

PLATO'S MENO: LEARNING AS RECOLLECTION OF INNATE KNOWLEDGE

Learning, in the strictest sense, is the acquisition of knowledge. In the *Meno*, however, Socrates is faced with the argument of the Sophists that learning is impossible because:

- (a) a man must inquire either about what he knows, or what he does not know;
- (b) he cannot inquire about what he knows, for he already knows it;
- (c) he cannot inquire about what he does not know, for he does not know about what he is to inquire.¹

As far as Meno is concerned, this question may be regarded as an eristic trick, but for Plato it had important philosophical implications. The answer Socrates gives to this dilemma is the basis of Plato's theory of knowledge, and also of his theory of education.

All knowledge, for Plato, was true knowledge, and therefore innate. The theory of *anamnesis* put forward in the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Thaetetus* states that knowledge is acquired, not through the senses or as information conveyed by one mind to another by teaching, but by the recollection in this life of realities and truths seen and known by the soul before its re-incarnation.² Thus, immortality and knowledge are mutually interdependent.³ In as much as the soul is immortal and has been born many times before there is nothing it has not learnt. So it is not surprising that it should be able to recollect about virtue and other things that it formerly knew. As all nature is akin, and the soul has learnt everything, nothing prevents a man who is in the process of recollecting one thing- learning, as it is called - from discovering all things, if he has the endurance and is not weary of inquiring, for inquiring and learning are entirely recollection.⁴ This implies that even men in complete ignorance will give the correct answers to questions put to them, provided they are asked according to a proper method.

Thus, Socrates' answer to the dilemma posed by Meno that learning is impossible because we cannot know what we know already or what we still do not know,

¹ R.S. Bluck, introduction, *Plato's Meno*, trans. R.S. Bluck (London: Cambridge University Press, 1964) p. 8.

² F.M. Conford, introduction, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, trans. F.M. Conford, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1935) p. 2.

³ *The Phaedo of Plato*, ed. R.D. Archer-Hind, (London: Macmillan, 1883) p. 6.

⁴ Bluck, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

is simply that we both know and do not know; we know everything, in the sense that the soul had seen and experienced everything in this world and in Hades; we do not know, in the sense that in the death preceding this present birth all that the soul knew was forgotten. 'Education', in the Platonic sense, is not the introduction of facts to the mind of ignorant students; for that is impossible, as it would be like, "putting the power of sight into a blind man's eyes."⁵ It is, rather, the process of helping students to recollect that which they have learned in their past births, and is latent in their memory, though they are unconscious of it. Learning brings this up to the conscious mind. Socrates compares himself, and thus the teacher, to a kind of mental-midwife (the Socratic *maieutike*) who helps people deliver the truths which are already present in their minds. (i.e. of which they are already 'pregnant').

If we believe that knowledge is innate, and that the most anyone can do towards enabling someone else to regain knowledge is to aid his reminiscence of the same by suitable questioning, does sense experience *not* play a part in the recollecting process? It does, for real "a priori" knowledge, it seemed to Plato, could not be transmitted by word of mouth, or produced by sensible images alone.⁶ In the *Phaedo*, and *Symposium*, he accepts the fact that sense experience is of value in the discovery or re-discovery of knowledge.

If knowledge is innate, would a blind man by birth know anything of colours? According to the *tabula rasa* theory, when a sense is lacking, all the knowledge that that particular sense apprehends is absent with it. Gilson asserts that if knowledge is innate, blind people should know colours. It is obvious blind people do not know colours. This does not, however, disprove the theory of recollection as learning. In this situation, Plato gives an answer to which Gilson accedes. Though some possess innate knowledge, they are sometimes prevented from knowing them in the act by the body with which that transmigrant knowledge is united.⁷ In this particular birth, the blind person would not be able to recollect colours. However, when united with a suitable body it may have learnt about colours in previous births, and may learn in later births.

In the *Meno*, however, the epistemology of Plato is not fully developed. This is crucial to the argument of knowledge being innate. What is re-collected must have been collected previously, and if all learning is recollection, we have an infinite regress. The explanation that the soul possessed all knowledge because it had acquired this in a past birth merely raises the query: how did the soul learn these things in that previous birth? The answer would naturally be that it had acquired knowledge of them in the

⁵. Plato's *Republic*.

