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Conversational Implicature and the Claim to Knowledge in Plato

Plato frequently discusses a tendency to treat the views one comes across as if these views come from a knowledge of the appropriate subject matter; he believes that people tend to do this too readily not only for their own views, but also for views expressed by others. In this paper, I consider the question of what Plato thinks is the cause of this tendency. I argue that Plato sees it as the result what Paul Grice called a "conversational implicature" (Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, chap. 2). Conversational implicatures are points which, although not literally stated by the speaker, are still understood as suggested by her words for reasons "essentially connected with certain general features of discourse", specifically the cooperative aspects of conversation in which each remark is expected to advance the discussion. (E.g. someone who's asked where an acquaintance lives and replies "Somewhere in the south of France" has implicated that she doesn't know where exactly the acquaintance lives.) An important feature of conversational implicatures is that the speaker can "cancel" the implicature by explicitly rejecting it, or by otherwise making it clear that he does not mean to suggest that the implicature is true.

According to Grice, one important family of implicatures consists of those connected with the quality of the information provided: a speaker's statement normally implicates that the speaker has adequate evidence for the statement she makes and that she does not believe the statement to be false. I argue that Plato holds a stronger view: that a speaker's statement normally implicates that the speaker has knowledge of the subject her statement deals with. This implicature can be cancelled: Socrates often cancels it by expressing uncertainty about his points, or by stating them ironically. Nevertheless, Plato does believe that a claim to knowledge is implicitly suggested by a speaker's confident statements; Plato believes that statements convey this knowledge-claim when the speaker puts them forward without fear of refutation (*Laches* 186c8-d3). I argue that Plato sees this knowledge-claim, not as something explicitly present in the speaker's words, nor as an ineradicable consequence of the fact that the speaker makes his statement as part of a conversation, but rather as a conversational implicature which results from the fact that a speaker is presumed to be stating something which will make a lasting advance in the discussion.

I conclude by examining the implications for a dilemma in *Theaetetus* 188b3-c9: Theaetetus says both (a) that someone who makes a false judgment must be ignorant of some of the things she's judging about, and (b) that a judger must know the things she's judging about in order to make a judgment (even a false one). (a) would follow from Plato's usual doctrine that those who know are unerring. Why, then, does Plato have Theaetetus also accept the contradictory (b)? I argue that Plato thinks judging requires accepting a proposition as if it was a statement you're listening to (*Theaetetus* 189e4-190a10), and thus accepting the statement's implicated knowledge-claim. Theaetetus accepts (b) because he's adopting the perspective of the judger to whom the knowledge-claim must appear true (as Socrates often does ironically). So Plato thinks judging falsely requires mistakenly thinking one knows (cf. *Sophist* 229c5-6).