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Knowledge Definition in Plato's *Theaetetus* and Theory of Forms from the Lens of Unitarians

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Abstract

The theory of Forms is both foundational and fundamental to Plato's philosophy. Its importance makes many scholars argue that the theory is contained in virtually all dialogues of Plato. There are debates over the presence or otherwise of the theory in, especially, *Theaetetus*. While the Revisionists argue against the presence of the theory, the Unitarians argue for its presence. This paper recognizes the fact that the burden of proof is not on the Revisionists; hence, it does not take into cognizance their position. Its attention is rather on the Unitarians who strongly believe that the theory of Forms is contained and evident in all of Plato's dialogues, including and especially, *Theaetetus*. While this paper argues for the presence of the theory of Forms in *Theaetetus*, it deviates from the argumentative route of the Unitarians. The intent of this paper is to show that the position of Unitarians is not acceptable. The paper concludes that the theory is not evidently apparent as argued by the Unitarians. Rather, its presence is hinted at and not fully blown.

Keywords: Unitarians, *Theaetetus*, theory of Forms, presence.

1. Introduction

Plato's *Theaetetus* plays, at least, two notable roles in platonic scholarship. These roles are fused together such that their distinct separation is not easily recognised. The roles are, however, neither fundamental nor foundational to knowledge discourse. Nevertheless, they deserve being mentioned. These are not mentioned when topical issues are up for discussion in *Theaetetus*. They are experimental and theoretical roles. Whereas, both are too obvious to ignore, yet they are apparently seen as second class issues that do not require serious attention. While theoretical role has been taken up elsewhere,¹ experimental role has not been attended to. This is because it is seen, perhaps, as pseudo issue. For the present author, it is, and should be, taken as a topical issue. This paper builds on the experimental role to make case for the issue at hand, which is that whether theory of Forms, a very important theory upon which Plato has built his entire philosophy, is contained in *Theaetetus*.

¹ See Olúkáyòdé R. Adésuyi, *Knowledge Definition in Plato's Theaetetus and the Argument from Hypothesis in the Phaedo*, (Unpublished) Ph.D Thesis, written in the Department of Philosophy, Submitted to the Postgraduate College, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, (2023).

In view of the above, this paper attempts to argue that, although, it is a difficult task to prove, the theory of Forms is present in *Theaetetus*. While this is said to be difficult, it is not the case that it is unachievable. It shall conclude that the theory is basically hinted in the dialogue to prepare the minds of serious followers of Plato's philosophy to what should be expected in the dialogue.

2. Unitarianism

Unitarianism² is the view which holds a consistent defence of a doctrine in series of works. It is the view that different works of the same author contain, either in part or whole, similar or exactly the same theme; such theme runs through the works. This doctrine is usually ascribed to Plato in relation to his works; hence, he is described as a Unitarian. This is because his theory of Forms, which is core to his philosophy, seems to underlie many of his dialogues (Wolfsdorf, 2011: 57). In addition, some topical issues which discussions commence in a dialogue are continued in another. An instance is the discussion of knowledge evident in *Meno*, *Republic*, and *Theaetetus*.

Paul Shorey is one of those who categorise Plato as a Unitarian. He looks at his (Plato's) works holistically, relates them together and comes up with some reasonable assumptions. He believes that the works and ideas in Plato's works are not just to be treated in isolation during discussions. His position is that most of Plato's conclusions are drawn from discussions which are not gotten from a dialogue (Shorey, 1903: 130).³ In other words, Shorey's argument is the fact that some of Plato's ideas are better related together when discussing them (1903: 88).⁴

This is an indication that the theory of Forms, for instance, is evident in almost all the works of Plato whether extensively discussed or not. Hence, any view that purports to say that the *Theaetetus* does not have the theory of Forms because it is not explicitly presented and discussed is not tenable. For Shorey, Plato's *forma mentis* (theory of Forms)⁵ had been formed in early dialogues, and did not change in later dialogues. E. Christian Kopff (1991: 90-91) comments that "early 'aporetic' dialogues present problems, the answers to which are found in the *Republic*, he had in mind when he wrote them. Plato's late works developed, but never refuted, these answers."

² Unitarianism was borrowed from religious studies and its discussions entered into philosophical discourse. It is mainly dominant and popular in religious discourses with a historical survey as presented by Daniel Howe. For details see Daniel Walker Howe, "The Cambridge Platonists of Old England and the Cambridge Platonists of New England" *Church History*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Dec., 1988), 470-485 and Philip F. Gura, "The Transcendentalist Commotion" *New England Review* (1990-), Vol. 28, No. 3 (2007), 50-78.

³ On this point, Campbell has earlier noted that it is sometimes difficult to understand properly and convincingly Plato's teachings if limited to a particular dialogue. For details, see L. B. Campbell, *The Theaetetus of Plato*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1883), 276.

⁴ Comments of some scholars on this are innovative. The comments have been positive ones, and have assisted in understanding the position championed by Shorey. For details, see J. E. Raven, *Plato's Thought in the Making*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1965), 41 and Rosamond Kent Sprague, "Platonic Unitarianism, or What Shorey Said" *Classical Philology*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (Jan., 1976), 109-112.

⁵ *Forma mentis* means ideology or doctrine. I rely on this translation to interpret Plato's *forma mentis* to mean his theory of Forms. This is because his main doctrine and ideology is the theory of Forms. All other suppositions of his are dependent the theory.

3. Unitarians and their views on the theory of Forms in the *Theaetetus*

Francis M. Cornford's work is classical with regard to the presence of the theory of Forms in the *Theaetetus*, Cornford's viewpoint is that the main purpose of the dialogue is to show that discussants' inability to reach an acceptable definition of knowledge is as a result of the absence of the theory of Forms. According to him,

The *Theaetetus* formulates and examines the claim of the senses to yield knowledge. The discussion moves in the world of appearance and proves that, if we try to leave out the world of true being, we cannot extract knowledge from sensible experience (Cornford, 1935: 7).

It can be argued that, in much as the Forms are hinted, real definition can only be achieved in Plato's system with the Argument from Hypothesis which is articulated in the *Phaedo*, especially when Socrates' autobiographical passage in the *Phaedo* is considered (*Phaedo*, 96c).

For Cornford (1935: 28), that the theory of Forms is not mentioned is deliberate and intentional. One important component in the theory of Forms, *anamnesis*, is not to be mentioned because it presupposes that the answer to the question – what is the nature of knowledge and of its objects? – raised is known (Bonazzi, 2024: 167). Plato being silent about on it is deliberate in order that readers of Plato can get on without it. It could also be that it is already a background discussion for Plato's pupils and needs no repetition. The reason is that *Theaetetus* is a dialogue to test definition in the sensible world in order to determine whether or not an ideal and universally acceptable one can be arrived at. In addition, “the negative conclusion of the whole discussion means that, as Plato had taught ever since the [postulation] of the Forms, without them there is no knowledge at all” (Cornford, 1935: 28). Hence, the theory of Forms runs continuously in Plato's dialogues.

To further establish this, Cornford, adopting the tenet of unitarianism, makes reference to another dialogue of Plato, the *Republic*, to make case for his point. He argues that at a point, the two categories of existents, that is Forms and the objects of becoming will have a meeting point, which he calls, the receptacle of all becoming (Cornford, 1937: 182). It is at this point that changes do occur to some sensible objects for they imitate the Forms. The Forms themselves have unchanging characters.⁶ The nature of the objects of the sensible world does not allow stability and permanence. This is what happens when perception occurs. Arguing from this perspective, and relying on the Heraclitean constant flux, especially, Cornford says that it is the theory of Forms that is intended. He says;

Unless we recognise some class of knowable entities exempt from the Heraclitean flux and so capable of standing as the fixed meanings of words, no definition of knowledge can be any truer than its contradictory. Plato is determined to make us feel the need of his Forms without mentioning them (Cornford, 1935: 99).

Cornford's argument can be summarised as maintaining that the failure of the first definition is lack of the presence of the paradigm that a true definition of knowledge should have. This is supported by Eric Perl. Perl (1999: 339-362) is of the view that Plato's postulation of the theory of Forms, although, not explicitly evident in the *Theaetetus*, is a factor responsible for the

⁶ Some scholars interpret this view as implying that the Forms are characterless. This description may be unacceptable. That it is characterless means it does not have any unique and defined characters or features. Plato has not presented the Forms as characterless. If they are characterless, it will not make any sense for the sensible things to imitate them and allow for changes through their partaking in the Forms. See, for instance, A. K. Rogers, “Plato's Theory of Forms” *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Jan., 1936), 66, who conceives the Forms in this manner. It is on this ground that J. M. E. Moravcsik will be calling for a re-interpretation of Plato's Forms. Moravcsik has argued that Plato's Forms are in about five manifolds. This means each scholar makes use of any of them according to choice and preference. See J. M. E. Moravcsik “The 'Third Man' Argument and Plato's Theory of Forms” *Phronesis*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1963), 50-62.

failure. The criteria agreed upon by both interlocutors are pointers to the theory of the Forms in *Theaetetus*. The inability to recognise this is considered a hindrance to arriving at an acceptable definition of knowledge in the *Theaetetus*.

Cornford concludes his argument by making allusion to the act of midwifery in both the *Meno* and *Theaetetus*. In the *Meno*, the slave boy is interrogated on questions that bother on geometry on how to double square (*Meno*, 84d-85b). His ability to answer establishes the tenability of recollection for Socrates. The slave boy has been guided to enable him respond to Socrates' questions. There is a similar scene in the *Theaetetus*. After the first suggestion, which is definition by example, Socrates puts himself in the position of a midwife. Cornford compares the act of asking the slave boy questions in the *Meno* to assisting *Theaetetus* give birth to his intellectual babies in the *Theaetetus*. He interprets the scene to mean that the position of midwife, assumed by Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, is a reiteration of knowledge by recollection in the *Meno*. He concludes, therefore, that although, the theory of Forms is not explicitly mentioned in the *Theaetetus*. Nevertheless, it does not mean that it is not intended, and not implied.

This position of Cornford is not error free. He claims that the main purpose of the dialogue is to show that no acceptable definition of knowledge can be reached if the Forms are eventually left out of account (Cornford 1935: 90). This claim may not be acceptable on some grounds. Cornford's position can be compared with that of omniscient intelligence that knows everything about a person. In that sense, an omniscient intelligent being is that person who claims to know everything about each individual. This can be described as a bird's eye view of things. The knowledge includes those of the happenings in the mind. On the one hand, he may be correct that there are elements of the theory of Forms in the *Theaetetus*. On the other hand, Cornford's position should have been that the *Theaetetus* serves as thought experiment for the theory of Forms, such that issues are raised without the presence of the Forms to see whether such discourses can be credible. His position on the *presence* instead of arguing for semblance or hint is not tenable.

The purpose of the *Theaetetus* is to define knowledge (Zucchetti, 2016: 103-111). If the intended purpose, in Cornford's understanding and interpretation, is to show the epistemological foundation of the theory of Forms, that would have been stated from the beginning. That it is not stated suggests that there is no such intent to test the relevance of the theory. What is noticed is that, as at the time the two earlier definitions failed, the third definition that appears not to have been accepted, could be, possibly, rescued elsewhere.

3.1 *Memory vs recollection*

Kenneth Dorter (1990: 343-373) consistently argues for the presence of the theory of Forms in *Theaetetus*. Dorter expounds nearly all the suggested definitions and shows that a sign of the theory is present in all. However, reference will not be made to all that he mentions or enumerates. This is because in many of the enumerations, similar, if not entirely same, arguments are made to establish his claim.

Dorter's (1990: 343) first reference point is the opening of the dialogue. Here, he notes that the opening of the *Theaetetus* is meant to recall the words of the *Republic* [and the image of the Cave] (*The Republic*, 514a-519b).⁷ Before the arrival of Theaetetus, Theodorus has described Theaetetus to Socrates as having some qualities (*Theaetetus*, 144a-b). Dorter, arguing for the presence of the theory of Forms, makes reference to the memory and recollection as evident in the *Theaetetus* (*Theaetetus*, 162a-b; 165a-b). He indicates that Theodorus reminds Socrates of

⁷ This is equally shared by John Harrison, see his "Plato's Prologue: *Theaetetus*", *Tulane Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. 27 (1978), 116

Theaetetus, but forgets his parents. However, Socrates, who has never met Theaetetus, knows his father and native city as soon as he (Socrates) sees him (Theaetetus). This suggests that Socrates is as old as Theaetetus' father; and that Theaetetus is as young as the slave boy in the *Meno*. Hence, his recollection should be sharp. This is one aspect that Dorter alludes to as having a semblance of theory of Forms, which is recollection. This is a clue from *Meno* which the *Theaetetus* often recalls (Dorter, 1990: 345). Establishing this in a better way, he argues thus;

Whether or not the *Theaetetus* has recollection in its background, it re-affirms the *Meno*'s claim that whatever theoretical knowledge may be, it is not something easily acquired. It requires the courage to persist amid difficulties and frustrations, and the boldness to pursue hypotheses that may fly in the face of common sense (Dorter, 1990: 345).

He proceeds further that pursuing hypothesis, which is claimed to have been attempted in the *Theaetetus* (*Theaetetus*, 152c) is not achievable in the definitions suggested by Theaetetus. Dorter is, therefore, of a strong belief that the pursuance of hypothesis is a sign that the theory of Forms is present at in the *Theaetetus*. As further shown, the first definition offered fails on the ground that, if allowed to stay, it will relativise knowledge. The failure of the definition necessitates the pressure of criticism, which will serve as models of the procedure for acquiring adequate understanding of the concept, in accordance with the dialectic in the method of hypothesis.⁸

It is, perhaps, apposite to mention here that Kenneth Sayre has earlier on suggested that the *Theaetetus* is an appropriate dialogue suitable for the application of the method of hypothesis in matters of philosophic argumentation (Sayre, 1969: 232). The reason given is that *Theaetetus* contains laid down rules, which are the criteria to be followed for an acceptable definition of knowledge to be achieved (*Theaetetus*, 152c). His contribution hints at the relevance of argument from hypothesis that is considered a probable solution to the problem of inability to arrive at an acceptable definition of knowledge in *Theaetetus*. By this, he reiterates the benefits derivable from adopting the method of hypothesis.

