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Time, Knowledge and the Telos:  
Jaakko Hintikka, Interpreter of Plato

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ABSTRACT. Jaakko Hintikka (1929–2015) was a leading philosopher whose work in logic, epistemology and semantics had a wide influence. However, he also devoted some of his efforts to Plato’s works. This paper deals with three articles: *Time, Truth and Knowledge in Ancient Greek Philosophy*; *Knowledge and its Objects in Plato*; *Plato on Knowing how, Knowing that, and Knowing what*. The objective of this paper is to understand the core of Hintikka’s work. The first article looks into the peculiar link between time and linguistic truth. The main argument is that for the Ancient Greek mind-set there can be eternal truths only insofar as they concern changeless objects. This comes from a very specific reading of how Plato and Aristotle deal with temporally indefinite sentences, which is worth taking into consideration again. The second and third articles converge in that they both appear to be an attempt to understand knowledge in relation to the concept of *τέλος*. Hintikka argues that ‘doing’ and ‘making’ are not clearly distinct concepts, and that the difference between process and outcome is also blurred. This view is labelled ‘telic’, and its epistemological and ontological implications will be considered in the paper. To conclude, focusing on these three works, the paper attempts to arouse interest both in this philosophical figure who was able to display considerable historical insightfulness, and in his results, which turn out to be an important key to comprehending some aspects of Plato’s philosophy and scholarship. KEYWORDS: Hintikka, Plato, Aristotle.

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*Introduction*

Jaakko Hintikka is one of the key figures in the last century’s logic, epistemology and philosophy of mathematics. One of his most renowned theoretical outputs is the Game-theoretical semantics. His work ranges from the logic of epistemology to modal logic with a high

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degree of technicality. He also interpreted the works of some major figures in the history of philosophy, e.g. Kant, Wittgenstein, Aristotle.<sup>1</sup> In spite of the broader attention devoted to logic, he never neglected the historical aspect of the reflections of the philosophers he found himself interpreting. To be more precise, he does say that some philosophical theories of the past prove to be incorrect, but at the same time he makes the effort to understand why the theories he takes to be incorrect looked so appealing to the authors who put them forward. In this way, his logic-informed analysis has some historical sense and gives interesting insights into the ancient texts.

In his historiographical investigations, Hintikka analysed various aspects of Plato's philosophy. In this paper, three articles will be discussed. The first is on both Plato and Aristotle, whereas the other two are exclusively on Plato: *Time, Truth and Knowledge in Ancient Greek Philosophy*; *Knowledge and its Objects in Plato*; *Plato on Knowing how, Knowing that, and Knowing what*.<sup>2</sup> The main goal of the present paper is to highlight for each article what the core argument is and why it is relevant to Plato's scholarship today. This will focus on the issues that are more important in the economy of the articles and that sound more original today.

### 1. *Time, Truth and Knowledge in Ancient Greek Philosophy*

The article deals with the notion of time and how it is related to sentences.<sup>3</sup> This means at least two things: either the time at which a sentence is uttered or the time reference given within the sentence. Hintikka contends that classical Greek philosophers have in mind *temporally indefinite sentences*, i.e. sentences depending on the time of their utterance.<sup>4</sup> He proposes the following example: according to Aristotle,

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<sup>1</sup> Just in the case of Aristotle cf. Hintikka 1973b; Hintikka 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Hintikka 1967; Hintikka 1973a; Hintikka 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Since the paper is concerned only with a theoretical outline of the core of Hintikka's articles, many interesting secondary aspects will be left aside.

<sup>4</sup> In the last part of his article, Hintikka hints that the weight orality still has in classical Greek culture can be responsible for this view. This suggestion, though important, will not be explored here.

if one says 'it is raining' both today and tomorrow, when today is rainy and tomorrow is sunny, then the same sentence is true today and false tomorrow. What is unsound to the modern ear with this view is to consider the two sentences, uttered on two distinct days, as the same sentence just because they have the same grammatical form. On the contrary, the modern view would have it that uttering these sentences, which have the same grammar, on two distinct days makes the two utterances differ in content: the facts that make them true, i.e. today's rainy day and tomorrow's sunny day, are different.<sup>5</sup> Instead, Aristotle and the Greeks consider the two as the *same* sentence and take its truth-value to vary,<sup>6</sup> as Hintikka convincingly argues from some pieces of textual evidence.<sup>7</sup>

