

Meno's Paradox of Inquiry and Socrates' Theory of Recollection

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Abstract:

In Plato's "Meno", the eponymous character suggests that inquiry is impossible. The argument he constructs for this has come to be known as "Meno's Paradox". As a solution to this paradox, Socrates proposes his "Theory of Recollection". This essay proposes that, whilst Socrates' Theory of Recollection is an inadequate response to Meno's Paradox, the Paradox can nevertheless be overcome in a simple manner.

There are two main notions which this essay is based around, namely, “Meno’s Paradox” and Socrates’ “Theory of Recollection”; the latter notion is often considered to be a solution to the problem of the first. In this essay, I will begin by explaining, in brief terms, the two notions, before looking critically at each of them. By doing this, I hope to show several things. Firstly, I want to show that Meno’s Paradox can be overcome without too much difficulty. Secondly, I want to show that, even though Meno’s Paradox can be overcome without too much difficulty, Socrates’ Theory of Recollection is not a way of overcoming it, and cannot be used as a response to the paradox. Finally, I wish to show that, even though the Theory of Recollection cannot be used as a direct response to Meno’s Paradox, it is nevertheless a clever and creative theory, which cannot be shown conclusively to be false, though by the same token, nor can it be shown conclusively to be true.

Meno’s Paradox, proposed at Meno 80d-e by the dialogue’s eponymous character, and stated in clearer terms by Socrates is as follows: “a man cannot inquire either about what he knows or about what he does not know – for he cannot inquire about what he knows, because he knows it, and in that case is in no need of inquiry; nor again can he inquire about what he does not know, since he does not know about what he is to inquire.” This, then, is Meno’s Paradox: inquiry is impossible, and by extension, learning is impossible. We can never acquire new knowledge.

Socrates does seem to take Meno’s Paradox seriously, and he responds by proposing his Theory of Recollection, which runs as follows. The soul, says Socrates, is immortal (81a-b). This is a fundamental, primary belief upon which the rest of the theory rests. The soul has been born many times, and has experienced an enormous amount of things; when we make inquiries or do what we call “learning”, we are in fact merely recollecting the knowledge which our soul has acquired before our human lifetime: “Inquiring and learning are wholly recollection.”¹ This is the theory, and Socrates goes on to use a slave-boy for the purposes of demonstrating his theory (82b-85b). Socrates makes the boy tell him that a square, whose sides are 2 units long, has an area of 4 square units. S then asks how long the sides would have to be in order for the area to be double, i.e. 8 square units. Initially the boy imagines that the sides of the square would have to be double, and so his reply is “4 units”; obviously, though, this will produce a square with an area of 16 square units, and so this is the wrong answer. The boy understands that he has given the wrong answer, and so after his initial confident answer that the square needed to have sides 4 units long, he is reduced to a state of perplexity. Through his own “recollection”, so Socrates claims,

1 *Meno* 81c-d.

he has realised his error. Socrates uses the way that this boy started off knowing nothing but ended up by realising his errors and reaching some true opinions, to make the claim that “he who does not know about any matters, whatever they be, may have true opinions on such matters, about which he knows nothing” (Meno, 85c). Socrates makes the additional observation that the boy will be able to have as firm a grasp of mathematics as anyone, if the right questions are put to him, so he does not actually need to be taught as such, but rather just needs to be helped along his path of recollection: “without anyone having taught him, and only through questions put to him, he will understand, recovering the knowledge out of himself” (Meno 85d). Socrates says that the boy holds true opinions about these geometrical matters, and that if he did not acquire them during this lifetime, then he must have learnt them at some other point; this must have been before he was a human being, maintains Socrates. If truth of all things is always in the soul, then the soul must be immortal (Meno 85e-86a). Socrates points out an additional benefit of believing in his Theory of Recollection, namely, that it will make us “better and braver and less helpless”². It does this by making us challenge our assumptions and “look into our soul” to find the correct answers to questions.

Before moving on to a criticism of these notions, I will first briefly talk through a passage in Plato's *Phaedo*, in order to elucidate further, and provide greater justification for, the Theory of Recollection. When someone sees something, says Socrates, it reminds him of something it is like; for example, when one sees a picture of Simmias, it reminds him of Simmias (*Phaedo* 73e-74a). When this sort of thing occurs, that is, when one has a recollection caused by like things, one considers whether the recollection offers a perfect likeness of the thing recollected (*Phaedo* 74a). To use a more abstract example, when one sees some “equal” pieces of wood, one recognises that they fall short of a perfect likeness with the abstract property of “equality” (*Phaedo* 74d), as no pieces of wood will be perfectly equal in length. Anyone who says that something he perceives is like something else must necessarily have knowledge of the thing it resembles but falls short of (*Phaedo* 74e). It is through the senses that we recognise that all sensible objects fall short of absolute equality; but it is before using the senses (in other words, before being born) that one must have gained a knowledge of the abstract concepts themselves, such as that of perfect equality (*Phaedo* 75b). The knowledge of these abstract concepts thus comes from an

immortal soul, which gained knowledge of abstract essences such as “to kalon” (“the fine”) and “to agaqon” (“the good”) before human birth.