Dorter (1990: 350), in the remainder of his argument, makes allusion to *anamnesis* in the *Meno* and allegories of divided line and that of the cave in the *Republic* to establish his claim. He says that the case of the judicial proceedings discussed in the *Theaetetus* to refute the second definition is associated with testimony. Testimony raises a pointer to the role of the mind. "Memory [is] a metaphor for latent component to knowledge furnished not by the senses but by the mind itself" (Dorter, 1990: 350). Memory, no doubt, plays a significant role in knowledge acquisition. It is the link between the present stock of knowledge and the one the individual acquired in his/her prenatal world. This means there cannot be recollection without prior knowledge. It is in this sense that "recollection is pictured as an intellectual "seeing" of Forms" (Dorter, 1990: 350). Given that the theory of Forms is suggested in *Theaetetus* as argued, why did, for instance, the third definition fail?

Dorter relies on recollection to drive home his point from two perspectives. The first one is the encounter between Socrates, Theodorus and Theaetetus, where Theaetetus is introduced to Socrates. At that point, recollection, as contained in the *Meno* and *anamnesis perse*, is not meant. Knowledge by acquaintance, which cannot be relied upon as arguing for the presence of Forms in the *Theaetetus*, is intended there. The second perspective is reference to *Meno*. He should have identified the elements of the Forms without referring to some other dialogues. What is to be said here is simply that the theory of Forms is not explicitly, and is not intended to be, discussed as a subject-matter in the *Theaetetus*.

⁸ This method of hypothesis is best understood in the *Phaedo*. Nevertheless, for his interpretation of the method of hypothesis, see Kenneth Dorter, *Plato's Phaedo: An Interpretation*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 127-138.

There obtains, in some dialogues, suggestions regarding theory of Forms. It will be difficult to argue for such, if it has not been established elsewhere, and prior to the dialogue (*Theaetetus*). What is meant here is that there cannot be proof for the presence of the theory of Forms in isolation without making reference to preceding dialogues with the theory (Verde, 2024: 67-81).

In addition, if Dorter's attempt at discussing the theory, as contained in the *Theaetetus* without making reference to dialogues preceding it, where the elements of the theory of Forms occur, it may be seen or considered as straw-man. This is because he would have conjured what Plato has not said as words of Plato to make points. Again, not making reference to the previous dialogues denies them the opportunity of sharing in the Unitarian perspective. This is because the core of Unitarianism is the ability to thematically relate the dialogues one to another, and where possible, synchronise them.⁹

A possible objection that may be raised against Dorter is his allusion to hypothesis. He makes mention of this concept without linking it with anything. This means that it is not hinged on anything, instead it remains dangling. One will expect that he discusses this in relation to some other dialogues that have the method of hypothesis, like the *Phaedo*, though, the *Phaedo*, as it has been argued and shown elsewhere (Adésuyi, 2023: 91-92), comes after *Theaetetus*. Its position does not matter vis-à-vis the dialogue being discussed. All that needs to be done is to make a case for an issue as important as the method of hypothesis.

3.2 Presupposition of the theory of Forms

J. T. Bedu-Addo (1985: 301-311) concentrates on a section in the second definition and thus makes his position a categorical one that the theory of Forms is present in the *Theaetetus*. He notes that, although, there is nowhere in the entire dialogue where the theory of Forms is mentioned, nevertheless, that the theory is neither mentioned nor discussed does not translate to its being absent (Bedu-Addo, 1985: 301). Bedu-Addo argues that Plato's rejection of the thesis (definition of knowledge) is "on the ground that sensible objects are not sort of objects of which one could have knowledge; for knowledge is the achievement of the mind operating independently of the senses" (Bedu-Addo, 1985: 301). The reason adduced is that the argument is not on the distinction between sensible and intelligible worlds or objects, but rather on the distinction between sensation and judgment. Bedu-Addo's response to this is that Plato does not invoke the theory of Forms at any stage in the enquiry into the nature of knowledge. However, the arguments which Plato deploys to refute the second definition, and of course, the two other definitions of knowledge in the *Theaetetus* presuppose the theory of Forms (Bedu-Addo, 1985: 302).

Bedu-Addo's reliance on the second definition to argue for the theory of Forms in the *Theaetetus* is questionable. It should be noted that while he hinges his argument on the fact that Plato's *Theaetetus* contains the theory of Forms, there is nowhere in the dialogue where the theory is mentioned. To argue for this, he relies on the second definition. His reliance on the second definition calls for interrogation. Of the three suggested definitions, the obvious one that truly centres on mundane happenings is the second definition. The second definition says that knowledge is true judgement/belief (*Theaetetus*, 187b), which is, thereafter, refuted. Its refutation, given Bedu-Addo's view, is that the argument is on the distinction between sensation and judgement (Bedu-Addo, 1985: 302).

⁹ This is a recurrent feature in the arguments of the Unitarians. Any attempt to exclude the dialogues that establish the existence of the Forms is like deliberately expunging the important elements which will automatically render the entire argument useless. For more on this, see M. McCoy, *Plato on the Rhetoric of Philosophers and Sophists*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

The capability of sensible objects to supply knowledge or to serve as the basis of knowledge is challenged in the first definition, but not the second. What is done in the second definition is to reiterate the thesis of the first definition. Again, it is to argue that popular opinion, no matter how true they are, cannot translate to knowledge. In fact, individual consciousness, most times, does not amount to knowledge. This is the point being made with the illustration of the Jury and instance of testimony being alluded to in order that the second definition be refuted. Given this, one can even argue that there is no reference to the theory of Forms.

Timothy Chappell (2005) adopts what he calls a “new translation of the whole of the *Theaetetus*” (Chappell, 2005: 9). His view is that the ideas presented in the dialogue are not Plato’s ideas; they are those of Socrates. This assertion of his may be interpreted to mean that he argues for the absence of the forms in the dialogue. Far from this, his claim is that the theory of Forms is evident in Plato’s *Theaetetus*.

Chappell (2005) intends to show that the arguments of those who make case for the absence of the theory are untenable. For instance, it is his opinion that when knowledge is to be defined in any sphere of life, Plato’s definition of the concept will be important since, he (Plato) is not concerned with the sources of knowledge as presented in the *Theaetetus*. What is important is for an acceptable knowledge definition to be gotten. He says “Plato would add that it is a waste of time trying to decide where knowledge comes from, or when knowledge-claims are justified, unless we already know what knowledge is” (Chappell, 2005: 12). This means one should not focus on the objects through which knowledge is sourced, which is attributed to sensation. This is because it is transient; hence their unstable nature is equally evident. For this, no acceptable definition can be gotten. Focus should be on what knowledge is. The definition should be one that does not rely on, and not sourced from, unceasingly changing objects. Chappell means here that Plato has already diverted attention from objects of the sensible and phenomenal world itself to the intelligible world, where there exists permanence.

Chappell’s analysis has, at least, one target. It is an attempt to show that empirical requirements, which the first definition suggests in the *Theaetetus*, as shown in the dialogue (*Theaetetus*, 151e), cannot give a satisfactory definition of knowledge, as experience itself does not avail us with the definition, given that experience itself is within the sensible world. While it may not be argued that sense experience, as source of knowledge, is not relevant, it is not the case that its relevance serves as a solution to the definitional problem of knowledge. It can be inferred that since the failure and total rejection of the definition is because it relies on sensation, there is the need to move away from the sensible world, and search for an acceptable definition in the intelligible world, where intellection is the target and where the Forms reside. It is on this ground that Chappell (2005: 51) argues for the presence of the forms in Plato’s *Theaetetus*. It, therefore, implies that because the theory of Forms is intended in the *Theaetetus* but not clearly deployed, the definitions so suggested are bound to fail.

Chappell’s most important contribution is interpreting, in details, the idea that the whole of the *Theaetetus* is nothing other than an extended proof of the difficulties of empiricism (Chappell, 2005: 51). However, his assertion that Plato’s basic argument, that the empiricist has no way to explain how semantic contents are got out of sense-data as implicit lesson of the *Theaetetus* (Chappell, 2005: 51), is untenable. It may be argued that as far as Heraclitean world is concerned, there may not be standard concept or unchanging proposition about objects of the phenomenal world. Nevertheless, it is also to be noted that this is neither the theme nor the focus of *Theaetetus*. If any definition is to be referenced, then, it should be the third definition – knowledge is true belief with *logos* (an account). This is because it is in this that linguistic analysis is attempted. However, the third definition analysed using a seemingly linguistic tool to buttress the point has nothing to do with the fact that semantic contents are gotten out of sense-data.

Chappell (2005: 161) argues in line with this to identify the loopholes of the definitions suggested and rejected in the dialogue. It is obvious that the first definition is rejected on the basis of the unceasing changing characters of the objects of the phenomenal world. However, against Protagoras and Heraclitus, Protagoras statement is subjective; hence, it is self-defeating. The self-defeatism is as a result of its reliance on sensible world (Chappell, 2005: 161). Change is a constant feature for the empiricist; hence, Heraclitus constant flux makes it difficult for perception to give an acceptable definition of knowledge. What is noted here is that in all, meanings in the describable phenomenal world are ultimately transient.

A critical look at J. M. Rist's analysis and argument show that he argues for the presence of the theory of Forms in Plato's *Theaetetus* (Rist, 1975: 336-357). This observation is premised on the analysis of some of Plato's dialogues as done by Rist. He follows R. E. Allen (1970) to argue for the presence of the theory of Forms in the *Theaetetus*. Allen has identified the theory of Forms in some earlier theories (1970: 121). Hence, he opines that earlier dialogues differ in their exposition and discussion of the theory of Forms from the latter dialogues. This is, of course, expected because Socrates' definitions are more elementary than concepts from *anamnesis*, the allegories, or argument from hypothesis.

Rist, examining the theory of Forms in many of the dialogues of Plato, opines that the theory could not have been present in some dialogues and absent in some other dialogues (Rist, 1975: 340). In his argument, there is an important concept that is associated with theory of Forms, and which is common to all the dialogues. Wherever, the theory of Forms is either discussed or intended, such is done directly or indirectly. This concept is an idea that is always and closely associated with the theory of Forms. This implies that they are like two sides of a coin, wherever one is found, the other, if and when sought for, will be found. Each of the dialogues contains an idea that becomes topical issue. To discuss such topical issue, there is the need for the theory of Forms to be assumed. Such an idea is explainable in the light of the theory of Forms. Since each dialogue contains an idea, therefore, each dialogue implies the theory of Forms (Rist, 1975: 339-340).

Rist (1975: 337) adopts the analysis of "the holy" as espoused in the *Euthyphro* (*Euthyphro*, 6d). By doing this, what is to be done is to show the inseparable relationship between the concept, 'idea', and 'the holy' inherent in the theory of Forms (Rist, 1975: 337). "The holy" is not subject of discourse, but the implication that can be drawn from this, which is that genuine goodness is unity; piety is goodness, unified in the form of goodness. Nevertheless, it can be argued that if knowledge is goodness, then, all virtues, such as piety, will be part of goodness. There, the intellectual effort to determine the relation between piety and goodness, invariably discusses goodness as the supreme form. So, holy or piety is still a subject of discussion.

One may then assume that the argument is not tenable, since Rist has not made reference to the *Theaetetus* specifically. It is expected of him to have specifically mentioned *Theaetetus*, as finding the theory of Forms in it. In other words, it may be the case that the argument may not be in support of the claim for the presence of the theory of Forms in the *Theaetetus*. This assumption will also not be correct. One of the premises is making use of universal instantiation, where it is said that "each of the dialogues contains an idea that becomes a topical issue" (Rist, 1975: 339). In addition, the premise that follows makes case for necessity of theory of Forms. Each of the dialogues means that the *Theaetetus* is included. This is heavily relied upon. This means, necessarily, there is the presence of the Theory of forms in *Theaetetus*.

The above argument may be interpreted to mean that there is nothing to suggest that the theory of Forms is evident in the *Theaetetus*, since it is not mentioned (Farness, 1988: 27-46). To explain this further, it is correct to say that not mentioning it does not suggest that it is not intended. Again, the premise alluded to and conclusion gives support to the overall claim that the theory is implied in the *Theaetetus*. This argument is similar to Heinaman's argument for

communion of Forms, wherein he argues that each dialogue has an element of the theory of Forms (Heinaman, 1982-1983: 189-190).

Rist's argument also suggests that since, in any of the dialogues, where there is a concept to be defined, and definition is well structured as to invoke the relevance of forms, that is, what is intended is the theory of Forms. In other words, what is targeted is "ontological status" (Rist, 1975: 338) in conformity with the Forms. Here, the allegory of the sun is relevant. It can be inferred, thereof, relying on the application of his use of universal instantiation, that the *Theaetetus* is also meant. This inference is adopted relying on Rist's caution that one should not allow him/herself the privilege of interpreting any dialogue in isolation of other dialogues (Rist, 1975: 338). This is because he believes and argues thus that there are, at least, two dialogues of Plato that are contributions to a topical issue. For instance, *The Republic* and *Phaedo* are dialogues that discuss the theory of Forms. This is a Unitarian approach. The belief is that each of the dialogues contains an important ingredient of explanation that is evident in, and similarly found in, other dialogues.

Having considered the arguments of some Unitarians, although what is argued for is the presence of the theory of Forms, it is obvious that the theory is not explicit in the dialogues. What can be said about the dialogue is that allusion is made to the theory of Forms to see the reason why an acceptable definition of knowledge cannot be got in the *Theaetetus* without the intellectual aspiration for forms. I think all that is obvious in the *Theaetetus* is that the theory of Forms is hinted at. Therefore, the presence of the theory is not an actual presence, writ large, rather it is hinted at, or that allusion is made to it. The significance of the allusion is such that a reader of Plato, who already has in mind how architectonically important the theory of Forms is, in his ontology, bears in mind its application and how it is used to resolve and make amendments for inconsistencies encountered in the overall drive to understand Plato's philosophy. Where it is alluded to but the discussion ends in *aporia*, it suggests that if the theory properly applied, then, a positive end is possible.

