Ancient Philosophy

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Classics and “Depth”

• Before we get going today, try out this question:

• What makes something a classic text? (whether it’s a work of fiction, poetry, philosophy, etc)
Meno
• We notice that Meno is a student of Gorgias, a well-known sophist. In addition, Meno claims that he has given many fine speeches about virtue on many occasions.

• Notice that Socrates again claims that we need to first find out what virtue is in order to discover whether it can be taught.

• Socrates then proceeds to examine Meno in his usual way, asking for a definition of virtue, and in particular, one that has the relevant form.
• Notice that Meno does not “play ball.” Whereas Euthyphro (among other interlocutors) agrees that Socrates’ question is perfectly good, Meno says that “somehow, I don’t think that virtue is like that.” Some commentators think Meno’s exchange implies that he is dimwitted or slow. I don’t agree. It might in fact be the case that Meno is asking a perfectly legitimate question: why should we expect that all of our concepts should admit of the kind of rigorous account that Socrates demands?
• While reading the Meno, it may be helpful to consult the Recipe for Socratic dialogues that I put on the class Evernote page.

• How does Meno depart from this pattern?
The first part: Socrates and Meno on the definition of Virtue (70-79)
• The dialogue does not begin with a preamble or situation. Instead, we begin right in the middle of the conversation.

• The question guiding discussion: can virtue be taught?
In order to answer the question whether virtue can be taught, they need to find out what virtue itself is.
• What is Meno’s first attempt at an answer?
• How does Socrates respond?
Meno

- 71e: a virtue for a man, another for a woman, and so on
Socrates

Hint: Bees...

Because of the analogies: we find one account of bees, strength, so why not virtue?
73d: V = the ability to rule over men

(problem: CX, slaves and little children have V, but do not rule)
73e: V = Justice

(problem: this is a part of virtue, not the whole thing)
78d: \( V = \text{power of securing good things justly} \)

Problem?
• Socrates asks Meno for a definition of a particular type, and Meno balks.

• What reasons does Meno give for not accepting Socrates’ type of definitions?

• What examples does Socrates use in order to convince Meno that his type of definition is the one they should pursue?
• What happens next?
The Stingray

• How does Meno describe what Socrates’ questioning does to him?

• How does Socrates respond?

• Where have we seen this before? (hint: Euthyphro)
The Paradox of Inquiry

- How will you search for anything?
- If the person knows what it is, there is no need to search.
- If the person does not know what it is, how will they start to look for it at all?
Conditions on Searching

• 1: Targeting
• 2: Recognition
• Let’s compare different kinds of searches.

• Suppose I send someone on a search for a pen, or a key.

• How would we direct such a search?

• How does this compare to searching for a concept?

• Can we generate the paradox for that kind of searching?
• One important caveat:

• The paradox can be put in stronger or weaker forms, depending on how much a person is allowed to know or believe at the beginning of the search.

• Now, does this mean that Plato leaves the paradox intentionally flexible?
• How do they respond to the paradox?

• Meno says: “does this argument seem correct to you?”

• Socrates: No

• Meno: Why not?

• Socrates: because....
• “Because, Meno, if we keep searching as we have searched before, we will come upon someone who has the correct definition. I have heard of a man from Chios who is reputed to be a wise fisherman. Let us go ask him and see what he says the definition is.”
Recollection

- Socrates gives the response that the theory of recollection can solve the problem.
- What sort of answer is this?
- Do you think it works?
- What is recollection, anyway?
The next big question is what the slave boy example has to do with any of this.

Is it an example of recollection?

If so, how does it work? What does it show about recollection?
As an experiment, let’s see if we can reconstruct this case for ourselves...
Area = 4
Problem: what is the length of the side of a square double the area?
Let's try a solution...

• What about a square with a length of 4?
• Problem: to find the side of the square double the original square’s size
• Initial proposal: double the original side
• Problem: gives us area of 16, not 8
Let's try another solution...

- What about a square with length of 3?
• Next proposal: side of length 3
• problem: gives us an area of 9
• The boy thought he knew before, but now realizes he does not know
• Socrates says they have benefitted him.
• Why?
• Because, before he was mistaken, but had no motivation to search. But now that he realizes the mistake, he wants to know the answer.
original $= 4$
• Next proposal: side of length 3

• problem: gives us an area of 9
In what sense is the answer to the puzzle an example of recollection?
Key point: what are the minimal assumptions needed in order to set out the machinery of the theory of recollection properly? We might divide the assumptions into two general classes. On the one hand, we have traditional assumptions about the soul and reincarnation/transmigration. On the other hand, we have assumptions about the person, here and now, who is attempting to recollect something that he or she already “knows.” The crucial question is whether the two sets of assumptions can come apart.
Possible Assumptions

- Subject K lived prior to birth.
- K existed in such a state that he could behold the forms
- K beheld the forms
- K, when born on earth, “holds in his mind (dimly)” all or most of his previously viewed forms
- All K have some, not all knowledge (Vlastos, 155)
• Recollected items are recovered from “inside K’s mind”, but are not present in the mind before the process of recollection as knowledge. (Vlastos, 155)

• All K are able to be led by a sufficiently masterful inquirer to recollect the appropriate item.

• All K have the ability to make correct judgments (Vlastos, 155)

• All K have the ability to extend their knowledge (by persevering in inquiry) without any preassigned limit (Vlastos, 155)
Some questions to consider

• Does the Theory of Recollection count as a satisfactory answer to the Paradox of Inquiry? Why or why not?

• Would Socrates' method of seeking definitions enable him to answer the Paradox of Inquiry? What would such an answer (or attempt at an answer) look like?

• Does Recollection enable Plato to do anything that the Socratic search for definitions is not able to do?