

Daniel Anderson's Interpretation of Recollection

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In Plato's *Meno*, Socrates finds himself in a dialogue with a well-known and slightly antagonistic man named Meno. Meno asks Socrates if virtue can be taught (70a). True to Socratic form, Socrates declares they must first understand what virtue is in order to know whether or not it can be taught. They wrestle with finding a definition, and after several tries resulting in no progress, Meno offers a paradoxical set of concerns. He wonders how one can search for a thing when they do not know what it is. Beyond that, he asks how one would know they found the thing they were looking for if they had no prior knowledge of it (80d). Hearing this, Socrates dives into the famous theory of recollection, a rough attempt to show that learning is simply the recalling of things that the soul has learned in its previous existence(s), but has since been forgotten. Socrates supports his theory by helping a slave boy with limited mathematical knowledge learn geometrical concepts.

However, does Socrates' theory alleviate the paradox Meno has raised? If not, what purpose does Plato have in Socrates' theory and example? In his article "The Theory of Recollection in Plato's *Meno*," Daniel Anderson argues that the theory of recollection does nothing to solve Meno's paradox, and Plato intends this to be the case. To Anderson,

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Plato's intent in the dialogue is to point out the laziness and impotency in Meno's argument style. He suggests that the real conclusion of Socrates' argument is that we are better off for trying to inquire than believing "we can't discover what we don't know and should not look for it" (86b-c).

In this paper, I argue that Anderson overlooks the way that the theory of recollection does help solve Meno's paradox. Plato achieves this by showing the false dichotomy contained in Meno's questions. I also argue that Anderson's conclusion on Plato's intent is false because it is based on Anderson's erroneous view of the efficacy of the theory of recollection. I assert that Socrates is genuinely engaging with Meno; Plato uses this exchange to call attention to the fallibilities of a "sophistic" education like the one Meno has, rather than point out Meno's individual flaws. For my purposes here, I will assume that Socrates is the mouthpiece of Plato, and any alternative interpretations in this realm are not pertinent to my argument.

I will begin by showing that, despite what Anderson argues, Socrates' theory of recollection and dialogue with the slave boy does in fact provide an answer to Meno's paradox. The paradox poses an interesting problem on the nature of learning. A person who knows something does not need to inquire about it, because he knows it. In addition, a person who does not know a thing would have no way of knowing how to inquire about it. For example, the phrase "bananas exist" requires no inquiry given that I know bananas do exist. I have seen them and eaten them. For those who do not know about bananas, how can they figure out if they exist? If they have no concept of a curved, yellow fruit they cannot inquire about it. Indeed, the phrase "bananas exist" is meaningless to them.

Socrates' answer is essentially laid out in two parts. He first says "the soul is immortal and has been born many times, and has seen the things here and the things in Hades—everything, in fact—there is nothing that it has not learned, and so it's no surprise that it can recollect about virtue and other things that it knew before" (81c-d). So, although we feel like we are learning things completely foreign to us, we are really just recalling things we learned in a previous life. Second, he offers on-the-spot proof by having Meno call over one of his unlearned slaves to do geometry. Socrates asks if the slave boy speaks Greek and knows what a square is. The boy responds affirmatively and then, through a series of leading questions, Socrates guides the slave boy to understand that the way to double a square is to use the diagonal of his first square as the first side for his doubled square. On the surface, this example is supposed to prove that the slave boy is recollecting the math concepts he already has learned, thus showing how it is possible to gain new knowledge despite being ignorant before.

This interpretation is what Anderson uses to show how Socrates fails to solve the paradox. He asserts that Socrates is merely showing that, given prior knowledge of something, we can learn more about it (Anderson 228). The slave boy knew what a square was initially, and therefore had a base knowledge from which he could work. But Meno's paradox is asking how that original knowledge can be acquired in the first place. Anderson writes,

If the theory of recollection is accepted at face value, it might be said to account for how the embodied soul 'learns.' But Meno's paradox was not posed solely in terms of learning in this life. Rather, it considered the general possibility of learning. The paradox, therefore, immediately becomes applicable to the process by which the soul acquired knowledge prior to this life. If the doctrine of recollection were introduced to explain this learning process, learning would immediately become lost in an infinite regress. (228)

Thus, Meno could ask how the slave boy learned these things in the life before this, and Socrates would have to continuously respond that there are realms deeper and further back where this first learning occurred. Thus, he concludes that Socrates, "does nothing to solve the paradox as Meno stated it" (Anderson 228).

Given Anderson's analysis, I raise an interesting question. He takes issue with the slave boy already knowing what a square is. Anderson claims that all Socrates does is take knowledge the slave boy has and building on it, which misses the point of the paradox. But could this be the case for the person who discovered squareness? There was a time when the first square was drawn, and there was a person who first postulated that there could be a shape with four straight, connecting and equal lines. How can we explain where this knowledge derived from? It would appear that, in some instances, things are genuinely discovered. While Anderson is right that Socrates does not address this question with the slave boy, it points out a consideration that can possibly cast doubt on Meno's paradox. Attempts to answer this question lie beyond the scope of this paper.