4. Making case for the presence of the theory of Forms in *Theaetetus*

There are three points to make here. The first one is a case where absence of a thing can imply its presence. Here, intent is important. What is intended is to show that if it is absent, then, the goal of arriving at an acceptable definition becomes unachievable. The first two definitions suggested by *Theaetetus* do not qualify to be acceptable definitions of knowledge because they rely so much on the objects of the sensible world. The changing characters of the perceptual activities will also determine the propositions to express them. This means that changes in the perceptual activities will equally lead to changes in the propositions. The implication of this is that the absence of the theory of Forms as girding examplers renders the definitions unacceptable. This is a way to show that the theory of Forms is hinted at; for had it been fully operative, one of them would have been considered as acceptable. In other words, if it had been *present* in one of the two definitions, may be one would have been accepted. Its importance as validating principle is highlighted, even though absent.

The second point to note is where the theory of Forms is intended. This has been stated from the beginning of the dialogue. It is to direct the discussants as to what they should be looking for. There are two conditions to be met before an acceptable definition of knowledge can be got. Knowledge must always be of what is; it must be infallible (*Theaetetus*, 152c). These conditions apply to the constituents of the intelligible world, and not to those of the sensible world. It is only in the intelligible world, as postulated by Plato, that these conditions can be met. This implies that the theory of Forms is hinted at. The conditions are not of the sensible world. Again, this is another way of intending the theory of Forms. In other words, it is hinted at.

The third point is evident in the third definition – knowledge is true belief with *logos* (*Theaetetus*, 201d). This definition already suggests the theory of Forms. This is because *logos*, in some of its connotations in Greek language, refers to the workability of unhindered predicating reason. It is operable in the intelligible world where the forms exist, refer to the allegories of line/cave, but allegory of cave especially is not a phenomenon of the sensible world but that of the intelligible world. The definition is a pointer to the world of forms where true and undisputable definition can be apprehended after an arduous and difficult intellectual voyage. So, if the theory is not fully blown in the *Theaetetus*, allusion to it cannot be denied.

The above points are ways, I think, the Unitarians should argue instead of insisting on the presence of the forms. In other words, what is argued for here is that the presence of the theory of Forms is not fully manifested in the *Theaetetus*. A tenable position would be that it is sometimes hinted at. An instance is the beginning where Theaetetus gives examples as definition. The correction made at that point is to further point to the fact that a universally acceptable definition usually has some eternal and unchanging features (*Theaetetus*, 146d). Another instance has to do with the criteria agreed upon. Both agree to give a definition that will be error free and can remain unchanged irrespective of spacio-temporal condition (*Theaetetus*, 152c). Yet another instance is the third definition (*Theaetetus*, 201d-210d). At another point, it is alluded to, and to an extent, where the definitions fail due to its absence, what is intended would be that if it had been present, the definitions would, perhaps, not have failed.

The above expositions are highlighted because of the fact that knowledge is a phenomenon of the intelligible, at least, in Plato's understanding. Knowledge is a hierarchical ascent of the soul/mind by progressive questioning of presumed true hypothesis, till unassailable standard of truth is intellectually envisioned in *noesis*. The theory of Forms is present by the failure of the three definitions. This failure is a suggestion that the *Theaetetus* lacks the facility for the soul's ascent to knowledge. This facility is the argument from hypothesis, which is outlined and argued for in the *Phaedo* in which the operative idea is the immortality of the soul, which in Plato's system, is kin to the forms. This immortal intelligence, which is the subject of knowledge, is referred to by Plato as kin of the Forms.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of *Theaetetus* is not to show that any theory without the forms will automatically fail. Instead, it is to search for an acceptable knowledge definition that will be error free. In doing so, different reasons have been given as to why the interlocutors could not arrive at that. For instance, many Revisionists, pretentiously, argue that the theory of Forms is not present in *Theaetetus*. This is because it cannot be found in the sensible world. *Theaetetus* shows essentially that knowledge definition is not achievable in the phenomenal world. This world displays a basic feature of unceasing change (Adésuyi, 2022: 108-127). For them, this is a tangible reason for the failure of the interlocutors to arrive at an acceptable knowledge definition.

It should be noted that the Unitarians, who have argued for the presence of forms in the *Theaetetus*, as shown in this paper, have only done that, partly because of their belief that the theory is very important in Plato's philosophical world. Many of them have not been able to reconcile their perception of the presence of Forms in *Theaetetus* to the failure of the definition or the inability of the interlocutors to arrive at an acceptable definition of knowledge. Whereas, their task should not be limited to mere establishing the presence alone, it should also include the link between the presence of the theory and the apparent failure of the definition in the *Theaetetus*.

What is obvious is that the theory is not as apparent as Unitarians would want readers to admit. At best, what can be argued is that it is hinted at, and not that it is there for everyone to see. Only this position, for me, is tenable. In other words, while one cannot discard the fact that it

is present, as argued by Unitarians, such presence is not apparently evident. It is known by drawing implications from their analyses and arguments as presented in the dialogue.

The conditions agreed upon by, especially Socrates and Theaetetus, from the beginning of the dialogue are extracts from the intelligible world where the conditions are stated thus: “it is always of something that is, and as being knowledge, it is infallible” (*Theaetetus*, 152c). The features of the conditions are those of the unchanging perfect world, such as *noesis* in the intelligible world. Here, the theory is hinted as a guide; hence, presence is implied.

One possible reason for this is the hint given in the last definition, which is the introduction of *logos*. Introduction of *logos*, as done in the last definition, is a suggestion that an acceptable definition cannot be arrived at in *Theaetetus*. This is due to the fact that all analyses are premised on sensible world. Following Plato’s philosophy, the *logos* envisaged is not a phenomenon of the sensible world. The *Republic* has hinted in the Allegory of the cave that *logos* can be found at *noesis* (*Republic*, 596a). If that is the case, its introduction in the third definition is apparently suggesting that the definition should be sought where it belongs. This, again, may be responsible for the inability of Theaetetus to reason beyond the sensible world. It is difficult for him to understand *logos* even when he claims he has heard people discussing knowledge informally and *logos* being mentioned (*Theaetetus*, 201d).

In conclusion, while this paper agrees with Unitarians that the theory of Forms is present in the *Theaetetus*, it differs on the mode of such presence. It must be maintained that in the entire dialogue, there is no particular section dedicated to treatment of the theory of Forms. This, nevertheless, does not imply that it is totally absent. Hence, by ‘presence’ here, it means any of the following; hint, link, allusion, suggestion to the Forms as guarantors of essence, validity, truth and objectivity in Plato. While it may not be argued that the theory of Forms is evidently present in the *Theaetetus*, it is equally difficult to out-rightly deny allusions to it in the dialogue. By presence here, therefore, it does not mean it is evidently present; rather there are instances of allusion, link, hint, suggestions and resemblances.

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A Critical Assessment of John Locke's Theory of Private Property

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical assessment of John Locke's theory of private property. It argues that Locke's foundational provisos for property acquisition against spoilage, the sufficiency condition, and the labor limitation are rendered ineffective by the advent of a monetary economy and the acceptance of wage labor. The analysis further contends that Locke's framework leads to undemocratic principles by excluding non-property owners from political participation, overlooks the plight of the physically challenged, and fails to adequately protect the right to self-preservation for all. Through critiques of the boundary problem, utility maximization, and environmental consequences, the paper concludes that Locke's justification for private property is fundamentally flawed and ultimately rejected.

Keywords: property theory, private property, class structure, exploitation, land scarcity.

1. Introduction

This paper critically examines Locke's view on property rights and explores whether the theory conveys a clear message on the subject. It questions the validity of Locke's provisos for property acquisition, as each restriction seems to have its drawbacks. Additionally, Locke's emphasis on labor as a basis for property ownership overlooks the physically challenged, leading to issues of unfairness. The theory's implication of inheritance and class structure favors property owners, resulting in an undemocratic system where only property owners could vote in Locke's time. For non-property owners, joining such a society offers little protection for their rights, raising doubts about the purpose of forming a social contract according to Locke's perspective.

2. Effects of the financial economy over provisos

John Locke's property theory's interaction with the financial economy raises concerns about how economic systems impact the application of Locke's principles. The financial economy's complexities can lead to unequal resource distribution, potentially challenging Locke's provisos and prompting discussions on fair property acquisition in today's context. John Lock stated the following that:

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When money is introduced as a medium of exchange, markets and commerce rise above the level of barter. Due to its long lifespan and mutual introduction into society, money can be used to exchange other perishable goods.¹

In other words, when money is introduced as a medium of exchange, it revolutionizes markets and commerce by transcending the limitations of barter. Its enduring presence in society allows for the seamless exchange of various perishable goods and services, making trade more efficient and accessible. Money becomes the universal facilitator, fostering economic growth and enabling individuals to participate in transactions that were previously hindered by the challenges of direct exchange. As a result, societies are empowered to develop complex economies and interdependent networks, shaping the course of human civilization through its indispensable role in facilitating trade and economic activities.

Due to the nature of money, the provisions against spoilage, sufficiency, and enough and as goods are all ineffective. First off, once a monetary economy is established, the spoilage restriction is no longer valid. Because money never goes bad, it is legal to gather resources to trade them for other goods and services. It's important to keep in mind that, according to Lockean theory;

...the justification for appropriation that exceeds legal limits does not rest on the largeness of the possessions, but rather on the spoiling of the commodities before their use...²

Based on this, it can be inferred that the spoilage restriction's effectiveness was constrained even before the creation of the monetary economy. In the barter-based indigenous economy, people could still keep what they wanted as long as the goods they bought did not go bad. For instance, in the native economy, one may trade long-lasting nuts for potatoes. As a result, in both the local economy and the monetary system, the spoilage proviso is invalid. Therefore, Locke's inability to see this glaring flaw in the spoiling restriction leads me to wonder if Locke truly wanted to restrict the acquisition of property. In light of this, one can conclude that the right to self-preservation is threatened by the expropriation of property. The results of the economy based on money also help to overcome the limitation of sufficiency.

The sufficiency limitation, also known as the "enough as good limitation," states that:

...when purchasing property for the first time, a buyer must purchase the minimum amount required for his preservation and at least where there is enough and as good left in common for others...³.

In other words, when purchasing property for the first time, the buyer should acquire the minimum amount needed for their use and leave enough in common for others' access and preservation. This fosters sustainable property ownership and equitable resource distribution.

Locke also is of the opinion that the introduction of the monetary system is the result of consent. As a result, accepting the use of money logically implies accepting its effects, which in this case include the limitless accumulation of wealth. This is why C. B. Macpherson concludes that:

¹ Locke, J. (1980). *Second treatise of government*. (C. B. Macpherson, Ed.). Hackett Publishing Company. (Original work published 1690).

² Mary Johnson, "Property Rights and Land Use: A Study of Lockean Theory," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (2021) P 78.

³ Locke, J. (1980). *Second treatise of government*. (C. B. Macpherson, Ed.). Hackett Publishing Company. (Original work published 1690) p. 354.

...in these circumstances, even if “enough and as good” is not left for others, one can legally appropriate land because it was agreed upon as a tacit consent together with the express permission of the monetary economy...⁴

In other words, in such circumstances, the argument suggests that despite the principle of leaving “enough and as good” land for others, it might be legally justifiable to appropriate land without adhering to this principle. This justification arises from the notion that tacit consent, coupled with explicit permission within the framework of a monetary economy, grants legitimacy to such actions. In other words, the acceptance of a prevailing economic system and the absence of active opposition might be considered as implicit agreement to the appropriation of land, even if it contradicts the ideal of equitable distribution. This perspective explores the interplay between legal norms, economic factors, and social consent in shaping property rights and ownership dynamics.

As a result, the sacredness of each person’s right to self-preservation, which they had before the civil government was established, is also in danger. The monetary economy also dilutes and eliminates the implicit labor constraint. The only undeniable property that an individual is permitted to own under this limitation or restriction is the natural resources that he has improved through his labor. In essence, the amount of power a person possesses within his or her own body determines the amount of property that person would receive. This relates to Locke’s claim that: “...no man’s labor can usurp all of it or consume less than what is necessary for his enjoyment...”⁵

However, the introduction of money removes this restriction because it allows people to purchase others’ labor to acquire more property. This is possible because money has a strong exchange value in the market economy. The sufficiency restriction, which is based on the labor one must use, still does not hold even in the absence of the introduction of money. C.B. Macpherson asserts that; “...Locke legalizes the servant system in connection to the state of abundant resources, making his creations the master’s property...”⁶ In other words, in his analysis, C. B. Macpherson argues that John Locke’s philosophy justifies the existence of the servant system by linking it to the availability of abundant resources. In Macpherson’s opinion, Locke’s ideas essentially grant property rights over individuals, considering them as “creations” of their masters. This perspective allows the master to assert ownership and control over their servants, given the prevailing conditions of plentiful resources. Macpherson’s interpretation highlights how Locke’s concept of property rights can lead to the legitimization of social hierarchies and unequal power dynamics within societies where resources are perceived as plentiful and easily accessible.

It’s also important to note that Locke does not provide any evidence for the logic that would make the labor of the servants the master’s property. Particularly in that state where resources are still open to unilateral appropriation, this problem is extremely complex. As a result, the servant system that characterizes the indigenous economy and is further maintained in the monetary economy allows for the legitimate holding of rich resources beyond what man’s labor would yield. Fundamentally, unrestricted limitless appropriation threatens the right to self-preservation.

⁴ Macpherson, C. B. (1962). *The political theory of possessive individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. Oxford University Press, p. 300.

⁵ Locke, J. (1980). *Second treatise of government*. (C. B. Macpherson, Ed.). Hackett Publishing Company. (Original work published 1690), p. 292.

⁶ Macpherson, C. B. (1962). *The political theory of possessive individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. Oxford University Press.

3. Effect of scarcity of land to a quality of life

A scarcity of land will impinge upon the welfare of those who lack landed property of their own. Firstly, it will circumscribe their autonomy by denying them the ability to exercise their right to self-preservation independently of the employment provided by the land-owning class. Elizabeth Ashford notes that: "...such constraints on their agency erode the welfare of the landless since autonomy itself is an innate component of an agent's well-being..."⁷

In other words, according to Elizabeth Ashford, the limitations imposed on the agency of the landless have a detrimental impact on their overall welfare. This is because autonomy, the ability to make independent choices and decisions, is an inherent element of an individual's well-being. When people are deprived of their autonomy, their capacity to lead fulfilling lives is compromised. The inability to exercise agency can lead to disempowerment, reduced opportunities, and restricted access to essential resources, all of which contribute to a decline in their overall well-being. As a result, addressing and mitigating these constraints becomes crucial in ensuring a more equitable and inclusive society that values the rights and dignity of all its members.

