

Socrates claims (*Meno*, 85d) that finding knowledge within oneself is recollection. Is this claim justified? What is its significance in the argument of the *Meno*?

In *Meno* we are faced with five important metaphysical and epistemological claims:

- (a) There is a distinction between knowledge and belief.
- (b) Knowledge is only within ourselves and can be found by recollection.
- (c) Recollection is a process in which our innate knowledge of the world (acquired before birth and forgotten at the moment of birth) is remembered.
- (d) This is possible not by means of connecting our experience of the sensible world with the 'soul's memory' (natural process) but by completing a further step that leads us to find knowledge only within ourselves.
- (e) This ultimately proves the immortality of the soul.

It will be necessary to consider in detail all these issues, so to determine whether the Theory of Recollection is to be considered justified. In order to do so, I shall also propose an account of the supposed relation between Socrates' conception of 'knowledge' and 'belief', as I assume that:

- This relation can be seen as the *necessary* starting point of the Theory itself, and
- Only if knowledge and belief are taken by Plato to be not disjoint then the Theory of Recollection can find a plausible justification.

In other words: only by a survey that starts from the epistemological conditions we are then able to appreciate Plato's metaphysical assumption in the *Meno*; and only with the former the latter is eventually able to find its completeness.

For the purpose of this paper, I shall then give a brief exposition of what is meant by knowledge and belief [1]. It will follow an analysis of the Theory of Recollection [2], and the remarking conclusion on whether the Theory can be thought to have a valid justification [3].

[1] Knowledge and Belief.

The distinction between knowledge and belief is found in [98a]¹: 'true opinions are not constant in men's mind; they need to be tied down by accounting their reason'. This claim is fundamental for Socrates in order to show that 'knowledge is equal to true beliefs bound by an explanatory account'². However, this in turn brings some questions about *how* we can relate the two, or in other words: how we are able to move from true opinions to knowledge. Therefore, a further explanation needs to be given in order to see how true opinions can be 'tied down'. This can be found only through the metaphysical claim of what we are as 'agents capable of achieving knowledge'.

[2] The soul and the Theory of Recollection

As far as I understand the metaphysical conception of the soul in Plato's dialogues, for the purpose of this paper, I think that a useful picture of the existence of the soul before birth is given in [*Phdr.*, 246 ff.]: 'there was a time in which we were just a soul, an immortal soul [...] and the imperfect soul, losing her wings at least settles on the solid ground [...]. There finding a home (i.e. birth), she receives an earthly frame, which appears to be self moved [...] and this composition of soul and body is called a living and mortal creature'. But birth, is not only a reincarnation of the soul, it is the neutralisation of our knowledge which was achieved before birth ('[...] a time in which we saw beauty, shining in brightness [...] beholding the beatific vision, and purifying ourselves [...]'). We all then go through an inevitable 'amnesia', a blank moment where our previous knowledge seems to disappear. However this has not to be seen as a 'dead end', for we are still entitled to a *recollection*

¹ Unless stated otherwise, references to the text concerns only *Meno*

² Knowledge and Belief in Republic 5-7, *G. Fine*, Plato 1

of such a knowledge. In [*Phd*, 75e] it is claimed that we lose our knowledge at birth; then by the use of our senses in connection with particular objects we recover the knowledge we had before. As shown by D. Scott³, however, this relationship between the perception of sensible objects, and our capacity of finding knowledge can produce a series of confusions concerning whether and who is definitely entitled to such a recollection. Two interpretations are then offered: the most common one is that of knowledge as derived from both *sense perception* and *memory of the soul*. Call it interpretation [K]⁴. However a second interpretation is possible: i.e. that perception is not a helpful means in finding knowledge, but only a deceiving one; so knowledge is possible only from within ourselves. By this interpretation then (call it [D]) recollection assumes a completely different aspect: it is not a *brute fact* of reality (as stated in [K]) that everyone, independently of who we are, recollects, but it is a much more difficult process that only a few (supposedly the philosophers) can achieve. However, this latter possibility can only suggest a dramatic end in Socrates' proof of the immortality of the soul: if knowledge justifies the existence of the soul before and after birth, the restricted possibility of finding knowledge to only a few, implies an equivalent restriction in the immortality of everyone's soul (as we shall see in [3] below)..