It is now time to criticise Meno’s Paradox and Socrates’ Theory of Recollection. The former is in my opinion nothing more than a piece of sophistry, like most paradoxes, and so it can be dealt with relatively quickly. For the sake of clarity, I will write out Meno’s Paradox in a more formal manner than has hitherto been used. It runs thus:

- 1) Something is either known or not known.
- 2) If it is known, then there is no need for inquiry, since it is already known.
- 3) If it is not known, then no inquiry can occur, because we do not know what the object of our inquiry is.

Proposition 1) is, undoubtedly, correct. This is basic logic: something is either “x” or it is not “x”; in this particular instance “x” just so happens to equal “what is known”. We might say, then, that proposition 1) is necessarily correct. One might object that something can be “half-known”, or at some point along the “knowledge spectrum”. For example, a man might be able to remember seven of the eleven digits which constitute his mobile phone number; as for the other four, he does “know”, them, but he just cannot remember them at present. If someone were to say the remaining four digits to him, then he would instantly remember them and recognise them as his own. It might seem a little inaccurate, then, either to say definitively that “He does not know his telephone number”, or that “He knows his telephone number”. My response to this objection is simple: the person in the analogy did not know his telephone number, as he was not able to think, at the time in question, what it was. The same will be true in all analogous situations. People might have some of the “pieces” required for knowledge of “x”, but if they do not have all the “pieces”, then they do not know “x”. To talk in less abstract terms, the man who could not remember his phone number had some of the digits needed in order to have knowledge of it, but he did not have all of the digits; therefore, he did not know his phone number. “Knowledge” entails a present state of mind, and so it is of no account that the man happened to know the phone number in the past, or that he might have known it again at some point in the future. If he does not know it in the present, he does not know it.

Proposition 2) is correct, but not necessarily correct, by which I mean that it is not a logical necessity for it to be correct. Proposition 2) is correct for practical,

rather than logical reasons. If someone knows something, he is perfectly entitled to make an inquiry to find out what he already knows; it would, however, be a stupid and pointless thing to do. Thus, whilst proposition 2) is not necessarily correct in the way that proposition 1) is, it is nevertheless correct, and so requires no further investigation.

Proposition 3) is the only one of the three propositions which I consider to be false. Since it is a universal maxim, providing but one counter-example will be sufficient to show that it is false. We might not know the object of our inquiry, but that does not mean that we do not know the methods of inquiry which are necessary to find out this object. For example, in my college, there are code-locks on doors, and one must know the correct code in order to pass through the door. I want to go to the computer room, but I have no idea what the code is. However, I have a very simple way of finding out: at the Porter's Lodge there is a list of codes, and I only have to go there and ask, and I will immediately be told the correct code for the door. In this instance, I started off not knowing something, but my ignorance did not render me helpless to inquire; I had in mind a very simple method of inquiry, I followed this inquiry through to its conclusion, and I reached the knowledge that I desired.

One might object to me that a distinction needs to be drawn between a priori and a posteriori knowledge. A priori knowledge is that which can be known without reference to experience, whereas a posteriori knowledge can only be known through reference to experience. The knowledge in the aforementioned example was of the a posteriori sort, whereas Meno had in mind a priori knowledge. Evidence for this is the fact that the ensuing dialogue deals purely with geometrical truths, which are examples of a priori knowledge. It is true that Socrates used diagrams in order to clarify his discussion with the slave-boy, but that does not render the type of information in question a posteriori, as the diagrams were only used to elucidate the rational processes which were going on inside the heads of Socrates and the slave-boy. Indeed, as Vlastos rightly says, diagrams were unnecessary in this section of the dialogue, and indeed the whole section from 82b9-85b7 could be replaced with a much more simple discussion of some of the mathematical implications of adding various numbers to one another, without making any difference to the content of Socrates' conclusions³. It is clear, then, that this section of the dialogue is concerned

3 Vlastos does in fact make his own Platonic-style dialogue in order to demonstrate his point, and in my opinion it works very well. See G. Vlastos, "Anamnesis in the Meno", represented in J. Day (editor), *Plato's Meno in Focus*, Page 90.

solely with a priori knowledge, and so perhaps I was in error, the critic would say, in not making this distinction when I claimed that proposition 3) was false.