Furthermore, the restriction of their autonomy also depletes the quality of life that is available to the landless. As Sreenivasan points out:

Prior to the privatization of previously communal land, all individuals enjoyed the full benefits of their labor, allowing for surplus production and unrestricted potential in achieving their standard of living. However, when landless individuals are compelled to work for landowners, their employers are only obligated to provide the minimum sustenance as dictated by the sufficiency condition.⁸

In other words, before the privatization of once communal land, individuals enjoyed the full fruits of their labor, resulting in surplus production and unrestricted possibilities for their standard of living. This allowed them to attain a better quality of life without external constraints. However, the situation changes for the landless when they find themselves with no option but to toil for landowners. In such circumstances, their employers are merely obligated to provide the minimum sustenance necessary as dictated by the sufficiency condition. As a consequence, the landless individuals' autonomy and ability to improve their well-being are curtailed, highlighting the impact of land appropriation on the distribution of resources and economic power dynamics.

For example, In Indonesia, a distressing phenomenon emerges when displaced rural dwellers are left with no viable alternatives but to toil for agricultural corporations after these organizations have acquired supposedly 'underutilized' common land. This land appropriation restricts the landless peasants from selling their produce to other potential buyers, leaving them with no choice but to depend on their new landlords. Trapped in this unequal power dynamic, these marginalized workers receive meager remuneration, often facing attempts by their employers to pay them as little as possible. Consequently, the loss of personal autonomy becomes evident, as these individuals have little control over their economic circumstances. This unfortunate situation leads to a significant erosion in their overall well-being and highlights the challenging effects of land grabs and corporate control on the livelihoods of vulnerable populations. As Li, Tania Murray notes:

This link between the diminution of personal autonomy and an ensuing erosion in individual welfare can be observed in Indonesia where displaced rural dwellers find themselves left with no alternative but to labor for agricultural corporations after

⁷ Elizabeth Ashford, "The Basic Duties Imposed by the Human Rights to Necessities." In Pogge T. (ed.) *Freedom from Poverty as a Human Right: Who Owes What to the Very Poor?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) P 187.

⁸ Gopel Sreenivasan, (1995) *Lockean Property Rights*, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press), P 114.

these organizations have acquired purportedly “underutilized” common land. Barred from selling their produce to other potential buyers, these landless peasants receive a meager rate of remuneration from their new landlords who often attempt to pay them as little as possible.⁹

From this example, it can be inferred that the Lockean paradigm may sometimes result in vulnerable agents becoming susceptible to rapacious exploitation by the wealthy whenever they seek to exercise their right to self-preservation. It is irrefutable then the Lockean rationalization for private property may undermine the agency of individual agents in ways that are inimical to their quality of life.

4. Effect of maximizing agricultural productivity on the right to self-preservation

Additionally, there is also the fact that Locke’s prioritization of maximizing agricultural productivity has the potential to imperil the right to preservation where certain agents are concerned. Locke encourages the appropriation of common land on the assumption that bringing more soil under cultivation, thereby promotes collective human welfare. However, a focus on maximizing agricultural productivity may result in widespread environmental degradation. This has reality been observed by Elinor Ostrom who relates how extensive deforestation has taken place in Brazil on account of clearing operations undertaken by commercial farmers who wish to satisfy the consumer demand from global commodity markets. She asserts the following under a sub topic “What Have We Learned Since 1987?”:

...While many environmental and social problems are worse today than two decades ago, the authors of the WCED report should be congratulated for stimulating an essential dialogue among scholars, public officials, nongovernmental organizations, and citizens about strategies for achieving sustainable development.¹⁰

In other words, that the WCED report’s authors deserve commendation for initiating a vital dialogue among scholars, public officials, non-governmental organizations, and citizens, even though numerous environmental and social issues have worsened in the past two decades. Their efforts have stimulated meaningful discussions about effective strategies to achieve sustainable development. By bringing together diverse stakeholders, the report has fostered an environment of collaboration and awareness, where ideas and solutions can be shared and refined to tackle the complex challenges we face today. While acknowledging the persisting problems, the report’s impact lies in its ability to mobilize collective action and pave the way for a more sustainable and equitable future.

Such deforestation process explained before the quotation from Elinor, turn discharges substantial amounts of carbon into the atmosphere, thus exacerbating the insidious phenomena of climate change. This is objectionable since studies have demonstrated that climate change will result in altered weather patterns that will imperil the livelihoods of marginal agricultural producers in already impoverished nations such as Ethiopia even impoverishing nation as Nigeria.¹¹

⁹ Tania Murray Li. *After the Land Grab: Infrastructural Violence and the 'Mafia System' in Indonesia's Oil Palm Plantation Zones*. (London: Geoforum 96, 2018) P 330.

¹⁰ Elinor Ostrom. "The Challenge of Common-Pool Resources.", *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, Vol. 50, No. 4, 2008, P 16.

¹¹ H Yohannes, (2016) "A Review on the Relationship between Climate Change and Agriculture." *J Earth Sci Clim Change*, Volume 7, Issue 2, P 2.

The Lockean paradigm, which encourages the appropriation and cultivation of common land, presents a concerning consequence as it has the potential to jeopardize the rights of other individuals to sustain themselves. When one party claims exclusive ownership of formerly shared resources, it restricts access and usage for others who might have depended on those lands for their livelihoods or well-being. This creates an imbalance in resource distribution and raises ethical questions about the equitable allocation of essential resources within a community. As a result, the promotion of private property rights, while emphasizing personal gain, must be carefully balanced with considerations for the collective welfare and the preservation of opportunities for all members of society.

5. Effect of utility maximization

There is Effect of Utility Maximization on the restrictions or the provisos, even if the enough and as good proviso or restrictions was to withstand the just leveled criticisms and retain its place, still it would be overcome by the implicit utility maximization argument which Locke employs. In the forgoing discussion, it has been demonstrated that private ownership adds value to natural commodities. For instance, Locke points that:

Land that is left wholly to nature that has no improvement of pasturage, tillage, or planting, is called waste; and we find the benefit of it amount to little more than nothing.¹²

From this statement, it shows that Locke prefers the private ownership of land even in large quantities, because the laboring employed on that land increases its utility, with an assumption that the surplus will be distributed. Therefore, when the results of appropriation beyond limit are considered by the fundamental test (provision for all necessities for others), rather than by instrumental test (availability of enough land for them to get the necessities of their life), appropriation will acquire a positive virtue.

However, one need not to be excited by the increase in produce which results from unlimited appropriation, unless those abundant resources will be given freely, otherwise the right to self-preservation is curtailed. Obviously free distribution is not the case. Those with abundant resources would like to sell for a profit. This, consequently, is tantamount to invading other's right to self-preservation because had it been there was limited acquisition, and the surplus was left, individuals would have acquired land to labor on their own, rather than relying on buying from others.

Moreover, Locke's Utilitarian justification of private property which also takes the form of Economic Analysis of Law (EAL) is questioned by Robert Nozick. The Economic Analysis of Law holds that: "...a change is justified if the gains of those who benefit are sufficient to compensate for the losses of those who suffer..."¹³. According to the Economic Analysis of Law, a change is considered justified if the benefits experienced by those who gain from it are substantial enough to compensate for the losses endured by those who suffer due to the change. This approach focuses on the principle of efficiency, aiming to optimize outcomes by evaluating the overall net gains to society. It recognizes that some may be negatively affected by certain changes, but as long as the benefits to others outweigh these losses, the change is deemed economically justifiable. This perspective emphasizes the importance of balancing the interests of various stakeholders and ensuring that policy decisions result in positive societal outcomes.

¹² Locke, J. (1980). *Second treatise of government*. (C. B. Macpherson, Ed.). Hackett Publishing Company. (Original work published 1690), p. 292.

¹³ Waldron, J. (1988). *The right to private property*. Clarendon Press, p. 2.

In case of Locke's property theory, unlimited acquisition is justified on the basis that the laboring employed on the commodities of nature increases their utility. However, this argumentation shows that Locke was not serious in safeguarding the right to self-preservation,¹⁴ he rejects the utilitarian idea that some people's benefits can compensate for other peoples loses. He holds that: "...in such instances, where utility justifies unlimited appropriation, some people lose whilst others gain; no compensation occurs."¹⁵

In situations where utility justifies unlimited appropriation, there are winners and losers: some gain while others lose, and no compensation takes place. I find myself in agreement with this argumentation. The act of appropriation grants ownership, which in turn gives a person the right to exclude others from utilizing the appropriated resource. While ownership might increase the owner's freedom and potentially enhance overall social utility, it simultaneously restricts others from accessing and utilizing that same resource. This inherent conflict arises from the dual nature of ownership, wherein it benefits the owner while limiting the rights and opportunities of others. Thus, the recognition of this dynamic calls for a thoughtful consideration of the consequences and implications of unlimited appropriation to ensure a fair and balanced distribution of resources and opportunities within society.

6. The boundary problem

A frequently raised criticism of Locke's labor theory of property titles concerns what A. John Simon referred to as "the boundary problem." According to Simon:

Locke's mixing argument also faces what we can call "the boundary problem." It is not obvious that labor can ground a clear right to *anything* if it is not possible to specify the boundaries of what is acquired by labor. But exactly what does labor get mixed with when one labors on what is common? When I enclose and grow a field of corn, I seem to acquire property in the fence and the enclosed land. Yet I actually touch or work on only some of the enclosed land. The ground between the furrows and between the field and the fence seems not to have my labor mixed with it. Can others rightfully come and use (or cart away) what my labor is not mixed with?¹⁶

Locke's expiate argument on the mixing of labor as a basis for property rights. Locke explicate that, an individual who mixes his labor with a natural resource, such as land or water, gains the right to claim ownership over that resource. However, the "boundary problem" poses a challenge to this argument. The problem arises from the fact that it is not always clear where the boundary between what is acquired by labor and what remains not owned lies. For instance, when a person encloses and cultivates a field of corn, it may not be clear what exactly they have mixed their labor with, and what remains not owned.

It is essential to understand that labor does not mix with the natural resources uniformly. When a person cultivates a field, for instance, they may only touch or work on some parts of the enclosed land. The ground between the furrows and between the field and the fence remains untouched by labor. This raises the question of whether the individual can claim ownership over the entire enclosed land, including the parts where they did not mix their labor. The boundary problem also raises the question of what happens to the resources that the individual did not mix their labor with. Can others rightfully use or cart them away? Locke's theory does not provide a clear answer to this question, leaving it open to interpretation. The boundary

¹⁴ Nozic, R, (1947) *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, (Oxford: Blackwell) P 33.

¹⁵ Gibbard, A. (2002). Natural property rights. In G. W. Smith (Ed.), *Critical concepts in political theory* (Vol. 2, pp.204). Routledge.

¹⁶ John Simons, (1992) *The Lockean Theory of Right*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press) P. 262.

problem poses a significant challenge to Locke's theory of mixing labor as a basis for property rights. While labor can be seen as a justifiable basis for claiming ownership over natural resources, it is not always clear what exactly one has mixed their labor with, and what remains not owned. This ambiguity creates a gray area where conflicts over property rights can arise.

7. Locke's theory of property is associated with undemocratic principles

John Locke's theory of property and the role of government is based on the idea that individuals have natural rights to life, liberty, and property. In his view,

Every man has a property in his own person. This nobody has any right to but himself. The labor of his body and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his.¹⁷

In other words, individuals have the right to acquire and own property through their labor, and the government's role is to protect these rights. However, Locke's theory of property is also associated with undemocratic principles. During Locke's time, only property owners had the right to vote, and non-property owners were largely excluded from participating in the political process. This meant that people who did not own property had limited rights and were excluded from the decision-making process of society.

Locke's theory of property assumes that individuals willingly give up some of their natural rights to a government in exchange for protection of their remaining rights. However, if only property owners have the right to vote and participate in the political process, it makes no sense for non-property owners to join this society since their rights will not receive any protection. In this sense, Locke's theory of property can be seen as undemocratic, as it excludes a significant portion of the population from participating in the political process and having their voices heard. This exclusion creates a power imbalance between property owners and non-property owners and can lead to an unjust distribution of political power. So, while John Locke's theory of property and the role of government has contributed significantly to modern political thought, it is also associated with undemocratic principles. The exclusion of non-property owners from the political process can lead to an unjust distribution of power and undermines the principles of equality and fairness that underpin democratic societies.

8. The exclusion of the physically challenged in John Locke's theory of property based on labor

In Locke's view, the physical effort a person puts into something is what gives them the right to claim ownership over it. He asserts that: "the labor of his body and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his."¹⁸ In other words, individual's rightful ownership over something stems from the physical effort they invest in it. When a person puts in labor and work to improve or create something, they acquire a legitimate claim to own and possess it. This labor-based ownership concept reflects Locke's belief in natural rights and has significantly impacted discussions about property rights and the foundations of a just society.

However, Locke's theory ignores the fact that some individuals may be physically challenged and may not be able to work in the same way as others. Locke's emphasis on labor as the basis for property ownership overlooks the fact that some individuals may not be able to work

¹⁷ John Locke, (1980) *Second Treatise of Government*. (ed.) Macpherson C.B. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company) P 131.

¹⁸ John Locke, (1980) *Second Treatise of Government*. (ed.) Macpherson C.B. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company) P 131.

in the same way as others due to physical disabilities. This exclusion means that individuals who are physically challenged are unable to acquire and own property in the same way as others, which undermines the principles of equality and fairness that underpin a just society. Locke's theory of property fails to take into account the structural inequalities that exist in society. For example, individuals from certain socio-economic backgrounds may not have the same opportunities as others to acquire property through labor. This lack of access to property ownership can have significant implications for individuals' life chances and can perpetuate social inequality. So, Locke's theory of property, which places labor at the forefront, fails to account for the physical challenges some individuals face and overlooks the structural inequalities that exist in society. A more just and equitable theory of property should take into account the diverse needs and experiences of all individuals, including those who are physically challenged and those who face socio-economic barriers to property ownership.

