

PHIL 31: Ancient Philosophy
Fall 2005; David O. Brink
Handout #5: Inquiry and Recollection in Plato's Meno

The Meno begins with Socrates and Meno discussing whether virtue can be taught. Socrates insists that they cannot settle this question without knowing what virtue is (71b, 86d). Knowledge of virtue requires finding the one form over the many virtuous things (72c). With this understanding of their inquiry, Socrates and Meno discuss a number of familiar Socratic themes -- such as the elimination of disputed terms from definitions (75bc, 79de), the relation among the virtues (73de, 79a-d), the good-dependence of desire (77c-78a), and the role of virtue and externals in eudaimonia (78c-e).

MENO'S PARADOX

But then, after a familiar statement of Socratic ignorance, Meno raises a problem for their inquiry.

How will you look for it [virtue], Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know [80d]?

The paradox is roughly this: how is knowledge or even inquiry possible if

- (a) inquiry into F is necessary for knowledge of F, and
- (b) knowledge of F is necessary for inquiry into F.

That's a "catch-22". Socrates accepts (a) (71b). (b) is new and what raises the present problem. But (b) is a natural challenge to Socratic inquiry. If, as Socrates claims, he is ignorant about virtue, how can he hope to identify and assess definitions of virtue? We might reconstruct Meno's worry as follows.

1. If I don't know what x is, I know nothing about x.
2. If I know nothing about x, I can't identify x.
3. If I can't identify x, I can't recognize x as the subject of my inquiry.
4. If I can't recognize x as the subject of my inquiry, I can't inquire into x.
5. Hence, if I don't know what x is, I can't inquire into x.
6. I don't know what x is.
7. Hence, I can't inquire into x.

THE SLAVE BOY

Socrates's examination of the slave boy is a mini-elenchus and is supposed both to show that Socratic inquiry can avoid paradox. The slave is initially confident that he knows the answer to Socrates's question, but Socrates not only shows that his answer is wrong but reduces the slave to a state of confusion. In this state of confusion the slave is better-off and closer to knowing (84ab). Moreover, through the process of elenctic examination of the slave's beliefs, he can reach the correct answer (85c). With repeated elenctic examination, Socrates implies, the slave's correct belief would come to be knowledge (85c7-d1). Here is a case of inquiry being

both possible and successful, even though the interlocutor did not know at the start of the inquiry (85c3). But **how** is this possible?

KNOWLEDGE AND TRUE BELIEF

Socrates distinguishes between knowledge and true belief (85c5-6; cf. 97b1-2) and claims that inquiry without knowledge was possible because the slave had some true beliefs; elenctic examination of beliefs, some number of which are true, will help identify these and other true beliefs and provide the sort of justification that can turn these true beliefs into knowledge (85c5-d3; cf. 97d8-98a4).

Specifically, we can reject Meno's paradox by rejecting (2). Knowledge of x is not necessary to identify x; some true beliefs about x are sufficient to "fix the reference" of 'x' and identify x for purposes of inquiring into x's nature.

THE THEORY OF RECOLLECTION

So far, this is a deflationary or non-metaphysical account of Socrates's reply to Meno's paradox. It ignores Plato's famous doctrine of Anamnesis or Recollection. Recollection posits the immortality of the soul and claims that embodied souls have existed previously (at least some of the time in other bodies). In their wanderings, these souls have learned all there is to know; but in the process of embodiment, the soul forgets this knowledge. The prodding of the elenchus accesses this information; because the beliefs are brought back without their account (logos), the person recalls true beliefs. Proper elenctic investigation restores this account and so restores knowledge (81b3-e3, 85c1-86b3, 97d8-98a8).

THE RELATION BETWEEN RECOLLECTION AND TRUE BELIEF

But what exactly is the relationship between the appeals to Recollection and True Belief? Plato seems to accept True Belief. Why add Recollection?