The most relevant outcome of this view is that there can only be knowledge of what is eternal and thoroughly changeless. This is so because once one states how a certain thing or fact truly is, if that thing or fact cannot change, the truth-value of the sentence describing it cannot change either. In a world where every day it rains by necessity, the sentence 'it is raining' is always true. Of course, this example is not genuinely Greek in that for Plato and Aristotle, and especially for the former, sensible things essentially *change*. In this way the eternality of the truth value of a sentence does not depend on the completeness of the time reference. Time reference here means whatever part of the sentence that specifies when the event described by the sentence occurs. So, for instance, in order to disambiguate the example of the rainy day, one could use 'the day *x*' instead of 'today', thereby obtaining an eternal truth-value: either the day *x* it rained or it did not.<sup>8</sup> However,

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<sup>5</sup> This also entails that Plato and Aristotle reject the modern notion of *proposition* as the objective logical content expressed by the uttered sentence and independent of the utterance itself.

<sup>6</sup> This never amounts to a change of criteria in evaluating phenomena as if within a relativistic view, rather to a specific way Greek thinkers have to deal linguistically with the fact that reality changes and that knowledge must be possible. Cf. Hintikka 1967: 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Cat.* 4a24–4b2; *Metaph.* 1051b13 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Hintikka 1967: 11–2 correctly points out that this requires a complex system of time-reckoning which cannot be taken for granted.

Hintikka argues that Plato and Aristotle do not think in this way. Instead, the eternity of a truth-value comes with the specific ontological status of what the sentence is about: if and only if something does not change at all, and the total absence of change in turn derives from very specific ontological traits, all the sentences describing that something correctly can be granted indefeasible truth.

Furthermore, this argument is related to the observational nature of knowledge. With particular regard to Plato, this raises a famously vexed question, namely whether knowledge is ultimately propositional or whether it is to be conceived as a direct contact with the object, as happens in perception.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, this issue cannot be addressed here. Suffices it to say that Hintikka touches on the issue, as will also be clear from the articles analysed below, showing that he is aware of the problem.<sup>10</sup> Particularly, he considers the possible bearings the theses he is arguing for can have on this specific account of knowledge.

In accepting the view that knowledge for Plato presents at least some features comparable to vision, what is seen by the knower is actually known (in the strongest sense, which means the known content will never turn out to be different) only insofar as by its own nature it does not change. This is the necessary condition for stating that what has been seen still is, and will always be, as it was (seen). In other words, it is eternal and incapable of being otherwise. What can reunite the apparently contradictory claims that knowledge is a special sort of immediate awareness (similar to perception) and that there can only be knowledge of changeless eternal entities (which are not experienced particulars) precisely is interpreting truth in terms of temporally indefinite sentences. That is so because, on the one hand, there is the moment at which the temporally indefinite sentence is uttered, and, on the other hand, there is the eternal object that is referred to and that provides a changelessly true content to the sentence.

Semantics and epistemology are insightfully led back to ontological matters: only in virtue of a specific ontological nature do cognitive

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Bluck 1963; Smith 1979.

<sup>10</sup> He is not the first one in the analytical tradition, cf. Ryle 1939: 317–22.

phenomena such as knowledge and belief acquire their own nature.<sup>11</sup> This way of interpreting the relation between sentences, time and reality is very fecund in the case of Plato's metaphysical epistemology: the very epistemological role of Forms comes with their peculiar ontological status, i.e. their being absolutely immutable. This is so true that the difference between sensible particulars and Forms is first understood through the different ways they can be cognised. Accordingly, Hintikka recognises that the tenseless value of the present-tense is the linguistic device found by Plato and Aristotle to state that things always are as stated by the sentence.<sup>12</sup> The need for knowledge led to the search for permanent objects whose permanence could be linguistically gained by readapting the temporally indefinite sentences in tenseless sentences where there is no reference to time at all and whose objects are in turn seen as timelessly present.