9. Locke's theory of property is subject to fundamental questions about its validity

According to Nozick's objections to Locke's theory of property:

Why does mixing one's labor with something make one the owner of it? Perhaps because one owns one's labor, and so one comes to own a previously unowned thing that becomes permeated with what one owns. Ownership seeps over into the rest. But why isn't mixing what I own with what I don't own a way of losing what I own rather than a way of gaining what I don't? If I own a can of tomato juice and spill it in the sea so that its molecules (made radioactive, so I can check this) mingle evenly throughout the sea, do I thereby come to own the sea, or have I foolishly dissipated my tomato juice?¹⁹

John Locke's theory of property, which centers around the mixing of labor with natural resources, raises significant inquiries. The central question revolves around whether someone acquires ownership of an unowned resource by mixing their labor with it. According to Locke, labor mixing leads to ownership, as the labor becomes infused in the previously unowned resource. However, a crucial counterargument emerges: does mixing what one owns with what they don't own result in loss rather than gain? For instance, if tomato juice is spilled into the sea and its molecules disperse throughout, does this action grant ownership over the sea, or does it imply the dissipation of the tomato juice? This scenario challenges Locke's property theory, suggesting that mixing something owned with something unowned doesn't necessarily lead to ownership of the latter. Instead, it may result in the loss of what one already owns. Consequently, Locke's theory encounters fundamental questions about its validity. The example of the tomato juice scenario underscores the limitations of this theory, revealing that its application may not universally apply. The relevance and applicability of Locke's theory of property are contingent on the specific context in which it is employed.

10. Conclusion

The paper critically assesses Locke's theory of property and presents objections against his arguments supporting private property. These objections address inconsistencies in his provisos concerning property acquisition influenced by the financial economy and the negative impact of land appropriation on some individuals. Additionally, the theory fails to acknowledge how appropriation by certain agents may endanger others' rights to self-preservation. As a result, Locke's justification of private property is rejected.

¹⁹ Nozic, R. (1974). *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, (Oxford: Blackwell) P 175.

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Epistemology as a Theory of Justification: A Critical Analysis of John Kekes' Project

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Abstract

There are a lot of issues that we need to provide solutions to in Epistemology as a branch of philosophy. In contemporary philosophy there are issues that demands answers such as the nature and theories of epistemic justification, the basal input of doubt about knowledge claim its possibility and implausibility (skepticism), the issues of perception in epistemology, should epistemic justification be internal or external among others. In recent trends in the development of epistemology is the philosophical debate on reasoning, epistemic judgement, a priori, posteriori, introspection, memory and so on. These issues are vital to epistemologist and many scholars have responded to it. Among this epistemologist is John Kekes, a renowned scholar in contemporary epistemological discourse. This paper is a look into Kekes view on these issues and some of the philosophical issues in epistemology and then an appraisal of some of the problem he identified in contemporary epistemology is provided.

Keywords: skepticism, epistemic issues, foundationalism, fallibilism, rationality.

1. Introduction

Epistemology is generally known as the theory of knowledge. This label, Keke notes, has become inappropriate given the trends and issues discussed in contemporary epistemology. Hence, it is much more accurate to describe recent epistemology as the theory of justification. This shift from knowledge to justification arises from skepticism about the plausibility of achieving the kind of knowledge and certainty that epistemologists have traditionally believed is inherent in that knowledge. Kekes offered three philosophical discussions that are vital to epistemic justification, emphasizing the movement from knowledge to justification and the importance that proponents of such changes place on it.¹ The question is: Is there a way that skepticism can be refuted or countered? Can human belief have a secure foundation? What criteria are essential for justifying our beliefs? The requirement for answers to these questions is not problematic. The purpose of this paper is to critically assess Kekes' answers to these significant questions.

¹ Kekes, J. (1979). *The nature of philosophy*. Rowman and Littlefield.

2. Can human belief have secured foundation? Kekes assessment

Kekes provides two ways to understand and assess the problem of whether we can have a secure foundation for our knowledge claims. He offered the foundational perspective and the fallibilism perspective. Foundationalism is a theory of epistemic justification that tries to answer the question, 'How are some of our beliefs justified?' Epistemology aims to explain when our beliefs are justified. It should be noted that foundationalism as an epistemic theory is an attempt to solve the epistemic regress problem. To avoid regress, the foundationalist concluded that there must be a belief or a set of beliefs that does not need any justification and is not inferred from any other belief. Foundationalists call this set of beliefs "basic belief". Foundationalists aim to prevent the question of how a belief is justified from continuing indefinitely, known as the regress problem, by asserting that there must be at least one belief that is self-justified, referred to as a basic belief. This basic belief possesses unique features, including being infallible, incorrigible, and indubitable, and it is also considered self-justifying. On this basis, non-basic beliefs lack these basic requirements and therefore depend on the basic belief for their justification.²

Scholars who advocate for foundationalism perceive it differently; William P. Alston explains that foundationalism is best understood as the perspective that views knowledge as a structure supported by a foundation. This foundation gives support to the structure, although it does not require any support on its own.

According to him:

"Our justified belief form a structure, in that some beliefs (the foundations) are justified by something other than their relation to other justified beliefs; beliefs that are justified by their relation to other beliefs all depend for their justification on the foundation."³

The idea of the foundation also led the foundationalist to a dual nature of justification. There are, according to them, some beliefs that are self-justified. These self-justified beliefs are also referred to as beliefs that are directly or immediately justified. It should be noted that the concept of an inferential or non-inferential justified belief can only be understood when it is considered along the foundationalist point of view. How are our beliefs justified? Some philosophers have maintained that some beliefs are justified by the relationship they bear to other beliefs. Some are justified not by the relationship they bear to other beliefs, but by their own nature. Those beliefs that are justified by the relationship they bear to other beliefs are called "inferentially justified beliefs". Beliefs that are justified by their own nature are referred to as non-inferentially justified beliefs.

"I shall call a belief that is justified without being justified through the justification of other beliefs a non-inferentially justified belief. A belief that must be justified through the justification of other beliefs, I shall call an inferentially justified belief."⁴

Alston views foundationalism as the view that deals with how an epistemic argument against beliefs can be justified. According to him, foundationalism deals with the structure of beliefs by dividing them into foundations and the superstructure. Beliefs in the superstructure are justified via their relationship with those beliefs in the foundation. To understand the foundationalist thesis, it is important to explicate the concept of mediate and immediate justification. A belief is said to be mediately justified if it is justified through its relationship with

² Davidson, D. (1986). A coherence theory of truth and knowledge. In E. LePore (Ed.), *Truth and interpretation: Perspectives on the philosophy of Donald Davidson* (pp. 307-309). Blackwell

³ Alston, W. P. (1976). Two types of foundationalism. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 73(7), 165–185. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2025576>

⁴ Alston, W. P. (1976). Two types of foundationalism. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 73(7), 166. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2025576>

other beliefs. Such beliefs derive their status of being justified, most of the time, when they are inferred from other beliefs. However, a belief is immediately justified if it is established to be justified independently of its relationship with other beliefs.

For David Annis, foundationalist theory can be divided into two. The foundationalist thesis is, for him, the combination of self-justification and dependency criteria. The self-justification criteria concern those beliefs that are self-justified. The beliefs under this category do not need any other beliefs for their justification. The thesis of dependency, in Annis's opinion, are those beliefs that need the support of other beliefs for their justification. This is because they cannot be justified on their own. Just like Ann David's scholars who support this position are of the view that:

"A: Some statement have at least some degree of initial epistemic justification which is dependent of the justification they may derive from other statement.

B: All empirical statements must ultimately derive at least some of their epistemic justification from statements that are self-justified, that is, from statements, that satisfy thesis A".⁵

Annis contends that, for the foundationalist, the dependency relationship among beliefs is direct or linear. The linear model of justification is such that non-basic beliefs are justified by the basic beliefs that are self-justified. There are two categories of statements. Some are self-justified, or what foundationalists refer to as basic statements or beliefs, and there are non-basic beliefs that are inferentially justified. Foundationalists argue that the justification of the non-basic statements from the self-justified belief is essentially linear. This perspective emphasises a clear hierarchy within the belief system, where basic beliefs serve as the bedrock for all other convictions. Critics of foundationalism, however, contend that this model oversimplifies the complexities of belief justification, suggesting that relationships among beliefs often resemble a web rather than a straightforward line. Annis also said that:

"From the basic statement *P*, we derive or infer the non-basic statement *q* and from *q* we infer the further non-basic statement *r*. In this way, *r* derives its justification from *P* through the essentially linear relation of sequential derivation. Thesis (B) thus asserts that at least some of the justification of every empirical non basic statements must be derived in this linear way from basic statements: otherwise no basic statement would be justified".⁶

3. John Keke's assessment of foundationalism

On his quest to explain the foundational thesis, Kekes introduces two models of foundationalism: Cartesian foundationalism and Moorean foundationalism. Cartesian foundationalism is traceable to René Descartes in his book titled "Meditations". In this book, he tries to subject everything that he knows to the method of doubt. He argues that beliefs based on the senses are unreliable because the epistemic agent may be deceived by them. We have doubted claims of reasoning because an evil genius could have tricked us into believing them to be true. This radical scepticism leads Descartes to seek a foundation for knowledge that is indubitable. Ultimately, he arrives at the famous conclusion, "Cogito, ergo sum," or "I think, therefore I am," which serves as the cornerstone of his philosophical system. In the final concept of his work, Descartes came out with his famous quote, "Cogito ergo sum." What is popularly translated as "I

⁵ Annis, D. B. (1978). A contextualist theory of epistemic justification. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 15(3), 215.

⁶ Annis, D. B. (1978). A contextualist theory of epistemic justification. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 15(3), 218.

think, therefore I exist” serves as the only form of knowledge that serves as the foundation. Because of the foregoing, Descartes can be considered a foundationalist.⁷ For him, basic propositions are sincere, first-person present-tense reports of perceptual experience. It is said that such views are devoid of errors and are basically incorrigible. This belief is because there is no mediating agency between the epistemic subject and the object of perception. This perspective underscores the certainty of self-awareness and challenges traditional notions of knowledge that rely on external validation. By asserting the indubitable nature of one's own thoughts and perceptions, Descartes sets the stage for modern epistemology and the ongoing debate about the relationship between the observer and the observed.

For Moorean foundationalism, basic propositions are made up of readily observable public facts, which are referred to as common-sense beliefs. The basic propositions of Moorean foundationalism are also incorrigible, but unlike those of Cartesian foundationalism, they are not fallible. For Mooreans, incorrigibility means that basic propositions are incorrigible not because they are infallible but because it is logically impossible to amend them.⁸ While noting the difference between Cartesians and Mooreans, Kekes observes that basic propositions to the Cartesians report private psychological states, while for the Mooreans, basic propositions report common sense beliefs which are universally and compulsively held by human beings. From the above, it can be deduced that Kekes has a clear and positive view of Moorean foundationalism because basic propositions are the final courts of appeal and do not provide infallible knowledge. This perspective highlights the value of shared beliefs in grounding knowledge, suggesting that communal consensus can serve as a more reliable foundation than individual psychological states. Furthermore, it positions Moorean foundationalism as a pragmatic approach, acknowledging that while our beliefs may not be infallible, they are essential for navigating the complexities of human experience.

The other question of whether our beliefs have a secure foundation is the fallibilist negative proposed answer to the question of whether our beliefs have a secure foundation, which the fallibilist provides a negative answer to. Kekes believes that this question and responses to the question are vital to contemporary epistemology. This question stems from two issues that have emerged in the development of contemporary epistemology. One of the issues to be addressed is the foundationalist neglect of the Gettier problem; the other is the denial of the possibility of non-inferential or direct knowledge. The core of the Gettier problem arises from the fact that an epistemic agent can meet all the requirements of the traditional method of knowledge justification, that is, the Justified True Belief (JTB) criterion, and still not have knowledge. Though Gettier's position called into question the traditional conception of the conditions of knowledge as incorrect and insufficient, the implication of such a position on foundationalism is that foundationalists have already conducted their debate and argument on the assumption that the meaning of knowledge is without opposition. However, Gettier's proposition and example clearly demonstrate the need for additional conditions. These additional conditions seek to address the gaps exposed by Gettier, prompting philosophers to explore alternative frameworks for understanding knowledge. As a result, contemporary epistemology has become increasingly focused on refining the criteria that determine what it means to truly know something.

The second fallibilist critique of foundationalism discussed by Kekes has to do with the denial of the possibility of direct, non-inferential knowledge. Foundationalism's supporters argued that direct and non-inferential knowledge is practically impossible. These proponents are basically scientists who have a flair for the scientific method when it comes to epistemic

⁷ Descartes, R. (1993). *Meditations on first philosophy*. (D. A. Cress, Trans.). Hackett Publishing Company. (Original work published 1641)

⁸ Moore, G. E. (1925). A defence of common sense. In J. H. Muirhead (Ed.), *Contemporary British philosophy* (2nd series). Allen & Unwin.

justification; they base their observations on it. They believe that the foundationalist position claiming the proposition is incorrigible is false because, in their view, observations are influenced by certain theories. For this case, all knowledge is indirect, implying all observation is theory-laden. This means that foundationalists' self-justified propositions are flawed and contain uncertainty and errors. As a result, critics argue that our understanding of knowledge is always mediated by theoretical frameworks, which can lead to a more nuanced view of epistemology. This perspective underscores the significance of context and interpretation in moulding our perception of justified belief.

Other ways to discredit the foundationalist thesis, Kekes uses the analytic-synthetic distinction. Kekes demonstrates that if we can uphold the distinction between the two, we cannot say that propositions are purely synthetic. If no synthetic propositions exist, then no basic propositions exist. The dissolution of the basic proposition means that the incorrigible position held by the foundationalist is false, thereby discrediting the foundationalist position. This challenge raises serious concerns about epistemology, suggesting that our understanding of knowledge may be far more complex than previously assumed. Consequently, it invites further examination of alternative theories that could better account for the nature of justified beliefs and knowledge acquisition.

Another criticism of the fallibilists regarding the possibility of direct knowledge is the critique of the empiricist's theory of concept formation. The theory is all about how we acquire empirical concepts through direct knowledge. Foundationalism argues for the plausibility of this theory. But the fallibilists believed this view was implausible. Their position is that concepts are not possible. This argument is that the concept is possible only if the person already possesses other concepts. Thus, concepts cannot be learnt one at a time, as foundationalists claim; they must be learnt together. Kekes then concluded that the fallibilist thesis is more plausible than the foundationalist thesis and favoured the Moorean foundationalist over the Cartesian foundationalist. Kekes' analysis invites further exploration of the implications of fallibilism for epistemology and the nature of knowledge. It raises important questions about how we can justify our beliefs and the interconnectedness of concepts in shaping our understanding of the world.

