

Why is *doxa* set over *nomima* at *Republic* 479d?

A new interpretation of opinion and its objects

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Abstract

Socrates' argument that the sight-lovers have *doxa* turns on the claim that the things to which they attend are between being and not-being. Throughout the argument Socrates usually refers to these things as "the many beautifuls." At a crucial juncture, however, he calls them instead "the many *nomima* of the many about the beautiful" (479d). Why? Some translate as 'beliefs,' others as 'rules.' I show that these interpretations make trouble for the argument, and I propose a new interpretation based on a study of Plato's use of *nomimon* and *nomizein* elsewhere; along the way I show that there are both incomplete and complete (roughly, predicative and existential) uses of *nomizein*, mirroring those of *einai*. The upshot: *nomima* are *conventionally-sanctioned* things, or more broadly things *conventionally deemed* to have the properties attributed to them. I show that this interpretation fits well with, and illuminates, Plato's characterization of *doxa* and its objects throughout the *Republic*. *Pistis* is the kind of opinion we form by accepting conventions laid down by experts, such as philosopher-rulers. *Eikasia* is the kind of opinion we form by accepting conventions laid down by non-experts, such as the many. Thus, *doxa* always consists in epistemic deference, and the objects of *doxa* are things that have their properties not by nature, but instead by convention.