⁶. Bluck, *op. cit.*, pp. 12 - 13.

⁷. E. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St Thomas*, (New York: Random House, 1966) p. 213.

birth before that - and so on, backwards and backwards endlessly. Therefore, in the *Meno*, innate knowledge simply refers to knowledge acquired in past births. The knowledge-acquiring birth is not specified. It is clear, then, that Plato did not indicate a definite starting point to knowledge. However, he settles this in the *Phaedo* by introducing a new argument. The recollection he is now concerned with is not recollection of past experiences on earth.⁸ He now tells us that the soul acquired all knowledge prior to the first incarnation itself. Therefore, innate knowledge is merely being discovered and rediscovered in the physical world.

Let us for a moment leave the question of how knowledge is possible, and consider the Platonic notion of what knowledge is. True knowledge, for Plato, is knowledge of the Forms; and for him they (the Forms) exist independent of human minds. If human minds did not exist or were destroyed, yet the Forms of things exist. Plato evolves two worlds to explain his theory of knowledge, namely, the physical world and the World of Forms. Now, this physical world cannot be said to be completely existent, nor any of the things in it. For instance, chairs, in this physical world, are many, impermanent, changeable, and material. The Form of a chair (the essence of chairs which makes us call a chair a "chair") is one, eternal, unchanging and immaterial. Things of this world cannot be "known" - for knowledge must be a permanent comprehension of a reality. Of the things of this world we can at least say we have "belief" about them. We can never "know" particular chairs; of them we can only have "belief" (*doxa* as opposed to *episteme*).

On the other hand, the World of Forms, being eternal, unchanging, is the world of knowledge (which, like them, should be eternal and unchanging verities). The Forms are the same for all, and the same for all time. In this sense, they are completely existent and, therefore, completely knowable.

If perception of particular things in this physical world, whether in this life or the past ones, does not yield us knowledge, but only a state of mind we may call belief, one may question how did the soul acquire that knowledge in the first instance. To this Plato gives an answer which is metaphysical and perhaps also mystical. The soul first dwelt in the World of Forms, apprehending their splendour in pure intellectual happiness, which only the philosopher upon this earth can even vaguely apprehend. Some souls see more of the Forms than others, some see less or not clearly (This seeks to explain, how some are better at learning than others). Then, due to some misfortune (*tini dustuche*), the souls fall from that world into this, and are born in physical bodies, losing both the bliss of apprehending the Forms - an apprehension which is essentially intellectual. In the *Meno*, as stated earlier, learning was recollection of what we had seen in earlier lives. Now, in the later dialogues, recollection is of what the soul had encountered in the World of Forms itself, before it incarnated in the first instance.

⁸. Bluck, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

Ananda Coomaraswamy, in an article entitled "Recollection, Indian and Platonic," draws an interesting parallel between the Buddhistic view of recollection and the Platonic.⁹ The subject of memory is discussed in the *Milinda Panha*. It is first shown that it is not by thinking (*citta*) but by memory (*sati*) that we remember; for we are not without intelligence even when what was done long ago has been forgotten (*pamuttham*). The super-normal power exercised at will by a Buddha extends to the recollection of any birth whatever, however remote; and one who is not an arahat can only by a step by step procedure recover the memory of one or more births but no more. It occurs factitiously when those who are naturally forgetful (*muttha ssatiko*) are constrained or stimulated to remember by another person (one thing); for example, when one recognises a relative by likeness, or cattle by their brands intuitively as when one remembers what has already been seen or heard (without being 'reminded' of it). Memory in that case is a latent power. Thus, what we think we 'learn' but really remember implies that in intuition and in learning directly, we are really drawing upon or, as the older texts would express it, 'milking' an innate prescience (*pragnana*).¹⁰ In the *Digha Nikaya* we are told the gods fall from heaven only when their memory fails, and they are of confused memory (*sati mussati, satiya sammosa*). Those whose minds remain uncorrupted and do not forget are "steadfast, immutable, eternal, of a nature that knows change, and will remain so forever and ever' and such likewise is the liberated (*vimutto*)".¹¹

For Plato, similarly, a failure to remember either causes or accompanies the fall of the soul from the heights in which it pre-existed, and had visions of the truths, while its "misfortune" may have had some intrinsic connection with a failure to apprehend or retain such visions.¹²