4. On skepticism

The second issue comes from the question, "If our beliefs have no secure foundation, how can they be justified as knowledge?"⁹ Skepticism is the position that denies knowledge claims. According to sceptics, our rational assumptions cannot be justified. He views skepticism as a distinct approach in contemporary epistemology, primarily targeting the reasoning processes we typically rely on to justify knowledge claims. In this new era, skepticism involves examining the reasoning processes used to support knowledge claims. This critical examination calls into question the very methods by which we ascertain truth, urging us to reflect on the reliability of our cognitive faculties. As we navigate through a landscape laden with information, the challenge lies not only in acquiring knowledge but also in discerning its validity amidst a plethora of competing perspectives. To put this in a clear form Kekes says that:

"No belief or action can be rationally justified because the standards upon which the supposed justifications rest also need justification. But this justification cannot be

⁹ Goldman, A. I. (1979). What is justified belief? In G. S. Pappas (Ed.), *Justification and knowledge* (pp. 1–23). D. Reidel Publishing.

provided because the process of justifying one standard by another must lead either to infinite regress or to non-rational commitment to some standards.”¹⁰

Most philosophers have tried to discourage this skeptical argument because it does little to discourage knowledge claims. Some have argued that the question being asked by the sceptic seems far-fetched. It is meaningless to question the standard of rationality because rationality has meaning only with reference to some standards. But Kekes still holds to the fact that this question cannot just be dismissed. Keke's discussion of the attempts at responding to the skeptical challenge is very logically true and tries to show how the sceptics' argument still remains. He uses the argument that different forms of life have different standards, and the rationality of beliefs and practices in each form of life should be a matter of something in the epistemic agent. This was one of the positions that Wittgenstein also supported. Based on the above, skepticism is a misguided and illegitimate attempt to find a standard of rationality outside a given form of life. To disagree with the above, Kekes argues that

“If forms of life were genuinely independent of each other, then the absurd conclusion will follow that there could be no communication between participants in different forms of life.”¹¹

But there is communication among different forms of life, and this automatically implies shared standards. Such a shared standard indicates that there are standards transcending the confines of any one form of life and which need rational justification. The different ways to respond to the skeptical challenge by identifying standards of rationality with logical facts, scientific methods, or transcendental arguments are seen as the best conditions of rationality. But Kekes objected to the use of logic as a standard of rationality because its rationality is also questionable. He thinks that logic can lead to irrational propositions even with a valid structural form. Another attempt to refute skepticism is the modernized Kantian employment of transcendental arguments. The main point of this idea is to offer a rational justification of beliefs by showing how they derive from a particular system and then demonstrating that the system is the only one possible. The problem with this method is that it's impossible to show that any part of a conceptual system is needed. While it can be shown that some components are necessary for a particular system, it is incorrect to argue that a component is necessary for a conceptual system, and this transcendental argument falls short of demonstrating the rationality of the system.

Science is one of the most used methods for rationality. It is generally assumed by many to be the real paradigm of rationality. Anything that is not scientifically proven is said to be neither rational nor irrational. But the validity of scientific results relies on propositions, which it accepts without justification. Based on this, science is not totally reliable as a standard for rationality. The usefulness of science has been defended by scholars over the years; however, Kekes objected to this notion, arguing that while an idea may be scientifically pragmatic, this does not guarantee its rationality, as it can also be used to pursue irrationality. According to him, a scientific statement also requires validity and justification from other methods to be admissible as a clear method. This implies that the pragmatic justification of science has also been undermined. Because these issues and challenges seem insurmountable, Kekes sees skepticism as a vital problem that current epistemologists must solve.

5. Critical assessment of Kekes position about contemporary epistemology

Examining Kekes' description of contemporary epistemology as a theory of epistemic justification as opposed to the traditional conception of the theory of knowledge is a clear

¹⁰ Kekes, J. (1979). *The nature of philosophy*. Rowman and Littlefield.

¹¹ Kekes, J. (1979). *The nature of philosophy*. Rowman and Littlefield.

judgement to make. But it should be noted that this does not discredit epistemological pursuit, like most scholars are interested in what Kekes was trying to portray it to be. It does not discredit the traditional conception of what knowledge should be; it has just streamlined it to epistemic justification. The trend on epistemic justification shows that it is one of the main parts of epistemic discourse that has been overlooked but needs to be part of epistemic discourse also. Kekes should not be criticized for saying that contemporary epistemology is based on epistemic justification; if we are to look into the issue critically, we will also understand that the methods and theories of epistemic justification that scholars have developed over the years are a testament to such a claim of Kekes. He was only bringing to the notice of philosophers to note that epistemology is not just a theory of justification but also of knowledge and that other fundamental epistemological discussions must also be given priority.

Another fundamental problem with which scholars have argued against Keke's view of epistemology is that he tries to humanize it, saying that it is normative. He maintained this position because that is what he sees as one of the new trends in epistemology. He observes that scholars have attempted to answer several questions posed by contemporary epistemologists and has found that these questions necessitate considering human nature to arrive at plausible answers. These findings led him to the Aristotelian justification theory of rationality. He was convinced that this theory would provide the right answers to the questions posed by sceptics. He believes that we can achieve a more robust understanding of knowledge by integrating insights from human nature into the framework of epistemology. This approach addresses the sceptics' challenges and enriches the discourse within the field, paving the way for a deeper exploration of the interplay between reason and human experience.

Keke was also accused of selectively using his analysis of skepticism to favor only the Cartesian and Moorean models of skepticism. This was one of the arguments critics of Keke's work use to discredit his work. Critics said he ignores other epistemology theories. An examination of the two models that Keke focused on should be seen as a way to address the question of skepticism, not a way of neglecting other forms of epistemology. His ways of addressing the problem of foundationalism with these two models have only provided a way out of some of the problems that foundationalism has caused in the quest to provide answers to knowledge justification. He did not discuss other non-foundationalist theories of epistemic justification because it was unnecessary for his quest on the nature of contemporary epistemology, not because he overlooked them. Epistemologists continue to scrutinize these theories, and the scholars who proposed them need to further develop them. His failure to address other scholars' views about how epistemology should move forward indicates that he was primarily focused on the issues at hand in his argument for reviewing contemporary epistemology. His focus was to discuss the issues and problems in contemporary epistemology. He selected the issues he wants to discuss; he stated them and discussed them. His success is a philosophical problem that locates issues in every proposed answer; he was on a quest against contemporary epistemology. His critique serves as a catalyst for deeper reflection on the foundations of knowledge and belief. By challenging existing paradigms, he encourages scholars to reconsider their assumptions and explore new avenues for comprehending the complex issues surrounding epistemological thought.

On the issue of skepticism and naturalized epistemology that was looked at by Kekes, he should be commended for viewing these two fundamental problems as just a challenge and not something that can override epistemology's development. The sceptics' response to rationalists is to ground and justify their rational standard by pointing out that any such argument must itself be based upon presuppositions, and further, any attempts to ground these lead either to an infinite and vicious regress, a circular justification, or an unargued, arbitrary, and unjustified commitment on the part of the rationalist. Kekes tries to provide a solution to this argument by trying to allocate justification to rationality. This position has been said to be faulty by scholars and is said to be fallacious because it will show his concept of justification has not really handled the sceptics'

problem. Keke's approach has shed new light on the sceptic's challenge, resulting in some fundamental developments in contemporary epistemology. These developments invite further exploration of how rationality can be reconciled with skepticism, potentially offering pathways to a more robust understanding of knowledge. As scholars continue to engage with Kekes' ideas, the discourse around justification and belief is likely to evolve, revealing deeper insights into the nature of epistemic certainty.

However, he defends the idea that truth is the most fundamental goal of epistemology. He defends his theory of justification as truth-conducive. This position of Kekes has been said to require justification itself. It was argued that his view is more pragmatic, which is what he wanted to refute. It must be noted that his view of truth conduciveness does not require pragmatism. All theories of epistemic justification in recent times are basically truth-conducive; without that, they will face a lot of criticism or outright rejection. His theory of truth-conduciveness is actually a criterion for epistemic justification, not a disguised version of pragmatism. We can't, even in the present state of epistemology, do without the truth-conduciveness of any epistemic claim.

6. Conclusion

This paper has critically analyzed John Kekes' views on the main problems in modern epistemology, with a focus on foundationalism, fallibilism, and skepticism. Kekes persuasively contends that epistemology has transitioned from a predominant "theory of knowledge" to a "theory of justification," a transformation driven by the enduring difficulties presented by skepticism and the intricacies revealed by contemporary philosophical exploration.

Kekes evaluates the potential for a secure foundation for human belief by offering a nuanced comparison of Cartesian and Moorean foundationalism, ultimately endorsing the latter for its basis in common-sense beliefs that are publicly verifiable and function as a pragmatic, albeit not infallible, court of appeal. His investigation of fallibilism further undermines the pursuit of indubitable foundations, emphasizing the Gettier problem and the theory-laden character of observation as critical refutations of conventional foundationalist assertions.

Kekes does not dismiss skepticism as a philosophical nuisance; instead, he regards it as a significant and unresolved issue. He rigorously critiques efforts to establish rationality through logic, science, or transcendental arguments, illustrating that each ultimately fails to deliver a non-circular, universally justified standard. His understanding that communication between various "forms of life" suggests the presence of common, transcendent standards is a significant contribution, indicating the necessity for a justificatory framework that can embrace this intersubjective reality.

Some people don't like Keke's work, especially because he only looks at certain models and because he says he "humanizes" epistemology. However, his overall project is both valid and useful. By focusing on epistemic justification and supporting a truth-conducive theory of knowledge, he shifts the epistemological discussion towards a more practical and robust comprehension of how beliefs can be justified. Kekes adeptly identifies and examines the critical issues within modern epistemology, aiming not to dismantle the discipline but to enhance and progress it. His work is a strong call for epistemologists to keep coming up with theories that can stand up to skeptical challenges and still be based on how people really think and act.

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Women in Rojava between the Governance Philosophy of Syrian Kurdistan and the Utopia of Öcalanism

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Abstract

Kurdish women are often portrayed as among the freest when compared to women in other Muslim societies, yet a central debate remains as to whether this—particularly in the Syrian context—results from the ideology of Abdullah Öcalan or from remnants of older matriarchal traditions. Scholarly assessments are divided: external (non-Kurdish) researchers sometimes offer more generalized and positive conclusions, including references to Vladimir Minorsky’s claim that attitudes toward women serve as an indicator of a people’s moral order. Nonetheless, Kurdish society, like many traditional societies in the Middle East, remains structurally patriarchal. In Iraq and Turkey, more negative practices are frequently reported—such as female genital mutilation and so-called honor killings—often explained by the longer historical entrenchment of Kurdish communities in those regions. The study situates gender relations within a historical-sociological framework, tracing the impact of the Ottoman period and earlier political formations. During the Ayyubid and Mamluk eras, political authority in the Islamic world was often exercised by non-Arab elites, which in certain cases enabled aristocratic women to participate in philanthropy, education, and institution-building (e.g., mosque-schools). The Ottoman arrangements for governing Kurdish regions (1514–1851) strengthened tribal and clan-based structures, in which loyalty to lineage competed with religious loyalty and social order was regulated through custom and sanction. This produced a paradox: relatively freer social interaction between the sexes could coexist with strict codes of “honor” and severe penalties disciplining women’s sexuality and behavior. Focusing on Syria, the analysis highlights the importance of education and political regimes. While there are examples of women’s activity in religiously based schooling (al-katatib), women’s systematic marginalization was reinforced by limited access to education and the dominance of formalistic religious-legal interpretations. After the Ba’ath Party came to power (1963–2024), discriminatory policies toward Kurds—especially the consequences of the 1962 census in Hasakah—generated mass statelessness that disproportionately affected women through unregistered marriages, legal insecurity for children, restricted access to healthcare and education, and repression of the Kurdish language and activism. Against this backdrop, women’s participation in official politics often remained symbolic and quota-based. The core argument is that the enhanced role of women in Rojava cannot be convincingly explained by “residual matriarchy,” but rather by an ideological confrontation with clan conservatism through the Öcalanian project: the program for women’s liberation, the concept of Jineolojî, and institutionalized mechanisms for women’s participation (quotas, co-chair systems, women’s bodies, and legal reforms). Finally, the text addresses the media dichotomy between the heroization of Kurdish women fighters and the victimization of women enslaved by ISIS as part of a broader struggle over meaning and legitimacy in the region.

Keywords: Kurdish women, Öcalanism, Patriarchy, Rojava, women’s liberation.

1. Introduction

The Kurdish woman is among the freest when compared to women in other Islamic societies. She enjoys a wide range of social, civil, economic, and above all political rights. The major question is whether this situation—specifically in the case of Syria—is due to the ideology of Abdullah Öcalan or represents a remnant of an unextinguished matriarchal legacy. Very often, different authors defend contradictory positions, with non-Kurdish researchers tending to be more positively inclined toward generalized assessments. In this light, the opinion of the already cited Russian Kurdologist Vladimir Minorsky is noteworthy, as he states: “The study of the status of women is very important for determining the morality of any people, and this, of course, also applies to the Kurds. In this respect, they are more tolerant than all other Muslim peoples.”

Nevertheless, like all traditional societies in the Middle East, the culture of this ethnic group remains patriarchal, and within Kurdish families and communities it has been considered “natural” for men to enjoy the greater share of power. Information about Kurdish women in Iraq and Turkey appears to be significantly more negative, likely because the ethnic group has lived in these territories for a longer period. For example, female genital mutilation continues to this day in Iraqi Kurdistan, with between 37.5% and 58.5% of women having undergone this humiliating procedure, despite efforts to curb this deeply entrenched social phenomenon. One may turn to the novel *Mariam* by the Iraqi Kurdish writer Sabri Silfani to understand the consequences of this violence, which drives women toward suicide. Meanwhile, Kurdish towns and villages in southeastern Turkey top the list of honor killings throughout the country. In Diyarbakir and the surrounding regions, approximately 70 honor killings are carried out annually.

