

Meno and the Paradox of Inquiry

I. The Paradox of Inquiry

In the Meno, Meno poses a question for Socrates (80d):

How will you look for [the definition of 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 you did not know?

Socrates restates this as the following paradox (80e):

I know what you want to say, Meno...that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for
what he does not know. He cannot search for what he knows -- since he knows it, there is no
need to search -- nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for.

In the discussion which follows, Socrates proposes to resolve this paradox of inquiry with his Doctrine of Recollection.

II. What is the Doctrine of Recollection?

Socrates states several points which he claims to have heard from the poets. These include (81b-e):

- i) The soul is immortal.
- ii) The soul has been born often.
- iii) There is nothing that the soul has not learned.
- *iv) The soul can recollect the things it knew before.
- *v) Recollecting is what men call learning.
- vi) Because all of nature is akin, after recollecting something one can go on to learn everything else if one is brave and untiring.

III. Two questions:

How is this doctrine of recollection supposed to solve the paradox?

What reasons does Plato offer for accepting the doctrine (aside from its value as a potential solution to the paradox)?

IV. The Argument

Does the example of the slave boy provide an argument for the doctrine of recollection, or more specifically, for (iv), and (v)? Consider the following reconstruction of the argument based on 85b-86b. Let 'D' be the answer to Socrates' question, viz., that a square with an area double a given square is a square constructed on the diagonal of the given square.

1. The slave boy didn't know the answer D, at the beginning of the inquiry. (85c)
 - he had never studied geometry in the past (85e)
 - he initially gave wrong answers. (egg., 82e)
2. He answered the questions on the basis of his opinion, i.e., he was not told along the way what to say in response to Socrates' questions. (85b)
 - BUT: some might object that Socrates "supplied" the slave boy with the answers, and so the boy did not find the answers, egg., D, on his own.

Possible Responses:

- Although Socrates provided the boy with options to consider, Socrates did not tell him what conclusions to draw. The boy made the judgments of correctness and incorrectness on his own. So the boy did not use Socrates as an authority in coming to his answer, but found the answer himself.

- Although Socrates played a role in guiding the boy, and although Socrates himself knew the solution in advance, nevertheless, a similar discussion could have occurred between two people who did not know the solution. It could even have occurred as an internal dialogue within a single person who did not know the solution. (Consider yourself thinking through a math problem.) This shows that it is possible to gain knowledge without relying on an authority to give the solution.

3. The boy arrived at the correct answer and either knows D, or could come to know D through further elenctic testing. (85c6-d2)

4. If the boy now has knowledge of D, he must have either:

- a) acquired the knowledge at some time, or
- b) always possessed the knowledge. (85d6)

5. Suppose that he acquired the knowledge of D at some time (This is the first option in premise 4).

--He didn't acquire it from us in this discussion. (from 2)

--He didn't acquire it at another time in his life. (from 1)

--So if he acquired it, it was not in this life, but before.

--But if he acquired it before this life, then he must have forgotten it at the beginning of the inquiry. (Since then he didn't state the right answers.)

--But he knows now, and that knowledge came from "within himself". (From 2 and 3)

--But finding knowledge "within oneself" (after forgetfulness) is recollecting.

--So the slave boy must have recollected D.

6. Suppose alternatively that the boy has always possessed the knowledge of D (and did not acquire it at any time). (This is the second option in premise 4.)

--If he always possessed the knowledge, then he must have forgotten it at the beginning of the inquiry.

--But he knows now, and the knowledge came from "within himself".

--But finding knowledge "within oneself" (after forgetfulness) is recollecting.

- So the slave boy must have recollected D.

(5) and (6) cover the options offered in (4), and under both suppositions it appears that that the slave boy recollected D. Thus the argument concludes that the boy's learning D through inquiry was recollection.

V. How does this function as a solution to the paradox of inquiry?

According to the Doctrine of Recollection, inquiry is a process of recollecting what we knew before. So:

--We search for what we once knew, and this serves as our guide in organizing our inquiry, and enables us to recognize the knowledge when we find it.

--But we also search for what we don't know now, because we have forgotten it. Our inquiry has a point, since the knowledge we have is not immediately accessible and we need to retrieve it.

Question:

If the boy must have acquired the knowledge before, how did he acquire it? Did he acquire it through inquiry? If so, then doesn't this simply push the problem back? Why doesn't the paradox of inquiry arise also for his inquiry in an earlier life?

- perhaps he always knew, i.e., it isn't acquired knowledge.

- perhaps he acquired the knowledge in a way other than through inquiry.

VI. Evaluation of the argument

There are two points where the argument is especially weak:

a) Socrates assumes that whenever one finds knowledge within oneself it is recollection (85d4). But this is this right?

b) Socrates claims that if the boy acquired the knowledge of D, he must have done so in a former life.

What are his reasons for thinking this?

- the boy didn't acquire the knowledge from his interlocutors.
- the boy didn't acquire the knowledge earlier in life.

But do these exhaust all the options? Maybe he didn't acquire the knowledge from Socrates just now, but nevertheless acquired it just now. We might say that he acquired it from reflection on and reasoning about his beliefs.

Even if we should be hesitant to accept the doctrine of recollection on the basis of Socrates' argument, what should we learn from the example? Does the example show that we can gain knowledge in some way other than empirical observation, or by accepting the conclusions of an authority?