What can be drawn from this? And how can it be developed? Hintikka's account seems to be quite convincing, especially in the case of Plato, because it makes clear at least two important facts. Firstly, as we have seen, it provides a new way to understand how ontology bears on the epistemic and linguistic dimensions.<sup>13</sup> If Plato expects knowledge to have some specific characters (being of something that is and being unerring)<sup>14</sup> this can only derive from ontological traits of the known object. Secondly, the objectivity that the modern view ascribes to truths, whatever they might be about, belongs instead to the *sort* of object referred to within the sentence (according to the modern view: given proper temporal and spatial references, if it is true today that *today* it is raining it will always be true that the day *x* it rained).<sup>15</sup> That is why

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<sup>11</sup> Since knowledge and belief have different objects, and this makes them different faculties, then knowledge cannot be the same as true belief plus something. Therefore, any skeptical reading that makes use of the critique of the 'additive model' seems to share Hintikka's framework. Cf. Vogt 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. also Owen 1966.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. some classic places such as Vlastos 1973a; Vlastos 1973b; White 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Tht.* 152e. For a comprehensive survey of the main interpretations of this clause cf. Aronadio 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Frege 1884: 34; Quine 1960: 191–3.

this account seems to best fit with Plato's philosophy given the peculiar relation between logical and ontological ἀλήθεια.<sup>16</sup> Not only does the degree of certainty of knowledge depend on the known object, but the actual truth of single sentences or statements is also somehow derived from the truth characterising the *object itself*. In this sense, the stable truth required by any knowledge can never be found by means of reference devices such as precise temporal reference. This squares very well with the conception of knowledge as direct contact because eternal entities grant the constant possibility to get in contact with them, whereas transitory beings cannot because once they have passed they can no longer be presently attained.

The first conclusion to be drawn is that all this assigns to Plato a strongly pragmatic view: only that which can *actually* be known can be known at all. In other words, however difficult for the knower it might be, if cognition requires some kind of relation to the cognised object, then only an object which is always attainable in principle and does not change can work as a proper object of knowledge. The pragmatic aspect is that this attainability must be real. Ancient philosophers, as Hintikka presents them, would not consider a proper object of knowledge any phenomenon that, once passed, nobody can be sure of. Conversely, the only sort of thing one can have knowledge of needs to be constantly attainable and not to depend on the circumstances or the time in which one is in contact with it.

## 2. *Knowledge and its Objects in Plato*

The second article directly addresses how knowledge is related to its object in Plato's thought. This article is particularly rich and lays the basis for many theses commonly accepted by later interpreters.<sup>17</sup> The present section will focus on the core of the article, that is, how Hintikka interprets what he calls 'Plato's implicit teleology'.<sup>18</sup> This should

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Szaif 1993: 72–124; Centrone 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Hintikka 1973a: 22–6, where he deals with the problem of meaningful falsehood in the *Sophist* and how it can be resolved thanks to the genus of difference. Cf. O'Brien 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Hintikka 1973a: 5.

not be taken as the providential sense of teleology, namely some kind of fate that takes care of human purposes. It is rather the deep-rooted mind-set that any cognitive act is essentially goal-directed where the goal has conceptual primacy. This is true for any faculty (δύναμις)<sup>19</sup> and not just for knowledge or belief in such a way that any faculty and its result seem to be confused.<sup>20</sup> Still more generally, Hintikka maintains this principle in relation to events, things and phenomena: the τέλος or ἔργον (end, goal and outcome, effect) is what really matters. This telic way of thinking can be interpreted along the lines of the previous article. There is such a strict connection between a cognitive faculty and its specific object that: i) one cannot think of the faculty regardless of the respective object since the latter is precisely that which distinguishes that very faculty from the others; and ii) as seen above, the nature of the object towards which the faculty is directed determines its relevant character (this is particularly pertinent in the case of belief/knowledge dichotomy).<sup>21</sup>

If applied to technical knowledge, the priority of the outcome over the process is more easily graspable. The fact of possessing technical knowledge is actualised in the functional existence of the product. Which means, one really knows how to make something when one actually brings it about and it works. What about the kind of knowledge that puts one in contact with reality without producing anything?

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<sup>19</sup> Hintikka's main reference is clearly the end of *Republic V*, 475–80.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Santas 1973 where the author, in recognising the great value of Hintikka's article, points out that Hintikka is wrong in stating that process and outcome of a faculty are being confused by Plato. However, the real import of Hintikka's reflection here is that the nature of the outcome explains the nature of the process. In other words, one knows because knowing is aimed at being. This does not just mean that one knows how things are, but rather that one only knows of the things that are (ὄντα). Furthermore, Hintikka's view seems to imply that the only evidence for one's knowledge of something lies in the result of that knowledge.