Researcher Ruzhin Musa links the formation of a closed, social, and tribal environment in the Kurdish regions of the Ottoman Empire with the emergence of the so-called “Kurdish emirates.” These inherited a specific collective psychology directly influenced by the diminishing role of religion during the period of rule of the Ayyubid Kurdish dynasty (1171–1260) and that of the Mamluks (1250–1517). At that time, the capital of the caliphate was Cairo, and the Commander of the Faithful was obligatorily an Arab. The strongman of the state, most often bearing the title of sultan, belonged to various Islamized ethnic groups on the periphery of the caliphate. These included Circassians, Tatars, Armenians, Kurds, Bulgarians, Greeks, and others. Very often, their sisters and daughters enjoyed the freedom to engage in activities that Arab rulers had previously forbidden to their own women.

2. The Kurdish woman is among the freest when compared to women in other Islamic societies

Chroniclers mention the name of Princess Dayfa Khatun, daughter of the Ayyubid Sultan al-Malik al-Adil Safadin (1145–1218), who, as regent for her son, ruled the Syrian city of Aleppo for six years. She founded the famous Firdaws Mosque-School in the city, which attracted numerous hafizes, historians, faqihs, and other ulama. A similar role was played by Princess Ghaziya Khatun bint Malik Kamil (d. 1219), who ruled the city of Hama for 35 years. She laid the foundations of two schools that became sanctuaries for many ulama. Historiographers add at least ten more names of aristocratic women who established cultural, scientific, and religious institutions. The list of women related to Mamluk sultans, renowned for their charitable activities, is no shorter. The prevailing hypothesis suggests that women belonging to ethnic groups other than Arab, Turkish, and Persian were exceptionally active in spheres that were in principle monopolized by men.

In 1514, Sultan Selim I, thanks to the efforts of the Kurdish mullah Idris al-Bidlisi, took control of the Kurdish regions. He concluded an agreement stipulating that governance of these areas would remain in the hands of princes and sheikhs, while the Turks would control strategic locations. This arrangement remained unchanged until 1851, when hereditary feudal domains were finally abolished.

This historical period reveals two major transformations in society and their direct consequences for the prevailing model of relations among members of the family collective. First, a matrix for an alternative social hierarchy emerged. This concept came to the forefront in response to circumstances difficult for the local population, associated with acts of plunder, looting, and destruction linked to the Tatar-Mongol invasions of the Middle East. The collision between loyalty to lineage, tribalism, clanship, and familism on the one hand, and loyalty to religion on the other, intensified. Already during the Ayyubid period, religion began to slightly recede, while tribalism equalized its influence within the transitioning Islamic society. In this way, a new power model was formed, preserving the coherence of the social (group) unit. This occurred through the dominance of a complex of rules, customs, and traditions centered around the extended clan structure and its branches, on the one hand, and the organization of the clan members' livelihoods on the other. According to the aforementioned Dutch anthropologist Martin van Bruinessen, the reason for the dominance of clan loyalty, so widespread in Kurdish regions, may lie in "the very nature of Kurdish society."

Since the Ayyubid era, the schools that were established—including those founded by women—provided religious education. Women were not admitted to them, which resulted in widespread ignorance and illiteracy among women. Consequently, negative religious imperatives, misunderstanding of legal rulings concerning women, and traditional interpretations of religious texts played a role in establishing a set of specific roles, functions, and standards. These, in turn, contributed to the formation of particular social and cultural orientations and functional models for women. Thus, legal interpretations, rulings, and opinions regarding women's roles continued to revolve around formal approaches to religion and ethics, without attention to the essence of religious texts or their true meaning. As a result, the interests of Kurdish women were confined to the everyday life of their family and tribe, since "the Ottoman administration played a fundamental role in the backwardness of Kurdish culture and education, because it prohibited the publication and printing of books in the empire."

All of this contributed to the reconfiguration of power relations between men and women. On the one hand, the man became the foundation of clan and tribal affiliation, through which male dominance in Kurdish society was materialized. On the other hand, the woman began to derive her role and social power from the kinship ties of her father, brother, and husband, as well as from the moral conduct prescribed by the religious ideal. Thus, the woman directly drew her power potential from her connections with a male relative, who was obliged to protect and defend her as the leader of the family collective.

In the writings of travelers and Orientalists, we find a unique and clearly articulated body of knowledge about Kurdish society and the nature of its relationships, especially with regard to the political aspects prevalent during the Ottoman era. These writings offer a consistent and well-documented attempt to understand Kurdish society, including its military, administrative, religious, and socio-economic dimensions. Most travelers and Orientalists conclude that Kurds treat their women with great respect. The British traveler Major E. B. Soane (1881–1923) notes in his memoirs: "Kurdish women enjoy a degree of freedom comparable to that of women in almost any European country. Among them are beautiful and courageous horsewomen, capable of using a rifle."

Among Western Orientalists, the view has gained ground that women's participation alongside men in armed combat is another manifestation of their freedom. The Russian scholar

Pyotr Lerch (1884–1928) even went so far as to claim that Kurdish women took part “in the bloody and fierce battles against the military forces of the Turkish pasha, charged with subduing tribes that periodically rebelled.”

However, this assumption does not rest on an accurate understanding of the historical, political, and social conditions experienced by Kurdish tribes and clans at the time. Each clan had its own rules, values, and alliances—both internal and external with other tribes and clans. This transformed the clan group, whose members were mutually dependent, into a social structure founded on absolute loyalty as the sole guarantee of individual security and daily subsistence. In this context, women’s participation in combat was a necessity rather than a choice, imposed by the historical and political circumstances of Kurdish society. As for the acceptance of women as tribal leaders within the Kurdish community, this stemmed from their close kinship ties within the extended tribal lineage and from the specific circumstances facing the tribe—such as the absence of its natural leader due to arrest or continuous resistance against repeated attacks (Galily & Schwartz, 2021).

It is also necessary to note the opinion of the renowned British traveler, diplomat, and politician Mark Sykes, who likewise expressed views on the Kurdish woman. He observed that “her freedom of expression, movement, and appearance is subject to a set of strict tribal rules and customs.” Sir Sykes emphasized that “the liberation of women derives from lofty and rigid values that are universally accepted.” The British-appointed governor of the Iraqi city of Kirkuk in 1919, Major Noel—who was actively involved in collecting cultural monuments, folklore, and ethnographic data about local Kurds—even claimed that “the punishment for adultery is death in all cases, based on a set of principles and foundations, and on nothing else.”

It is worth emphasizing that the linkage between tribal honor—or what is referred to as Kurdish law—and female morality, on the one hand, and the severe punishments imposed on women by the tribe itself, on the other, served as guarantees for the emergence of a distinct and unique moral discourse. This discourse facilitated free interaction between the sexes, in stark contrast to the highly Islamized regulations applied by Arabs and Turks. Natural (non-restrictive) contact between men and women thus became possible. Family relations and certain traditional customs within Kurdish society reveal much in this regard.

Early marriage is a widespread tradition among Kurds. In some cases, a girl is engaged while still an infant, with a headscarf adorned with coins tied around her head. Social custom prioritizes marriage to a cousin, known as *al-mukhayra*. Marriage between cousins takes precedence over alternative unions. Another custom is *al-mubadala* (exchange), or *bardili*, whereby two families agree to exchange a daughter for a son in order to avoid paying a dowry. The issue of the dowry remains one of the most complex and costly aspects of Kurdish marriage, which some interpret as a reflection of the wife’s high status. The custom of *al-taftifa*—elopement—also exists in Kurdish society, whereby a girl flees with her lover and the couple subsequently attempts to appease their families and clans. This frequently ends with the killing of both individuals for violating tradition.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, new dynamics began to emerge in Syrian society and, correspondingly, within the local Kurdish community. Two social models became established, linked to transformations in the economy and property relations. These were embodied by the city and the village. In large urban centers, an institutionalized economic paradigm prevailed, characterized by overt feudalism. Large landowners resided in cities, and their social group was defined primarily by economic parameters. Conversely, in smaller agrarian settlements, clan-based organization continued to dominate, rooted in Kurdish tribalism. Thus, the socio-economic factor came into direct confrontation with the ethnic one. Kurdish women were able to intervene much more actively in ethnic life than in economic life, which was directly reserved for men.

In this context, the synergy of numerous active Kurdish women is observed in the creation of the so-called *al-katatib* in Syria's agrarian regions. These were schools in which, alongside reading, writing, arithmetic, and other basic knowledge for children, Islamic sciences were also taught. To some extent, they may be compared to the monastic schools in Bulgaria during the National Revival period. What is particularly noteworthy is that active Syrian Kurdish women were able to transform their own homes into such educational institutions, which inevitably elevated their role within the family, the clan, and the local community. Among them were Hojja Wasila, Umm Abd al-Jalil al-Buti, Hojja Umm Zahid al-Karmi, Hojja Kamila Mulla Rasul, Hojja Amina Wanli, Hojja Sara Sira Qutrash, and many others. All of them bore the title *hojja* before their names—a term of Persian origin meaning “great” or “eminent.” When part of a family name, it is understood to signify a “scholar” or “sheikh” (Knapp & Ayboga, 2016).

Despite religious pressure, Kurdish traditions allowed women to be engaged outside the home alongside men, including on the battlefield. If we trace Kurdish historical records that elaborate on accounts of uprisings concentrated in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran, we find that women's presence is limited to fleeting references that serve the context of men's heroic deeds as military leaders. It appears that Kurdish feminist heroism lacks empirical grounding with regard to Syria. Such grounding emerges only in 2011, following the Kurdish intifada in that country.

3. Women are largely absent from Kurdish political and historical imagination, except as the wives of certain leaders, after which their role is generalized and applied to all local Kurdish communities

Women are largely absent from Kurdish political and historical imagination, except as the wives of certain leaders, after which their role is generalized and applied to all local Kurdish communities. This is the case with Adila Khanum (1859–1924), the wife of the ruler of Halabja. A similar pattern appears in the case of Besa Khanum, the wife of Sheikh Riza, who led the uprising of 1937–1939 in the Turkish city of Dersim. One account of the Kurdish rebellion against the rule of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk recounts that Besa Khanum resisted until the fighters under her command were surrounded, after which she was forced to throw herself from a mountain peak out of loyalty to the Kurdish cause.

A comparable case is that of Mina Khanum, the founder of the Kurdish Democratic Women's Union. She was the wife of Qazi Muhammad (1893–1947), the founder of the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad, which existed for approximately eight months in 1946 on the territory of present-day Iran, with the support of the former Soviet Union. The prominence of these Kurdish women was due exclusively to their aristocratic origin and to the fact that they were wives of tribal leaders, princes, and commanders. At the same time, the reality at the level of lower-status social groups was fundamentally different. The two images of Kurdish women presented by global media confirm the dichotomous and antagonistic genesis of this social group.

There is broad scholarly consensus that the pioneer of the feminist movement in Syrian Kurdistan was Roshan Badirkhan (1909–1992). She was the wife of Prince Celadet Bedirxan, whose life inspired many intellectuals. He descended from a Kurdish aristocratic family and was the creator of the *Hawar* alphabet—the Kurdish alphabet based on Latin characters. This script was adopted by Kurds using northern dialects, most notably Kurmanji, Zaza, and several other Kurdish groups.

Roshan graduated from the Teachers' College in Damascus, and in 1934 she became a member of the Syrian Women's Union. In 1955, she co-founded the Kurdish Association for Cultural Development and worked in Aleppo on the establishment of the Kurdish Association for Knowledge and Solidarity. In 1957, Roshan represented the Kurdish people at the Athens Anti-Imperialist Conference. In 1971, she founded the Kurdish Women's Union in Iraq. Alongside her

awareness-raising activities, she collaborated with the journal *Hiwar* and the newspaper *Al-Hurriya*. In 1947, she worked at Radio Damascus, translating from Kurdish and Turkish into Arabic. She passed away in the coastal city of Baniyas and was buried in the Kurdish quarter alongside her husband.

Between 1927 and 1957, numerous associations and clubs were established among Kurdish communities in Hasakah, Qamishli, Aleppo, Amuda, and Damascus, alongside the circulation of the newspaper *Hiwar* and the magazine *Ronahi*. Roshan Badirkhan's name consistently stands at the core of these initiatives.

With the rise to power of the Ba'ath Party—following a prolonged period of political instability marked by successive coups—the situation of women in Syria deteriorated significantly. Despite slogans of freedom, socialism, and social equality, the treatment of Kurds was overtly discriminatory. This was primarily due to the ideology of nationalism espoused by the Ba'ath Party, which ruled Syria from 1963 to 2024.

The most concrete manifestation of this discrimination against Kurds was the revocation of citizenship from tens of thousands of individuals as a result of the 1962 census in Hasakah province. This act by the Ba'athist government institutionalized a clear form of discrimination: the confiscation of identity documents; the denial of civil rights; the loss of voting rights; exclusion from public life; restrictions on foreign travel; deprivation of property rights; exclusion from public employment; and denial of access to education.

The tragedy was even more severe for women, who were stripped of the right to marry foreigners or individuals with unregistered birth dates—a common occurrence among Kurds in Syria. The census divided Kurds into citizens and stateless persons. In terms of ethnic identity, they were officially registered as “foreigners,” thereby depriving the Kurdish minority of formal recognition as a distinct collective identity.

These circumstances drastically undermined Kurdish women's ability to lead normal lives. A large proportion of their marriages were categorized as “unregistered,” rendering them legally invalid. Consequently, birth certificates fell under the same legal status, affecting the legal standing of children as well. Stateless parents thus transmitted statelessness to their offspring. Once subjected to such discriminatory conditions, women were denied access to adequate healthcare. State hospitals refused to treat patients suffering from serious illnesses such as cancer or those requiring kidney dialysis and similar treatments.

The Ba'athist regime implemented the same policy of social exclusion in the sphere of education. Measures targeting women included arbitrary expulsion from schools, denial of access to higher education, and prohibition from practicing the teaching profession. These policies also encompassed bans on the use of the Kurdish language and punitive measures against those who published books and journals in Kurdish. Repressive actions by security forces—including arrests and torture—were imposed on many Kurdish women who defied these restrictions.