II

In the *Meno*, Socrates undertakes to prove that all learning is nothing but recollection, by inducing Meno's slave-boy, who never studied geometry, to arrive at a geometrical truth. As we see, the slave-boy demonstration is introduced in order to satisfy Meno that it is worthwhile for him and Socrates to continue looking for virtue, although neither of them know what it is. Meno is made to understand that Socrates is not teaching the correct answer to the slave-boy. Socrates is only "asking him

⁹ A.K. Coomaraswamy, "Recollection Indian and Platonic," Supplement to *The Journal of the Oriental American Society*, Vol. LXIV, no. 2, p. 5.

¹⁰ Quoted in *op.cit.*, p. 6.

¹¹ *op.cit.*, p. 7.

¹² *op.cit.*, p. 7.

questions;¹³ he is not "telling or explaining any thing to him."¹⁴ Since, the slave-boy acquired the right opinion about the geometrical truth, it meant either that he had been taught geometry in this earthly life, or that his immortal soul possessed these true beliefs with him, including the true belief, which he did not know.¹⁵ Hence, Socrates concludes, these true beliefs need to be awakened into knowledge by questioning, i.e., by stimulating recollection.

Much has been said for and against Plato's theory of knowledge as recollection. R.S. Bluck asserts that there is a plausible theory of knowledge according to which the search for "what one does not know would not be futile."¹⁶ I cannot but agree with him in this and shall give my reason and discuss it later on in this paper. Ast and Schaarrchmidt, taking an extreme view, rejected it because of the manner in which the slave is made to "recollect" and because of the "unsoundness of the proof of immortality."¹⁷ J. Ecstein, taking a similar view, maintains that it is difficult to comprehend how the soul learnt all things during its immortality,¹⁸ and emphasizes the inadequacy of the slave-boy demonstration to prove it.¹⁹ I will refer to Ecstein's arguments later in this paper. Hugh Petrie, for his part, holds that Plato's answer in terms of recollection of a previous existence is inadequate, but maintains that nothing in intellectual history since then has contributed much of an improvement on Plato's response.²⁰

It appears to me that the theory put forward by Plato that all knowledge is innate seems plausible though it has not been successfully demonstrated in the slave-boy experiment. Perhaps in the *Meno* Plato's primary concern is to show that the slave

^{13.} *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. I, trans. B. Jowett, (New York: Random House, 1937) p. 362.

^{14.} *op. cit.*, p. 364.

^{15.} Cornford, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

^{16.} Bluck, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

^{17.} Bluck, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

^{18.} J. Ecstein, *The Platonic Method: An Interpretation of the Diabolic Philosophic Aspect of the Meno* (New York: Greenwood, 1908) p. 32.

^{19.} *op. cit.*, p. 32.

^{20.} Hugh Petrie, *Dilemmas of Inquiry and Learning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) p. 30.

boy's ideas are innate, as asserted by Bluck, and not to describe the best means of recalling them.²¹ Nonetheless, certain weaknesses in the demonstration have given rise to criticism.

The use of leading questions by Socrates is the common criticism levelled against the slave boy demonstration. A "leading question" is a question which contains the substance of the answer, and accordingly suggests the expected affirmative or negative response. Of the fifty three questions put to the slave boy by Socrates, thirty eight could be considered "leading questions." Let us follow the dialogue of the *Meno* at a point for an example.

Socrates: But does not this line become doubled if we add another such line here?

Boy: Certainly.

Socrates: And four such lines will make a space containing eight feet?

Boy: Yes.

Socrates: And are there not these four divisions in the figure, each of which is equal to the figure of four feet?

Boy: True.

Socrates: And is not that four times four?

Boy: Certainly.

Socrates: And four times is not double?

Boy: No, indeed.²²

Ecstein contends that the majority of questions put to the slave-boy was of the "leading question" type. Therefore the slave-boy's responses to Socrates promptings can in no way be considered purely recollections of a pre-natal knowledge of geometry; for Socrates is either "telling" or "explaining" the answers. He suggests that it is possible, after all, that the boy had opportunities to learn this skill and knowledge during the course of his earthly existence.²³

One cannot but agree with Ecstein that here Socrates resorted to an abundant use of "leading questions"; but *ipso facto* it does not completely nullify the theory that knowledge is innate. It cannot be said for certain that Socrates transmitted his own ideas to the boy through his questions. There is a big difference between giving the correct answer and putting insight into a person's mind. It seems to me that what Socrates was engaged in was the latter. Besides, this brings in the question of motivation. Socrates merely helped the slave boy to follow each step in the argument,

²¹ Bluck, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²² Jowett, *op. cit.*, p. 363.