<sup>21</sup> Hintikka has been influential also in interpreting one of the most debated passages in the *Republic*, namely 477–8. Obviously, his interpretation most decidedly asserts the objectual difference between what can be known and what can be believed. For a renowned and controversial interpretation opposing this view cf. Fine 1978. Cf. also Smith 2000 who, among other things, takes Hintikka's view into account.

Plato assimilates the outcome of theoretical knowledge with its objects. This is consistent with the direct relation model of knowledge discussed in the previous section, which Hintikka, following an eminent tradition, calls ‘knowledge by acquaintance’.<sup>22</sup> The proper understanding of something is thought of as the contact with its clear presence leading to the unerring comprehension of its identity. Therefore, what is produced in instances of genuine knowledge is a fully transparent connection with the peculiar object that constitutes the goal of the knowing activity.<sup>23</sup> The article goes on to discuss how this view is the basis of the more common issues of propositional knowledge and possibility of meaningful falsity.

Given the limited scope of the present paper, it can be interesting to develop some specific aspects and implications of Hintikka’s reading of Plato. Firstly, the problem of connecting two different dimensions, namely cognition and external reality, does not arise within this conception. That is so because what knowledge is directly derives from what sort of object the cognised content is. For Plato, reality is at the same time objective and intelligible.<sup>24</sup> In modern terms, this does not raise categorial problems in that the object of knowledge is, as it were, ready-to-be-known. Plato’s ontology is so epistemological in character that it assumes the kinship between, or being the same gender as (*συνγένεια*),<sup>25</sup> knower and being. In this way, what needs to be justified is falsehood and error. There is no question of how the mind is to latch onto the world, it is rather about *what sort* of reality can be fully known. Obviously, this is linked to what has been stated in the first article looked at here. The relation between time, truth and reality is Plato’s privileged setting for working out metaphysical questions. Secondly, Hintikka’s proposal of telic structure can be further applied to ontology, which means understanding the way Forms constitute the goal and the completion of the things partaking of them. Each Form is

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<sup>22</sup> Hintikka 1973a: 18.

<sup>23</sup> And, of course, this never produces the object itself, cf. Santas 1973: 43. I wish to thank Prof. Yuji Kurihara for dialectically pushing me to specify this point.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. for example *Phd.* 79a.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Phd.* 79c2–d6; *R.* 490a8–b7.



a fully determined being such that any sensible thing comes into being and appears by tending towards the relevant Forms. This second point is just a hint at further work that is actually in progress.<sup>26</sup> For now, it is important to recognise the extent to which Hintikka's interpretation is fascinatingly heuristic and innovative.

### 3. *Plato on Knowing how, Knowing that, and Knowing what*

This third article aims to correctly interpret Plato's notion of ἐπιστήμη. It will be very briefly discussed here because it might be taken as recapitulating the major ideas of the other two articles and treating some complementary topics. It is recognised to what extent the concept of ἐπιστήμη is multifaceted and cuts across diverse possible logical employments. At first, ἐπιστήμη is associated with technical endeavour from a historical point of view, on the grounds that in the archaic period there is a great deal of textual evidence.<sup>27</sup> However, according to Hintikka, the concept of ἐπιστήμη is at the interface between propositional knowledge (knowing-that), practical skill (knowing-how) and immediate quasi-perceptual acquaintance (knowing-what).<sup>28</sup> Moreover, ἐπιστήμη is that form of cognition of which one must be aware (as one has it) and must be able to give an account. This means that the ἐπιστήμη is governed by rational principles and can be taught and learned.