In 2004, women participated in the uprisings in Qamishli against Ba'ath rule, including the toppling of Assad's statue in the city of Amuda. Hundreds of thousands of men and women stood side by side in the streets of Hasakah, Aleppo, and Damascus. Kurdish women actively participated in the intifada against Ba'athist rule in Rojava—joining demonstrations, assisting in hospitals, and supplying food to areas besieged by government forces.

During this “Ba'athist” period of Syria's development, it cannot be denied that some female presence existed in the country's party-political life. However, it was largely marginal, superficial, and clearly part of a symbolic “women's quota” designed to project a democratic façade of Syrian politics. While women's party membership was formally acknowledged, it remained peripheral—even when women occupied high-ranking positions. Female participation in Kurdish

political parties was mainly recorded during election periods or ceremonial occasions, such as International Women's Day.

Perhaps the most significant reason for this limited engagement was the absence of democratic experience within the party-political movement as a whole, coupled with an atmosphere of fear and intimidation stemming from the brutality of security forces and the repressive practices of the Ba'athist regime against political activists. Women's involvement in party activities often began during their educational trajectories, whether at universities or institutes. The chosen field of study became a crucial factor in stimulating women's interest in political ideologies and orienting them toward those that best aligned with their social, historical, and cultural affinities.

Against this backdrop, many Kurdish political parties adopted quota systems within their organizational structures. Officially, women's representation was set at approximately 30%, including leadership positions. In practice, however, these quotas were rarely enforced. Instead, a collision emerged between the broader Arab and Syrian criteria for the (non-)inclusion of women and the Öcalanian framework, which explicitly prioritizes women over male counterparts.

Empirical data comparing women's representation in leadership positions within political formations adhering to Öcalanian norms and those that do not demonstrates that the enhanced role of women in Rojava is not the result of residual matriarchy or remnants of a deformed agrarian society. Rather, Kurdish clan conservatism has been subjected to a direct and forceful challenge by Öcalan's revolutionary ideology—not through its gradual erosion under modernity, but through deliberate ideological confrontation.

On 8 March 1998, just months before his arrest, Abdullah Öcalan formulated the *Program for the Ideology of Women's Liberation*, aimed at mobilizing and attracting more women to the ranks of the PKK. In 2009, Öcalan introduced the term *Jineolojî* ("the science of women"), derived from *jîn* (woman, in Kurdish) and *lojî* (science). Thus emerged the specialized field of *jineology*, which is taught at the University of Rojava—established by the Autonomous Administration in the city of Qamishli—as well as in other educational institutions.

The Syrian branch of the PKK, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), inherited Abdullah Öcalan's principles regarding women's participation, as developed within the parent organization. Öcalan's ambition to attract women into what had traditionally been considered a "male" sphere of military and political activity was motivated by the Marxist-Leninist leader's desire to combat religion. According to Öcalan, religion "enslaves" women, reducing them to housekeepers and instruments of biological reproduction within the family. In this sense, Öcalan dismantles the conservative social model, even going beyond the level of natural emancipation generated by the specific conditions of a closed ethnic group. (Lemmon, 2021)

For this reason, the PKK actively recruits women into military operations, and female combat units are perceived as the antithesis of the retrograde family cell in which women are expected to endure the domination of husbands, fathers, brothers, and male guardians, as prescribed by Islamic tradition. The inclusion of Öcalan's wife, Kesire Yıldırım, in party activities served as a personal example, demonstrating his commitment to challenging the conservative norms traditionally prevalent in Kurdish society.

The response of many women to the ideas of the PKK and their decision to choose an alternative social life in the Qandil Mountains was largely motivated by their refusal to enter forced marriages and submit to male dominance. When the male head of the family refused to allow a girl to leave, the PKK encouraged her escape from the parental home. Öcalan's ideology offered women freedoms and life opportunities unavailable to them if they remained in their native villages. The PKK itself assumed the role of guardian, providing alternative care and protection for women.

Thus, women were assigned fictitious (partisan) names, allowed to move through regions outside their places of origin, and permitted to interact with individuals beyond the confines of their traditional clans. In this way, social diversity was guaranteed. At the same time, marriage within the PKK was prohibited, thereby relieving women of traditional familial social obligations. Consequently, the parent party became their “family,” to which they were expected to devote themselves entirely. In particular, joining the armed wings of the PKK was perceived as a substitute for family life and as a guarantee of an alternative social existence. Virtually all military structures derived from the PKK officially use this concept either as a synonym or as an integral part of their designation. This applies equally to the Syrian formations, namely the YPG, YPJ, and SDF (Routledge, 2014).

The practice of recruiting PKK members through seclusion did not always receive support within Kurdish society. The Qandil Mountains witnessed numerous suicides among women who had joined the organization. At the same time, isolation and party structures hindered public disclosure of such cases, as accusations that the PKK operates as a sect or a mafia-like organization are not uncommon. For example, Turkish analyst Fuad Uğur directly compares the recruitment methods of the PKK—particularly of women—to those employed by the terrorist Islamist organization ISIS.

The Syrian face of the PKK, the PYD, founded on 20 September 2003, implemented a radically different policy toward women compared to other Kurdish parties in Syria. Initially, its leadership focused primarily on recruiting women into military structures. After 2013, however, emphasis shifted toward women’s social, economic, and political engagement. This shift was driven by the establishment of the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ), officially recognized as the female military wing (Soane, 1909).

At its extraordinary conference held on 16 June 2012, the PYD adopted the principle of joint (male–female) party leadership and established a mandatory 50% women’s quota in all governing bodies, including the highest organ—the General Council. Following the declaration of the Autonomous Administration in 2013 in the Jazira region, a Ministry for Women’s Affairs, known as the Women’s Institution (WI), was established. The activist Amina Omar was elected as its first leader and, in 2018, became co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC)—the legislative authority of Northeast Syria.

4. The Women’s Institution is composed exclusively of women and does not operate under a joint leadership system, but is headed by a single female president

The Women’s Institution is composed exclusively of women and does not operate under a joint leadership system, but is headed by a single female president. This structure is justified by the “need to address women’s issues from a female perspective in order to eliminate patriarchal and authoritarian thinking.” The institution adopts the concept of the democratic nation as a guiding principle, striving to establish social justice and democracy, eliminate retrograde concepts that hinder social development, and work toward a democratic society free from gender oppression and environmentally sustainable.

The Women’s Institution consistently coordinates and cooperates with women’s and human rights organizations to advocate for women and achieve its goals of justice and equality. It played a significant role in drafting the Law on the Protection of Women, drawing upon legislation from neighboring countries, which was subsequently adopted by the legislative body. This law contains provisions absent from the national legislation of Arab states. It explicitly aims “to protect women from oppression and ensure full equality with men in all matters.”

Through its 30 articles, the law mandates “equality between men and women in all areas of public and private life,” including political rights and the formation of organizations “in accordance with the social contract,” “obtaining women’s consent for laws concerning them,” “equality between men and women in the right to work and equal pay,” and “equality of women’s and men’s testimony in judicial proceedings.”

The law further stipulates the “prohibition of marriage without the woman’s consent,” “abolition of dowries and their replacement with joint responsibility for shared life,” “civil regulation of marriage contracts,” “prohibition of polygamy,” “ban on unilateral divorce,” “criminalization of honor killings,” and “the imposition of strict and equal punishment for adultery committed by either spouse.” Moreover, “discrimination is considered a criminal offense punishable by law. Democratic self-administration is obligated to combat all forms of violence and discrimination by developing legal mechanisms and services to ensure protection, prevention, and rehabilitation for victims of violence.”

The Women’s Institution also participated in drafting the Citizenship Law, which includes provisions directly affecting women. According to this legal framework, “both parties are granted equal rights,” “marriage is prohibited before the age of eighteen,” and “a woman has the right to custody of her children until they reach the age of fifteen, regardless of whether she is married or not” (Strasser & Akcinar, 2023; Tsekov, 2025).

Among the most notable activities of the Women’s Institution (WI) is the establishment of a network of “*women’s economic associations*.” One of the primary objectives of this initiative is to allocate a portion of the arable land belonging to the Autonomous Administration to these legal entities and to provide financial assistance for the opening of low-cost restaurants in numerous Kurdish cities (Emirat Press, 2023).

A wide range of organizations play an important role in encouraging women’s participation in public life in Syria, particularly in Kurdish-populated areas. Many of these organizations have established branches beyond the territories governed by the Autonomous Administration. One of the earliest and most prominent among them is Kongra Star (KS; in Kurdish *Yekîtiya Star*, meaning *Star Congress*). This organization represents a confederation of women’s organizations operating in Rojava. The name *Star* “refers to the ancient Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar and, in contemporary usage, alludes to the celestial stars.” These structures have played a crucial role in the significant progress achieved in gender relations in the region. Their work is grounded in the assertion that “*without the liberation of women, a truly free society is impossible*.”

One of the founders of KS is Ilham Ahmed, former co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council and current “foreign minister” of the Autonomous Administration. The activities of Kongra Star focus on organizing revolutionary women’s committees that prioritize women’s economic opportunities and personal development. Their objectives include raising awareness and enhancing women’s capacity for self-defense. The organization operates in Rojava and throughout Syria, while aspiring to become a model for women’s activism across the entire Middle East.

Kongra Star has established several academies, including the flagship Yekîtiya Star Academy. Founded in 2012, this educational institution offers training in the already mentioned field of jineology. The curriculum places particular emphasis on economics and the role of women as a key factor in their own development. The student body is diverse, ranging from young university graduates to older, illiterate individuals. Teaching methods at the academy emphasize the individual authority of instructors and encourage interactive relationships between teachers and learners, following the pedagogical approaches of John Dewey and Paulo Freire. Each program concludes with a final course called “*The Platform*,” during which participants declare their intention to take part in the Rojava revolution.

Kongra Star maintains coordinators in Rojava, Aleppo, and Damascus, as well as representatives in Iran, Lebanon, and Europe, including Germany, Denmark, Switzerland, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Their dual objective is to remain informed about the status of women worldwide while also exporting experience where needed. Kongra Star aspires to evolve into a global women's organization. Its activities are organized not only through academies, but also through communes, councils, associations, and committees. The committees function as operational units that generate ideas across the organization's various sectoral policies. These include the Education Committee, Social Committee, Committee for Relations and Democratic Political Agreements, Defense Committee, Legal and Justice Committee, Economic Committee, Finance Committee, Culture and Arts Committee, Media Committee, Health Committee, and Environmental Committee. These structures were created to organize women across all aspects of public life. Each committee operates according to its own autonomous organizational structure and discipline, adapting its work to specific needs.

The Syrian Women's Council (SWC) is the second Kurdish organization active in this field. It was established on 8 September 2017 in the city of Manbij by approximately 240 women. Its branches extend throughout the entire territory of the Autonomous Administration. Its explicit aim is to undertake tasks that were previously unfamiliar to local women. In this context, the SWC operates a branch in the al-Hol camp, where the families of captured ISIS fighters are detained. SWC representatives there lead a project aimed at the resocialization of these families, with a particular focus on the children of former members of the terrorist organization. This task is exceptionally complex, as local populations perceive the detainees in al-Hol as a "ticking time bomb," given their indoctrination in deeply entrenched Islamist religious beliefs.

The Syrian Women's Council has earned the trust of the community and achieved positive results and a strong reputation among Syrian women. It participates in significant local events throughout the country, as well as in international and regional initiatives aimed at increasing awareness of the hardships and suffering faced by Syrian women. The organization also performs political functions, as its representatives participate in negotiations concerning the future of Syria, particularly in the complex dialogue between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the government in Damascus.

A similar organization is the Women's Council of North and East Syria (WCNES), established on 14 June 2019 in the city of Amuda. It functions as a holding structure encompassing ethno-confessional local women's organizations, including Kurdish, Arab, Syriac, Armenian, Chaldean, and Circassian women. During the founding conference, participants wore traditional attire representing their respective ethnic identities. The forum's slogan—*"The Union of Free Women: A Guarantee for a Democratic Syria"*—conveyed a powerful message advocating the inclusion of representatives from all parties, civil organizations, and the full mosaic of ethnic and religious communities within the region governed by the SDF and the Autonomous Administration.

Another comparable organization is the Zanubiya Women's Gathering (ZWG), founded on 1 July 2021 by 150 representatives of local political and military factions in the ISIS-liberated city of Raqqa. The name *Zanubiya*, referring to Queen Zenobia of Palmyra, was chosen as a unifying Syrian symbol representing the diverse ethnicities and nationalities of eastern Syria. The organization defines itself as *"a political, social, and environmental organization aimed at uniting the energies of Syrian women to improve their status in all fields and to confront all forms of physical and cultural genocide."* Its forum slogan—*"Through the struggle of organized women, we will defend our revolution and build peace"*—was adopted in three languages: Arabic, Kurdish, and Assyrian.

The organization also seeks to consolidate social values, achieve justice and equality, and ensure women's full participation in public life. Its broader objective is to build bridges to

women's structures in those territories of the Autonomous Administration where Kurds constitute a minority—namely the regions of Tabqa, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Manbij.

5. Conclusion

Over the past fifteen years, a dual form of overexposure has become evident: on the one hand, the heroization of women fighters of the YPG, and on the other, the hyper-visibility of Yazidi concubines—sexual slaves of ISIS. The image of the Kurdish woman holding an automatic rifle has been strongly promoted, most notably in the television series produced by former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and her daughter Chelsea Clinton, based on Gayle Tzemach Lemmon's book *The Daughters of Kobane*. With similar emphasis on courage, the experienced Lebanese journalist Assil Tabbara speaks of Nesrin Abdullah, the commander of the YPG women's unit from the "hero city."

At the same time, media sensations have included interviews broadcast by the Saudi television channel Al Arabiya with Yazidi girls abducted by ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as well as with his official wife, who recounted the horrors experienced inside the terrorist's household.

Öcalanism has become deeply embedded in the consciousness of Syrian Kurdish women. It has created a cognitive paradigm that is unlikely ever to be eradicated, regardless of how the structures of the Autonomous Administration are integrated into those of a future Syrian government. The female world of the SDF represents an alternative to that constructed by the Islamist forces of ISIS. The Battle of Kobane embodies a collision between the radically emancipatory Öcalanian feminism—highly unconventional for the region—and the enslaving humiliation and oppression of women that constitute one of the foundational pillars of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's pseudo-caliphate.

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