefs about the good. What we ideally come to know, the Form of the Good, is an intelligible object, not an object of belief (doxa). But how should we think of ethical investigation? From the point of view of contemporary ethics, and from the point of view of ordinary talk about our ethical lives, it seems obvious that we have beliefs about the good. Perhaps we would not say that we have beliefs about ‘the’ good, but rather, that we have beliefs about what is good, or beliefs about what it means to say that something is good. Starting from such beliefs, we might try to formulate a theoretical account of these matters. It would seem that an ethical theory according to which we cannot conduct this type of investigation must be misguided.¹ We should not ascribe such a theory to Plato—the Republic itself is an ethical investigation that begins from beliefs about intelligible matters.² Accordingly, Plato should be able to account for such beliefs, beliefs that figure in philosophical investigation.

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² Note that such beliefs can be of quite different kinds. Theorists will differ on whether ethics should begin from intuitions. Even if it does not, it will begin from some considerations, and as long as these are subject to revision, they will count, in Plato’s framework, as beliefs.

Cephalus’, Polemarchus’, and Thrasymachus’ beliefs about justice, as well as Socrates’, Glaucon’s and Adeimantus’ reactions to them, figure prominently in the Republic as a whole. Similarly, the saying of the poet Simonides, that justice is to give everyone his due (Rp. I, 331e), is an important starting-point of the discussions in the Republic. Again, this is not presented as a piece of knowledge. It is someone’s view, and one that is worth engaging with.
Plato’s conception of belief makes room for what I see as three distinctively different ways of believing. Plato ascribes features to beliefs—such as, that belief is with or without knowledge, that belief is ugly and blind, and so on—that allow us to draw a distinction between beliefs about the objects of belief, beliefs without knowledge about intelligible matters, and beliefs with knowledge about intelligible matters. First of all, Plato’s conception of belief explains that the proper objects of belief are not knowable. The proper object of belief is the 'believable' (doxaston): roughly speaking, something in the domain of perception. To have beliefs about such matters is not second best. In relation to such matters, belief is entirely adequate. Second, the fact that there are beliefs about intelligible matters helps Plato account for investigation. Investigation begins from beliefs about matters that we ultimately want to know about. Our initial ideas are beliefs, not pieces of knowledge. But in the course of investigation, they can be examined, dismissed, and reformulated. Accordingly, they can be stepping-stones toward knowledge. Third, Plato envisages also another way in which we employ the faculties of belief without relating exclusively to the domain of believables: by creating poetic images. Myths, stories and similes are not themselves pieces of knowledge. To some extent, they engage with visible particulars—with protagonists, their deeds, clothes, shields, and so on. But they can also aim to capture truths about intelligible matters, such as courage or justice. Images and stories play an important role in education and in our everyday lives: they can

3 One might object that, rather than introduce a distinction between three modes of believing, we should keep apart a strict and a loose sense of belief. In the strict sense, belief is belief about believables. This proposal seems right to me insofar as beliefs about believables are, as I see it, the ‘core’ case of belief: here belief is applied in the manner that most immediately reflects the nature of belief. But I do not think that beliefs about intelligible matters are beliefs in a non-strict, and thereby ordinary sense. Beliefs about intelligible matters are as much the subject-matter of epistemological theorizing as beliefs about believables. As will become clear from my argument, beliefs about intelligible matters are beliefs in a lesser sense insofar as, in these beliefs, the faculty of belief is not employed in the manner that most fully represents its nature.