I can answer this objection in two ways. Firstly, if proposition 3) is intended to be concerned with a priori knowledge only, then it exceptionally-poorly written, as this fact can in no way be inferred from looking at the proposition itself. If proposition 3) is intended to be aimed solely at a priori knowledge, then this fact makes an absolutely enormous difference as to how we interpret it, and so it is a very bad error indeed to make no mention of this fact. I would almost go so far as to say that it is absurd to suggest that it has in mind a priori knowledge only: so great is the difference that this would make, that it is entirely ridiculous for it to have wholly neglected to mention this fact. My second answer is that, even if proposition 3) is aimed merely at a priori knowledge, it makes no difference, as we can learn new a priori knowledge anyway. Socrates induces the boy to learn new knowledge⁴; to use a simpler example, I can learn, a priori, that $1,389,987 + 1 = 1,389,988$ (and one cannot claim that this is a posteriori knowledge: it is inconceivable that anyone might have had sensible knowledge of such large numbers).

Proposition 3) is incorrect, and thus, the whole of Meno's Paradox is incorrect. Before evaluating Socrates' Theory of Recollection, I will first explain why it cannot solve Meno's Paradox, whether or not it is true. The reason for this is that a new and very similar paradox can be made out of it, simply by substituting Meno's terminology for Socrates'; White composes this new paradox better than I could, and so I quote in full White's words:

“You will not of course attempt to recollect what you have already recollected, since you have no need to. But how will you attempt to recollect a thing of which you have merely unrecollected knowledge? What sort of thing, among those things of which you have only unrecollected knowledge, will you set up as the object of your search? Or to put it otherwise, even if you happen to come right upon it, how will you know that it is that of which you had merely unrecollected knowledge?”⁵

We can see, then, that the Theory of Recollection cannot be used in order to solve Meno's Paradox; but that is not an objection against the Theory itself. Simply because

⁴ For ease, I use the term “learn”, even though S is at great pains to explain that the boy is not in fact “learning”, but rather, “recollecting”. However, since this is irrelevant to the subject in hand, I consider it easier simply to use the normal term “learn”.

⁵ N. White, “Inquiry”, represented in J. Day (editor), *Plato's Meno in Focus*, Page 163.

it cannot be used for the end towards which it was created is not an objection against its veracity. I shall therefore now evaluate the veracity of the theory itself.

I made the distinction between a priori and a posteriori knowledge when I was evaluating Meno's Paradox. The same distinction must be made when looking at Socrates' Theory of Recollection. When it comes to a posteriori knowledge, it is clear that recollection plays no part in its acquisition. If I want to find out the colour of somebody's hair, I will look at their hair, and through the medium of sight, will acquire the knowledge that their hair is, say, "black". This has nothing to do with recollection, and it is clear that, if I do have an immortal soul of the sort which Socrates is claiming that I have, then this is not the sort of knowledge which is known by it. Empirical knowledge is simply not its realm. For this reason, I can quite confidently say that the Theory of Recollection is only applicable to knowledge which can be acquired purely through reason, and I do count this as a major objection to it.

The reason why I count it as a major objection that the Theory of Recollection only accounts for knowledge derived by reason is that this sort of knowledge is pointless without knowledge derived by the senses as a compliment to it. Scientific progress relies upon empirical evidence. Undoubtedly, rational thought plays a major part in any academic inquiry, and I would not go so far as to say that all a priori truths are analytic and trivial. Advanced mathematics, for example, whilst being an example of a wholly a priori science, can be usefully applied to less abstract fields, such as engineering, economics, and physics; in conjunction with empirical evidence, mathematical truths help a great deal in our understanding of the world. Nor is it necessarily the case that all a priori truths are analytic: Kant cited as examples of synthetic a priori concepts causality, space, and time - he said that these were concepts which it was necessary for us to grasp, a priori, before we could make any sense of our experiences of the world. For these reasons, I am not by any means understating the importance and value of a priori knowledge. At the same time though, I am making the point that in isolation, a priori knowledge does not achieve much; the empirical evidence gathered through our sensory faculties is the most important tool in learning about the world, and since this is not accounted for by Socrates' Theory of Recollection, his theory does not account for how we acquire a very substantial portion of our knowledge.