The issue in Anderson's argument that I consider is this: even if Anderson is right in pointing out that Socrates' answer can lead to infinite regress, he falsely concludes that Socrates' answer does nothing to show that the paradox is wrong. I argue that Socrates, while not having a knockdown answer to Meno, does point out that Meno's paradox is a false dichotomy, which is certainly significant. If we take Socrates to be trying to prove his theory of recollection true, that is, to prove that there was a life before this one where our souls learned everything and that life is proven by a slave boy learning geometry, then Socrates surely fails. It does

not follow from Socrates' example that there was an existence before this. I do concede that the theory is inadequate in that sense, as a more thorough and far-reaching proof would be necessary for that undertaking. But Meno cannot hold to his questions given Socrates' answer, and we cannot write off its philosophical contributions the way Anderson does.

Glenn Rawson alludes to the idea that Meno's paradox could be a false dichotomy, but does not offer a formalized discussion to show how it may work. I attempt to show how it works here. The assumption in Meno's question is a binary view of knowledge. Either one has true, complete knowledge of a thing, or no knowledge at all. It can be formalized as such:

- (1) Concerning knowledge of things, Meno says that a person must be in either state X or state Y.
 - (2) If a person's knowledge is in state X concerning a thing, then they have true knowledge of it.
 - (3) If a person has true knowledge of a thing, they cannot learn anything more concerning it.
 - (4) If a person's knowledge is in state Y, they have no knowledge of a thing.
 - (5) If they have no knowledge of a thing, they cannot learn anything about it (they are not aware of its existence).
- (C) A person cannot learn new things.

What Socrates does with the slave boy shows that there are other levels of understanding besides these two. We know that the slave boy has knowledge of Greek and squares. Socrates' leading questions draw from this base knowledge to help the boy learn something new. Clearly, the boy has not acquired something he did not know before, though he may have been unaware that he previously had this knowledge. This move points out a new state of knowledge, one in which we do not know by experience, but we have an idea of something based on secondary evidence. We can use this secondary evidence to test a hypothesis and come to true knowledge.

Earlier, I gave an example about knowledge of bananas. I framed it in the same dichotomy that Meno does. If I have no knowledge of the existence of bananas, I cannot learn about them. If I know they exist, then I do not need to learn any more. But imagine that, despite never seeing a real banana, I have seen pictures of bananas online, or that my friends have told me about bananas. I am now in a state of knowledge that does not fit into X or Y. I am in a kind of liminal knowledge space, where I can inquire and move myself to a new state of knowledge. Should I go to the grocery store to investigate the existence of bananas, I would have my first contact with a real banana and shift to having true knowledge that bananas exist.

This state of liminal knowledge is common to us all. We see things online and on TV and are given secondary knowledge of things out in the world. It is not until we have real-life contact with the things we see that we come to true knowledge—rarely do we gain true knowledge concerning things we see online and on TV. The slave boy is in a similar situation when Socrates questions him. He knows what a square is, and soon learns the mechanics of doubling the area of a square. This shift in knowledge is cognitively significant, just like coming into contact with things one has only heard about before. The slave boy is not completely ignorant. He knows that a square can be doubled, but until he does it himself his knowledge is not sure.

Socrates has added a new state of knowledge that I will call state Z. With this addition, we can show how this changes the formal argument that Meno is making.

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- (3) If a person has true knowledge of a thing, they cannot learn anything more concerning it.
- (4) If a person's knowledge is in state Y, they have no knowledge of a thing.
- (5) If they have no knowledge of a thing, they cannot learn anything about it (they are not aware of its existence).
- (C1) A person cannot learn new things.
- (6) There is another state of knowledge, state Z.
- (7) If a person's knowledge is in state Z concerning a thing, it is based on secondary knowledge and not actual experience.
- (8) If a person has secondary knowledge but no actual experience, they may be able to learn more about that thing by experiencing it.
- (9) This experience has cognitive significance.
- (C2) Learning is possible.

The philosophical contribution made here should not be ignored. If Meno had realized what happened to his paradoxical and dichotomous questions, he would have to deal with this new state Z. Anderson errs in concluding that the theory avoids Meno's questions altogether. It does poke a legitimate hole in what Meno is saying.