²³ Ecstein, *op. cit.*, p. 363.

motivating him to express his own opinion. Therefore, it could be surmised that, leading though the questions are, and obvious though the answers are, the slave's understanding at each stage could not have been achieved if the knowledge was not already present in him. The slave does not say "yes" and "no" because of the way Socrates put the question, *but with realization accompanying*. This is the re-awakening or reminiscence process.

Again, a "leading question" may not necessarily lead a student to the correct answer. It may even mislead him. A teacher may utilise this device to test a student's power of thinking. Such a question might trap or mis-direct a student. Could not a multiple-choice question be termed a "leading question"? I think it could be. Here, the correct answer is given along with the distractors, and the student is expected to choose the correct answer from among incorrect ones. In the demonstration, though the answers seem prompted, if the slave did not recollect correctly, the answers would have been incorrect. Besides, the slave was free, either to agree or to disagree with Socrates, which would determine the correctness or incorrectness of his response. He was not responding under any form of compulsion or even constraint.

Furthermore, the use of "leading questions" was not confined only to the *Meno*. Socrates resorts to this type of questioning in the *Republic* and in the other dialogues too. Plato was an excellent educator, and it is possible that he used this subtle teaching method to test the student. It could not have been that this method of inquiry was used merely to facilitate the recollection process in order to show Meno that learning is recollection.

F.M. Cornford seems to think that Socrates' abundant use of leading questions might have created an uneasiness in Plato's mind, and this might have had something to do with the introduction of the new argument in the *Phaedo*,²⁴ Bluck contends, on the other hand, that if Plato considered the leading questions a serious flaw in the argument, he cannot have failed to recognise it; in which case, he would hardly have presented it at all.²⁵ It seems to me that the new argument in the *Phaedo* was introduced mainly because Plato felt that he had not developed his epistemology fully, and not because he considered the use of leading questions a flaw in the demonstration. For in the *Meno* Plato was not as yet ready to put forward a metaphysical theory; he was only leading up to it.

Let us examine another aspect of the demonstration. Fifteen of the questions put to the slave-boy by Socrates could be considered as non-leading direct questions. Of these, the slave-boy responded correctly to thirteen questions. These questions referred to the products of 2×2 , 3×3 , and 4×2 etc. One of these questions was answered

²⁴. Bluck, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

²⁵. *op. cit.*, p. 12.

incorrectly, one evoked an "I do not know,"²⁶ and yet another elicited an "I do not understand."²⁷ Ecstein contends that the slave-boy's ability to give correct answers to the direct questions is not sufficient proof that he has learnt these in an earlier birth. On this point it could be contended that, if knowledge was not innate, the slave-boy would not have been able to respond positively to direct questions put to him due to the following reasons.

First, it must be remembered that the questions were answered correctly by an illiterate slave-boy, not accustomed to organised thinking. However, he was not a bad student. A student who will not join the teacher in submitting his or her will to the demands of his or her subject is necessarily a bad student for Plato.²⁸ In this instance, the slave boy submitted his will to the demands of the subject. Secondly, though illiterate, he was made to find a correct solution to a difficult geometrical problem. Thirdly, Meno testified that the slave-boy had not received any instruction in geometry or otherwise in this earthly life.

Another striking feature in this slave-boy demonstration is that five of the direct questions were answered correctly and in quick succession towards the end of the experiment. Since these questions were integrally connected with prior learning (in the process of the demonstration), it could be surmised that the slave-boy was able to answer them correctly. This could also confirm Socrates' thesis "that giving positive hints would lead to the stirring up of latent true opinions, which would eventually lead to the conversion of these into knowledge."²⁹ Socrates maintains that recollection is a process, and not a sudden jump from ignorance to knowledge. The slave-boy's false opinions were dispelled by giving positive hints. Consequently, true opinions are "stirred up" giving way to knowledge, which was latent. As G. Matthews rightly argues, "belief is at the most the beginning of a long trek towards the philosophical goal, and knowledge must have a starting point."³⁰ What is implied is that recollection can be aided by careful questioning. Therefore, the correct way to recollect is to recollect things "in order."³¹

²⁶. Jowett, *op. cit.*, p. 362.