Even if we accept that Socrates' theory is limited, since it only deals with a priori knowledge, there are still problems with it. When Socrates gives the geometrical demonstration with the slave-boy, he seems to ask questions which could be construed

as “teaching”; if this is the case, then the boy is not really recollecting at all, but rather, he is simply being taught. Many of his questions demand simply “yes” or “no” answers, and, we presume, the slave-boy can tell from how the question is phrased what answer S expects. For example, when Socrates begins a question with “ouk”, then he clearly is expecting the answer “yes”. I do think, however, that Socrates’ demonstration with the slave-boy can be defended against the charge that Socrates is merely teaching the boy. As Moravcsik says, there is a difference between questioning and understanding, which comes in the form of understanding. In his words, “There is apparently, according to Plato, a gap between the question and the response. This unobservable gap is understanding.”⁶ I would be reluctant to accept this answer, were it not for an additional fact, namely, that the slave-boy cannot rely upon Socrates to guide him directly, as we might expect, for the reason that on several occasions he deliberately misleads him. Vlastos says, and I agree with him, that Socrates is not teaching the boy, “because he cannot cite Socrates’ attitude toward p as evidence for its truth. Socrates makes sure of this both by instructing him, ‘Answer just what you think’, 83d2, and also by the more painful method of laying booby-traps for him along the way which teach him that he cannot rely on Socrates to make the right suggestions to him”⁷. For these reasons, I think we can say with justification that Socrates is not teaching the boy, and so we have not yet shown that the slave-boy is not “recollecting” the knowledge which he seems to acquire.

We can tell, then, that something is needed to bridge the gap between understanding and input (i.e. what Socrates tells the slave-boy). However, whether that something is necessarily “recollection” is another matter. We might just as plausibly claim that this “something” is a capacity for rational thought, with which we are born. Some might be inclined to say that the Theory of Recollection is in fact saying just this, and in this case it should be treated as an elaborate metaphor for a rational capacity. However, I do not think this is the case. For a start, it is probable (but not necessary) that any set of ideas which is quite as elaborate and grand as the Theory of Recollection has more substance to it than mere allegorical usage. Moreover, we must remember that the historical figure of Socrates was himself supposed to be a religious man, who did actually hold to be true his beliefs about the immortality of the soul. Vlastos says, “Those who come to our text without sympathy for its religious inspiration are apt to look at its union with annoyance and to think that Plato might have been a great philosopher or, at any rate, a good one, had it not been for his

6 J. Moravcsik, “Learning as Recollection”, represented in J. Day (editor), *Plato’s Meno in Focus*, Page 123.

7 G. Vlastos, “Anamnesis in the Meno”, represented in J. Day (editor), *Plato’s Meno in Focus*, Page 98.

religion.”⁸ I think that this viewpoint is a little unfair, though I am not criticising Vlastos for it as he is not claiming it as his own view but rather saying that this is what some people think. Socrates, or Plato, whoever these religious beliefs belong to⁹, did very well to fit his philosophy around his own belief system, and I think he is to be admired for sticking by his religious beliefs whilst exploring philosophical ideas which were consistent with those religious beliefs. Nevertheless, the fact remains that, if we do not believe in the immortality of the soul, and what is more reincarnation, then we are going to find it very hard to believe any of the subsequent beliefs which Socrates builds upon it, including of course his Theory of Recollection. This rules out a lot of people: any Christian, for example, or Muslim, or Jew, is not going to be able to agree with Socrates' theory for this very reason. Even those with religions which do believe in reincarnation, for example Hindus and Buddhists, are not going to believe in Plato's theory, because he is proposing a very particular form of reincarnation which is inconsistent with the beliefs of the aforementioned religions. At the same time, though, it would be an impossible task (and I mean “impossible” in a literal sense) to disprove that there is an immortal soul which is reincarnated many times, in the way Socrates says that there is.

In conclusion, Meno's Paradox can be overcome fairly easily. The Theory of Recollection is an original and inventive way of accounting for the understanding of mathematical kinds of truth. I would shrink from calling it “plausible”, as it is based on the questionable assumption that there is an immortal soul which has been reincarnated many times before entering the human body, a soul which has experienced and so has knowledge of everything. However, at the same time, it is impossible to rule out the possibility that such an immortal soul does exist, and Socrates' Theory of Recollection is indeed correct.

8 G. Vlastos, “Anamnesis in the Meno”, represented in J. Day (editor), *Plato's Meno in Focus*, Page 104.

9 And I will not, at this time, delve into the issue of whether the ideas proposed in the Platonic dialogues represented the views of Socrates or of Plato himself.