From here, I turn to Anderson's argument for Plato's intent with this theory. His conclusions are informed by his mistaken view that Socrates does not successfully answer Meno. Anderson spends a good deal of time

detailing Socrates' purpose in bringing up the theory of recollection and engaging in a dialogue with the slave boy. Despite his qualms with the theory of recollection, Anderson does not assume Plato is a fool. He looks beyond the philosophical arguments of the dialogue and into the characters and drama to show that Plato has very good reasons for posing the theory. Anderson claims that Plato, through Socrates, uses the theory of recollection and dialogue with the slave boy to point out Meno's inferior view of truth and argument, and to show that we are justified in inquiring after things. He places Socrates' emphasis not on coming up with a good theory to refute Meno's paradox, but on trying to show Meno how idle his argumentative style is.

Because we have seen that the theory of recollection does shine light on Meno's paradox, I will argue that Socrates offers the theory because he is genuinely engaging with Meno, and in the end Plato intends to use Meno as an example of the fallibilities of sophistic learning. According to Anderson, Meno is a man "with excellent memory, but very little understanding; a man to treat others as his opponents and is more interested in scoring debating points than in pursuing truth" (Anderson 225). Scoring debating points is the assumed intent behind Meno's paradoxical questions. Because of this, Anderson says that Socrates employs various methods to show Meno where he is wrong in his attitude, although Meno is too prideful to know what Socrates is doing.

Anderson's first evidence for his argument is found in the way Socrates introduces the theory of recollection. Socrates says, "The soul is immortal and has been born many times, and has seen the things here and the things in Hades—everything, in fact—there is nothing that it has not learned, and so it's no surprise that it can recollect about virtue and other things that it knew before" (81c-d). Interestingly, Socrates does not take credit for this idea. He attributes it to "wise men and women" that he had heard speak in the past (81a). Anderson notes that Socrates' attitude here is odd, considering the skepticism he had of the popular teachers of his day. Socrates' skepticism is even explicit in other early dialogues like *Apology* and *Euthyphro*. He frames this point as an attempt from Socrates to give his argument the "oracular character that is more likely than reasoned argument to gain Meno's acceptance" (Anderson 229).

Is this a typical Socratic move? This is the Socrates who was dedicated to using reason to find the objective truth about what seem to be the most elementary matters. This is the Socrates who frequently criticized the verbal competition of the sophists. He cared more about finding what is right, rather than who is right. It would seem very out of character for Socrates to cite the same teachers he criticized because it is convenient for him to convince his opponent of something. He would be putting himself

on much the same level of the sophists he critiques. While it might be true that Meno would have been more receptive if he knew the idea came from prominent thinkers, it is not why Socrates brings it up in the dialogue.

Socrates is genuinely engaging with the paradox that Meno has set up. Not only is this characterization more true to form for Socrates, but there is textual evidence as well. Meno sets up his paradox in the form of a question. He says, "How will you search for [virtue], Socrates, when you have no idea what it is? What kind of thing from among those you are ignorant of will you set before yourself to look for? And even if you happened exactly upon it, how would you recognize that this is what you didn't know?" (80d). It seems self-defeating for Meno to ask how you can inquire about anything at all in the form of a question. There is a clear contradiction, but Socrates chooses not to say anything about it at this point in the dialogue. Socrates does acknowledge that he can see right through Meno's fallacious ways of argument. He refers to it as "sophistic" and when Meno asks if Socrates thinks his argument is "finely stated," he says no (81a). However, before he dives into his analysis of it, he restates it in the form of sentences, "For he cannot search for what he knows—he knows it, and there is no need to search for such a thing—nor for what he doesn't know—since he doesn't know what he's searching for" (80e). The restatement shows a willingness to adjust Meno's argument to avoid its self-defeating nature. Once Socrates has adjusted Meno's claims, he can readily use his theory to point out the flaws in what Meno says. This is evidence that he is genuinely engaging with Meno, and setting out to prove once again that a commitment to truth can trump sly persuasiveness.

As a side note, Socrates here shows a great example of the philosophical principle of charity. The philosopher must have such a drive for truth, that they are willing to build up contrary arguments where it is possible. It is always to be done in the spirit of humility, not caring to outwit an opponent but to search for understanding with them. Socrates was a lifelong example of philosophical charity; he was always more than willing to recognize his own ignorance. This kind of commitment to truth would have no doubt been important to Plato. It would characterize everything they read and spoke about in the Academy. Surely this example would not go unnoticed as Plato's students read this dialogue. Unfortunately, with Anderson's interpretation, we miss out on this lesson in philosophical charity. Socrates is only seen as bypassing Meno's argument to make an example of him.

Anderson's second textual support for this argument comes from the first questions that Socrates asks the slave boy. The slave boy is asked if he knows Greek and then if he knows what a square is. He answers in the affirmative, and as we saw earlier in the paper, creating a problem for Anderson. To him, Socrates is telling the reader that he is not actually dealing

with Meno's paradox, but rather a "looser problem of how knowledge can be acquired within a framework of previously given knowledge" (Anderson 230). The only way that this can be true is if Socrates does not actually do anything to answer Meno's paradox. Anderson argues just that, so it makes sense for him to take these questions as evidence that Socrates does not intend to engage with Meno. As we have seen earlier in the paper, the theory of recollection does disrupt the paradox, so the questions cannot be taken as evidence that Socrates only wants to show the readers that we are justified in inquiring after things.