At this point, the article's main innovative claim stands out. Bearing in mind the similarities ἐπιστήμη has with technical/productive knowledge, one actually knows how to do or make something if one knows what one is doing or making actually is. Hintikka is asserting that knowing-how and knowing-what are inseparably connected. The knowing-what in question is to be understood as knowing the fundamental traits that characterise the cognised object and that consequently distinguish it from other things. Finally, since what is known

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<sup>26</sup> For a work insightfully going in this direction cf. Frede 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Hintikka 1991: 31–3.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Smith 1979 who convincingly argues that knowledge by acquaintance and knowing-what are not the same thing, but the best way to understand Plato's notion of ἐπιστήμη in *Republic* V is to think of it as a blend of the two.

is known by means of definitions, and definitions qua linguistic items are in themselves propositionally articulated, knowing-what is in turn connected to knowing-that. This seems to suggest that Plato's concept of ἐπιστήμη cannot be reduced to just one of these modern ways to deal with the concept of knowledge. On the contrary, technical skill, direct relation to objectual identity conditions and linguistic articulation are all required to make sense of Platonic ἐπιστήμη.

In addition, all this is overtly thought of as knowledge of ends, goals and outcomes retaining what is significant in the second article analysed in this paper. This may be considered implicit in the reference to technical knowledge. When one is crafting something, that process naturally *aims* at something (the final product). Once again, any act of knowledge or belief is so object-centred that it makes sense so long as its object is or comes to be. The parallel with technical skill has another aspect of interest insofar as for Plato genuine knowledge either truly grasps its object or it is not knowledge at all. This bears significant resemblance to technical production because if one crafts a shuttle (knowing what it is) either it is a shuttle or it is not, which amounts to saying: either the thing works (has an effect) in some *determinate* way or it does not. Furthermore, Hintikka very importantly recognises the peculiar nature of Plato's presentation of the alleged omnipotence of the Sophists: for Plato, when the Sophists affirm that they know everything, it amounts to saying that they are actually able to *produce* everything.<sup>29</sup>

Once again, the priority of ontology over the epistemic dimension is maintained. Also, the peculiar relation between cognition and reality is telic, i.e. the process is comparable to aiming at something where that something constitutes the perfect fulfilment of the act of aiming. This way of putting the matter is orthogonal to the modern ways of interpreting the logic of 'know' since it merges knowledge of objects analogue to perception with propositional knowledge and operative knowledge.

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. *R.* 596 and *Sph.* 233–5 for an interpretation that keeps the two *loci* separate; cf. Nehamas 1982: 63.

#### *4. Conclusions*

It is now time to summarise what is innovative and worth considering in Hintikka's work on Plato. The first point is methodological. The three articles surveyed here show a remarkable degree of historical sensibility and competence. This is not just the non-obvious fact that the interpreter needs to understand the problematic horizon of an author and his contemporaries, even if this implies that the interpreter's theories or views, and above all her theoretical instruments, do not fit with the interpreted texts. More insightfully, Hintikka's articles are first of all attempts to understand Plato's assumptions which are historically sedimented and which he neither openly nor directly addresses. At the same time, however, Hintikka was very active in contemporary logic and epistemology, and very capable of exploiting his theoretical drive and espousing it with historical sense. Proceeding this way can prove to be rather insidious, but it helped disclose new relevant facts about Greek philosophy and the history of ideas.

The second point of interest is that the main theses exposed in these articles, on the one hand, sound convincing in their attempt to clarify some fundamental tenets of Plato's metaphysics and epistemology. On the other hand, they treat some problematic points of these tenets in a way that is consistent with the treatment of later interpreters. As seen several times, the being of the object is what determines any possible cognitive relation to it. Not just this, it also determines the kind of cognition one has of it. This also reverberates on the linguistic side: the truth of the statements can only be granted by the way the object is and changes. In addition, the type of connection is telic, that is, it takes the object as aim and outcome. What follows is not literally what Hintikka himself argues, yet it may be taken as deepening and developing his approach.

Firstly, there seems to be a two-way connection between cognition and reality: on the one hand, reality determines the kind of cognition; on the other hand, reality is the perfect outcome of the cognitive activity. What is real is such as to be perfectly cognisable. This view somehow presupposes the continuity between mind and world without run-

ning into categorial differences: knowledge and language do not need internal criteria to determine their validity, but rather issue *naturally* from how reality is structured. This also more clearly explains Hintikka's claim that the object is the *outcome* of knowledge. Secondly, in some respects, the concept of telic structure should be applied to Plato's ontology as well: Forms are the goals of sensible particulars because they represent their perfection (required by an authentically unerring ἐπιστήμη and any stable linguistic truth). These are of course just lapidary suggestions, which cannot be further developed in this paper. However, they are an attempt to make use of Hintikka's endeavour which is definitely worth considering again.

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