[2b] Meno's Paradox

We can then summarise what has been defined so far as:

- (a) *Knowledge (distinct from belief) is acquired only by means of recollection.*
- (b) *Recollection is a process in which our innate knowledge of the world (acquired before birth and forgotten at the moment of birth) is remembered.*
- (c) *This is possible not by means of connecting our experience of the sensible world with the 'soul's memory' (natural process) [K] but by completing a further step that leads us to find knowledge only within ourselves [D].*

This last point, however, is crucial and can bring to contradiction⁵.

From [82a] we find Socrates engaged in an *elenchus* in order to demonstrate that recollection can be produced within ourselves. This is well represented in his request: 'Pay attention whether you think that [Meno's slave] is recollecting or learning from me'. It follows an important moment when the slave is convinced to admit his incapacity of offering an answer to one of Socrates' questions, which brings to the claim that [85c] 'The man who doesn't know has himself true opinions about the things that he does not know. But now these opinions have been stirred up like a dream, and he can achieve knowledge without being taught but only questioned; finding the knowledge within himself'.

This passage is probably the most effective one in support of Scott's interpretation [D] (above) and remarks an important aspect already noted before: the distinction between beliefs and knowledge.

Socrates is presented by Meno with the following argument:

- (1) For any x, either y knows x or it is not the case that y knows x.
- (2) If y knows x, then it is not the case that y can inquire into x (you cannot inquire into what you already know).
- (3) If it is not the case that y knows x, then it is not the case that y can inquire into x (you cannot inquire into what you do not know what to inquire).

³ Platonic Recollection, D. Scott, Plato 1

⁴ [K]: for it is plausibly close to Kant's theory of empirical knowledge as based on intuitions and concepts.

⁵ Proofs are given in: Platonic Recollection, D. Scott, Plato 1. An example is in [82b4]: the slave already has a proper conceptual apparatus *before* the *elenchus* starts; it follows then that he is in some (elementary ways) ready to approach the further step that leads us to find knowledge only within ourselves. Therefore [D] seems (as in many other cases) to be proved.

This, known as Meno's paradox, will offer a new light under which we can interpret the relationship between knowledge and belief and a further clarification about the validity of the Theory of Recollection.

The problem offered by the paradox is that, if valid, it leaves us under only one strong sceptic possibility: that knowledge is not possible. But as proposed by G. Fine⁶ even though the argument is valid, it is not necessarily sound. This is verified by considering that both (2) and (3) are not completely convincing if interpreted under the distinction between being completely ignorant and having true (and false) beliefs. If so (2) and (3) are inevitably rendered as false, producing a final argument which is unsound and saving knowledge from its supposed impossibility. Proof is offered by Plato within the *elenchus* between Socrates and Meno's slave: as we have seen before referring to passage [85c] 'the slave's realisation that he doesn't know the answer is not destructive: it makes him more willing to inquire'. This can be taken as a refutation of condition (3) in the argument.

We can then conclude that inquiry requires only true beliefs and not knowledge itself. This shows a distinctive aspect of considering the paradox as an expression of 'if one doesn't know at all the definition of x, then one *cannot say* anything about x' (which is refused) and the accepted one: 'if one doesn't know at all the definition of x, then one *cannot know* anything about x'. So that:

(d) *Knowledge is not possible, unless we are able to define our true beliefs and inquire over them.*

[2c] Is then belief fundamental in finding knowledge?

If we now compare point (c) and (d) above, we are led into what seems to be a contradiction: it was previously established that recollection is possible not by means of connecting our experience of the sensible world with the 'soul's memory', but by completing a further step that leads us to find knowledge only within ourselves, for 'experience of the sensibles is deceiving' (c). But we have already obtained that experience is the only starting point left in finding knowledge (d).