Perhaps Recollection is added as an "inference to the best explanation". Recollection supplements True Belief by offering an explanation of the latter's claims. How do interlocutors come to have the true beliefs that are sufficient for the possibility of inquiry? Is this just some fortunate coincidence? Recollection seems to provide an answer: it's no accident that interlocutors (e.g. the slave) have (has) true beliefs; souls have been around for a long time -- long enough to have acquired knowledge.

However, Recollection might actually seem to be a **bad** explanation of True Belief, because it might seem to be incompatible with it. True Belief resolves Meno's paradox by appeal to the interlocutor's possession of true beliefs without knowledge. But Recollection may seem to ascribe knowledge, and not just true belief, to the interlocutor. But this objection misunderstands Recollection. Meno's paradox asks how the interlocutor can inquire without knowledge; True Belief says this is possible if she has true beliefs without knowledge. Recollection posits knowledge -- but not in the interlocutor at the time of inquiry. At the outset of inquiry, Recollection allows, the interlocutor has no knowledge, not even tacit knowledge. According to Recollection, it is the interlocutor's soul that knew p but has **forgotten**. Embodiment strips the soul of the account of p and, sometimes, p itself. So at the time of inquiry, the interlocutor has at most some (not all) true beliefs, and some of these can only be retrieved by elenctic prodding. So, whereas True Belief appeals to true beliefs without knowledge, Recollection appeals to prior knowledge; these two claims are compatible.

But Recollection does posit prior knowledge (81c6-7). Of course, if we had such knowledge and lost the account (logos), we might see how we now have true belief. But this just pushes our question back. How did we acquire this knowledge previously? We may have had an infinite amount of time to gather knowledge, but the worry Meno's paradox raises is not affected by how long we had to pursue inquiry -- it isn't that inquiry is impossible iff you're in a hurry. If we assume that the appeal to true belief must be explained in terms of prior knowledge, as Recollection does, we seem to be off on an infinite and apparently vicious regress.

Recollection seems insufficient as a resolution of Meno's paradox. But it may be unnecessary. Why not just accept True Belief? Inquiry is possible if we have some beliefs about the subject matter of the inquiry, and successful inquiry is possible if enough of our initial beliefs are true (or sufficiently approximately true).

We can ask how we come by true beliefs. This is a perfectly sensible question, but the resolution of the paradox does not depend upon its answer. The question itself initiates a particular inquiry that we can pursue if we have some initial beliefs and that we can pursue successfully if we have some true beliefs.

Consider an evolutionary explanation of why beings like us should hold true beliefs in terms of the selective advantages of (certain) true beliefs. Though someone might try to argue in this way that certain true beliefs could be "hard wired" into us, a more modest suggestion might be that this explains why what is hard wired is not specific true beliefs -- innate beliefs or ideas -- but certain cognitive capacities -- innate capacities -- that when stimulated in certain ways activate cognitive faculties that acquire and process beliefs in reliable ways.

Socrates is concerned with moral inquiry. We may wonder whether there's any comparable explanation of innate moral beliefs or capacities. Here Plato might appeal to the account Protagoras offered in defense of the claim virtue is widely distributed within Athenian society. It's no accident that people should possess reasonably reliable moral capacities; a certain amount of (other-regarding) virtue is necessary to secure and maintain the benefits of social intercourse and stability (Pr 323a, 324d-325a).

Of course, such innateness hypotheses differ from Recollection in important ways: there are no metaphysical assumptions of immortality, nor is there the assumption that the interlocutor ever knew or even believed the correct answer to the inquiry prior to the inquiry. But the innateness hypothesis nonetheless resembles Recollection at least in this important respect: it explains the possibility of inquiry and learning by appeal, in part, to facts about the cognitive equipment that the interlocutor brings to the inquiry. Nor is it entirely clear that Plato seriously commits himself to much more than this, for just after explaining True Belief, Plato has Socrates say that finding knowledge within oneself just is recollection (85d5-6). Someone might say that the real doctrine of recollection is just anything, such as True Belief, that explains how learning is possible in terms of resources within the interlocutor and that the metaphysical story about prenatal knowledge is merely a metaphor or at most speculation about what these internal resources are (cf. 86b5-6).