Third, Anderson's appeal to the general roughness of the theory is taken by him to be a strong support that formulating a good answer to Meno is not Socrates' primary concern. As one who values a strong logical argument, can Socrates really be satisfied with the theory of recollection based on one interaction with a slave? Certainly not. Even if we showed one thousand times that unlearned slaves are capable of learning math, it does not follow that they learned it in premortal realms. Anderson is right to point out the potentially problematic nature of the theory of recollection. It does require a base knowledge from which we learn other things. There is reason to believe what Anderson says about the argument leading to an infinite regress is true. Socrates even seems to tacitly acknowledge this point when he says, "because all of nature is of the same kind and the soul has learned everything, nothing prevents a soul that has recollected just one thing—which people call learning—from rediscovering everything for itself" (81d).

I argue, however, that Socrates is aware of the limitations of his argument. Despite that, he still sees it as a legitimate way to poke holes in Meno's paradox. We have seen Anderson's view on why Socrates may have attributed the idea that we learn things in a previous life to other teachers. While the use of this tactic to help him best his opponent doesn't seem Socratic, he may have done it because he was aware that it might be a hard conclusion to support logically. Note that Socrates does not restate this conclusion after talking with the slave boy. Instead he says that the slave could discover those geometrical principles because his mind is "in a state of having learned throughout all time" (86a). This recapitulation is much more ambiguous than the assertion that the soul has learned everything in previous lives. Socrates may not be too invested in his theory as a way to prove this conclusion. As further evidence, Socrates says, "I wouldn't strongly insist on the other aspects of the argument" (86b). "Other aspects" here is most likely referring to his premortal life statement. But Socrates stepping back from aspects of his argument does not mean that the conclusion is only to show Meno why we should seek after truth. Socrates does not need his theory to prove a premortal life to

be efficacious. All that he needs to accomplish, the theory already does, i.e., give another state of knowledge that a person can be in besides pure intelligence and utter ignorance.

The textual clues, roughness of the theory, and the fact that Anderson does not think the theory of recollection solves Meno's paradox at all, lead him to believe that Socrates' real intent is to have the reader conclude that, "we would become better men and braver and less lazy if we believe it is necessary to search for what one doesn't know, rather than if we think that we can't discover what we don't know and should not look for it, for this I will fight strongly, if I am able, in both word and deed" (86c). This is certainly a worthwhile lesson to take from the dialogue, but it cannot be the main conclusion. I have shown that the theory of recollection and dialogue with the slave boy are, in fact, philosophically significant in pointing out the dichotomous nature of Meno's paradox. This misstep is what led to Anderson's various misinterpretations of the text, and the function of the theory of recollection itself. Anderson essentially argues that Socrates lays out a disingenuous theory. Socrates is not so much concerned in engaging with Meno's question in a reasoned way, but rather forms his answer to point out a character flaw in his interlocutor. This claim is contrary to the reasons Socrates involves himself in these kinds of conversations. It would put him on a similar level of the sophistic behavior that he does not endorse.

It is true that Socrates has a craving for truth that Meno does not. However, forming a rhetorical theory, and helping a slave boy learn math, are not Socrates' way of getting the best of Meno's careless attitude. They are authentic attempts at showing Meno the logical error in his argument. In this venture, Socrates is successful. Meno, even in his staunch reluctance to admit his own ignorance, is forced to say, "your words seem good to me, Socrates" when shown how the slave boy learns (86c).

This interpretation of the dialogue is cohesive with the way Plato depicts the behavior of Socrates. Dialogues such as *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Major*, *Parmenides*, and many others show a dialectical approach that involves proposal, then analysis, then revised proposal to get to the truth. Many of these show the dangers of being educated by, and thinking like, sophists. We watch as Socrates, through patient and detailed reasoning, shows the ignorance of one who claims to be a person of much wisdom. The exchange between Socrates and Meno is consistent with that form.

In conclusion, Daniel Anderson has adopted an interpretation of Plato's theory of recollection that is incorrect, and thus misconstrues the dialogue's intent. We have seen that even a theory as rough as Socrates' presentation of recollection can poke holes in a sophist's attempt to derail the dialectical procedure. Certainly, Plato would be concerned with his

students learning a lesson of this nature. The philosopher's way, when genuine and humble, will point out fallacious thinking in profound ways. The *Meno* is no exception to these principles, and Socrates proves that he does "fight strongly . . . in both word and deed" to give us insight into the possibility of learning (86c).

Works Cited

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