In order to avoid this confusion we are required to answer a new epistemological question: are knowledge and belief ultimately 'disjoint'?

Many passages in *Meno* give us an answer to the problem. However only in Republic V we are offered with an ultimate proof of the fundamental connection between knowledge and belief⁷.

For the purpose of the inquiry, it will be sufficient to analyse the former dialogue. The *elenchus* offered by Socrates, in order to show whether knowledge is found in ourselves, seems to be constructed on the following structure:

- The slave recognises he does not know (1st approach to recollection).
- It follows the acquisition of true opinions (not yet knowledge).
- The opinion has been tied down with explanatory reasoning: i.e. knowledge is acquired (final stage of recollection).

If this is so, then the *elenchus* is the ultimate strategy in order to connect belief and knowledge (and it may be so nevertheless). But here we are concerned on whether *recollection itself* is able to justify the connection in question. As supposed by Fine, the Theory seems not to be sufficient to complete the connection, and we can only supposedly believe in its validity for it is supported by the *elenchus* (which is essentially a Socratic method) while the theory goes beyond him: 'it shows that the *elenchus* is possible'⁸.

⁶ Inquiry in the *Meno*, G. Fine, Cambridge Companion to Plato.

⁷ See: Knowledge and Belief in Republic 5-7, G. Fine, Plato 1.

⁸ Inquiry in the *Meno*, G. Fine, Cambridge Companion to Plato.

[3] The immortality of the soul.

If this is the ultimate conclusion to which we can arrive then, in a way, we should be justified in picturing a sort of ‘incompleteness’ in the theory of recollection as a justification of how knowledge can be reached.

But an important passage eventually absorbs this discontent: in [86b-c] Socrates says: ‘I do not insist that my argument is right in all other respects, but I would contend at all costs [...] that we will be better men [...] if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know, rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it’.

In this passage, I think is contained what seems to be ‘the first ethical principle for the *lovers of wisdom*’.

This, whether is acceptable or not⁹, ultimately leads Socrates to the justification of the immortality of the soul, which can be formulated as follows:

- We find knowledge from within ourselves.
- This is not given by sense-experience but by recollection.
- Therefore we must have had knowledge before our sense-experience: i.e. before birth.
- It follows that there must have been a time where we were not human (soul exists before birth).
- And, consequently, (the ‘cyclical argument’) a time in which we will not be human (soul exists after birth).
- Therefore the soul must be immortal.

This argument, however, is not without problems. If we return to the interpretations described above ([K] and [D]), it seems that even though [D] appears to be the more plausible one in reading Plato’s argument of Recollection, it gives not much room for a generalisation of the immortality of the soul (only those who reach the knowledge are entitled to the logical argument). And this is self-contradictory for ‘Plato did not believe that only philosophers have had a previous existence; he clearly believed that all men have’¹⁰. This is also confirmed in [*Phdr*, 245c]: ‘Every soul is immortal’.

A solution can be obtained by claiming that ‘all people recollect to some degree’¹¹. But this would move us to a deeper analysis into the *Phaedo*, which is not part of our concerns at the present.

Conclusions

It has been shown, in this paper, that recollection can be explained by means of an analysis of Plato’s early epistemological doctrine (the conception of knowledge and belief). The theory in support of recollection is however not completely justified unless we update its epistemological content to the possibility that knowledge and belief are ultimately not disjoint. We have also concluded that the *Meno* is not able to offer a complete definition of how this connection can be pictured out. And this leads us to the consequent problem: that not every soul is entitled to being immortal, which is, as claimed above, against Plato’s doctrine.

⁹ I personally think that here Socrates is convincing of his theory by means of trust.

¹⁰ Plato’s *Phaedo*, D. Bostock, p.67.

¹¹ Platonic Recollection, D. Scott, Plato 1, p.115.