²⁷. *op. cit.*, p. 365.

²⁸. H.S. Stern, "Philosophy of Education in Plato's Meno," *Educational Studies* vol. xii (Sept. 1981): p. 24.

²⁹. Bluck, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

³⁰. G. Matthews, *Plato's Epistemology* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972) p. 16.

³¹. Bluck, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

Again, the slave-boy's inability to answer some questions correctly cannot be explained in terms of recollection, says Ecstein. He makes a point here. If all learning is recollection, and if recollection is a process, as assured by Socrates, it is difficult to understand why the slave-boy faltered at these places. These questions are said to be integrally associated with the other questions, and in totality, not different from the others in complexity or difficulty. In one instance, he was not able to give the length of a side of a figure of eight square feet, and in another, he failed to give the areal extent enclosed by the rectangle D B L M.

This difficulty would arise in the case of learning and not of recollection, says Ecstein. He, in fact, asserts that Socrates skillfully turns the problem of the boy's failure to remember into evidence for reminiscence.³² In this discussion, Socrates convinces Meno that the slave-boy is "better off in knowing his ignorance."³³ Perhaps, the method of "stirring up" true opinions is not radically different from the method of eliminating false opinions.³⁴

Another likely explanation is that the frailty and slowness of his mental vision may have hindered him from grasping the steps of the problem as a whole. As such, he would have faltered at these points. This could be conceived as a possibility. Even so, I believe that this is a fragile point in the demonstration. For, in spite of Socrates' careful questioning, and the attempt to make the slave-boy recollect things "in order", he has erred in the process.

In another instance, Socrates' request to assess the extent of space in a given area evokes the reply, "I do not understand." This is a clear failure of understanding and not just of memory, asserts Ecstein. He concludes that the slave refers to a kind of knowledge which cannot be reduced to recollection.³⁵ This I think is an exaggeration. It is possible that the slave simply did not understand the question put to him. His power of concentration may have weakened at this point, due probably to the lack of practice in organised thinking.

Again, a further question raised by Ecstein is whether the slave-boy could be able to cope with a slight variation of the problem. Socrates, however, assures Meno that the slave boy would be able to give correct replies to the same questions in different

³². Ecstein, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

³³. Bluck, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

³⁴. Bluck, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

³⁵. Ecstein, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

forms.³⁶ This point cannot be conclusively proved, as we are exposed to only one demonstration. The reader, therefore, has to infer that it would be applicable to other branches of learning as well. Similarly, could the slave-boy apply this principle he learnt to another learning situation? It is difficult to decide. Lack of subsequent demonstrations and lack of conclusive proof leave these questions unanswered.

Yet another problem that arises is whether Socrates' diagrams are meant to assist the slave-boy with his problem. Certainly what he has to recollect is a deductive argument, and stress is laid on the importance of questioning. Since use is made of diagrams, Bluck contends that the slave-boy would no doubt have taken longer to recollect the required solution without them, just as he would have, if he had been given a diagram and then left to his own devices.³⁷ It seems to me that the slave-boy would have taken longer to recollect the required solution if no diagrams were used, as diagrams facilitate comprehension. It is common knowledge that the use of diagrams is widely employed in the study of geometry. But I believe the question of leaving the slave-boy to his own devices does not arise here. Learning as recollection needs an agent. Plato holds that in the act of teaching, the subject and its rules take possession of the teacher. The teacher becomes an instrument to reveal the demands of the subject matter.³⁸

Taking into consideration the arguments discussed above, it appears to me that, in the *Meno*, Plato has given us a plausible theory of knowledge. However, he does not provide proof of the theory which would make it sound and reliable.³⁹ Certain weak points are apparent. Nonetheless, this does not nullify its usefulness as a theory of learning as recollection. It is important to note that Plato himself did not claim to have proved it conclusively.

LEELA KOBBEKADUWA

³⁶. Bluck, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

³⁷. Bluck, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

³⁸. Bluck, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

³⁹. Bluck, *op. cit.*, p. 47.