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**The Bountiful Mind:
Memory, Cognition and Knowledge Acquisition
in Plato's *Meno***

Selina Beaugrand

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Abstract

The Meno has traditionally been viewed as "one of Plato's earliest and most noteworthy forays into epistemology."¹ In this dialogue, and in the course of a discussion between Socrates and his young interlocutor, Meno, about the nature of virtue and whether it can be taught, "Meno raises an epistemological question unprecedented in the Socratic dialogues."² This question - or rather, dilemma - has come to be known in the philosophical literature as Meno's Paradox of Inquiry, due its apparently containing an easy-to-detect equivocation of the word 'know'. Immediately after the paradox, and in an apparent response to it, Socrates recounts a myth: a story told by priests and priestesses about the pre-natal existence and immortality of the soul. From this this myth, Socrates concocts the infamous theory of recollection – a theory according to which the soul has acquired knowledge of everything before it was born, while in a disincarnate state. According to the traditional reading of Meno's paradox, this theory constitutes Plato's response to it.

The traditional reading has come under fire in recent years by advocates of the epistemological reading (ERM), who argue that the theory of recollection is not Plato's intended response to the paradox. Instead, they suggest, Plato's distinction between true belief and knowledge – which appears towards the end of the dialogue – is sufficient for solving the paradox; and as such, it ought to be read as Plato's response to it.

In this thesis, I argue against ERM's claim that a mere epistemological distinction is all it takes to solve the paradox. To do so, I explore the metaphysics of change in Plato's ontology. From this, I appeal to our everyday notion of 'memory' in order to show that Meno's paradox, in fact, contains a hidden-premise, which when laid bare, reveals two distinct

¹ Christopher Shields, *Ancient Philosophy: A Contemporary Introduction*, 2nd ed., (New York:

² *Ibid*, p. 64.

challenges contained within the argument: a superficial one, and a deeper one. I argue that although it appears at first blush as though the former could easily be dismissed as an equivocation, to which the epistemological distinction between belief and knowledge could provide an answer, the latter cannot. This is because the deeper challenge threatens the very preconditions of knowledge itself – that is to say, it renders cognition impossible – and, as such, it cancels out any effort to provide an epistemological response to the superficial challenge. Hence, unless the deeper-level challenge is satisfactorily disarmed, both challenges remain unanswered.

I argue that although the major motivation for the theory of recollection in the *Meno* is indeed to provide an answer to scepticism about knowledge, nevertheless, it ought to be understood, first, as a theory of cognition – i.e. as a theory about the preconditions and atomic building blocks of knowledge – and not a theory of knowledge per se. This answer comes in the form of a radical theory of the mind and cognition – one that stands in stark opposition to our common-sense views about the mind: a view from which, Plato believed, the paradox arises.

Drawing on recent debates between Nativists and Empiricists in the Cognitive Sciences, I argue that it was a great achievement of Plato's to grasp that our common-sense view about the mind, and its concomitant process of learning, language acquisition and knowledge acquisition, might in fact be at the very root of scepticism about our ability to engage in meaningful philosophical practice, and our ability to acquire objective knowledge – especially, objective moral knowledge.

The *Meno's* paradox, then – so I contend - is not a puzzle whose solution rests upon merely pointing to an epistemological distinction between true belief and knowledge, as advocates of ERM have suggested. Rather, it is a puzzle about cognition. More precisely, it is a puzzle that targets the rudimentary cognitive stages of initial cognition and truth-recognition - one

whose solution entails offering an account of the mind that would make these elementary cognitive processes possible.

Accordingly, Plato's theory of recollection in the *Meno* ought to be read as an attempt to map the structure of the mind, and as such, to provide an account of cognition. In doing so, he intended to put forward a view about the preconditions of knowledge – the sort of preconditions without which language acquisition and knowledge acquisition would simply not be possible. With this theory, Plato has the beginnings of an argument against the kind of relativism and scepticism prevalent at his time.

As such, a correct interpretation of the so-called paradox of inquiry (and Plato's proposed solution to it via the theory of recollection) should approach it as a puzzle about mind and cognition – and not solely as an epistemological one, as it has previously been treated.

Declaration

I declare that the research contained in this thesis, unless otherwise formally indicated within the text, is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material submitted for a degree.

Signature:

Date: 1st September 2016

For A.

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Introduction

In the *Meno*, Plato introduces the famous paradox of enquiry, which argues that if you already know x , then there is no need to enquire further into x ; and if you don't already know x , then you don't know what you're looking for. Hence either way, whether x is known or not unknown, enquiry into x is impossible. Plato's traditional response to the paradox is taken to consist of a theory based on a myth: the soul is immortal, and given that it has lived forever, it contains truth: the theory of recollection. Therefore, whether one knows or doesn't know x , enquiry into x can begin on the basis that we have some vague conception of x within us which can guide us throughout the process of enquiry. Plato's response is generally taken to be inadequate: the theory's reliance on the conception of an immortal soul makes it outdated³ at best, and unphilosophical at worst. Why did Plato provide such an obviously inadequate response to the paradox? Might it be that this theory is not intended as a response to the paradox at all? If so, what is Plato's response to the paradox, and what other role might the theory of recollection play?

Recent interpretations of the *Meno* take the theory of recollection to be no more than a catalyst for an important epistemological distinction he makes towards the end of the dialogue between 'correct opinion' and 'knowledge'; it is (allegedly) this distinction that constitutes Plato's response to the paradox.

In what follows I will argue that this interpretation neither squares with textual evidence from the dialogue, nor would it constitute a philosophically adequate response to the paradox, had Plato intended for it to play this role. Given the metaphysics of change in Plato's ontology, the overall structure of the dialogue, and what has come to pass in the discussion between Meno

³ See, e.g., G. Fine, 'Inquiry in the *Meno*', *Plato on Knowledge and Forms*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), p. 64.

and Socrates prior to the introduction of the paradox of enquiry, the theory of recollection is indeed Plato's response to it.

The aim of Chapter 1 is to introduce the problem of recollection in the *Meno*. I shall attempt to show that regardless of what reading one adopts – the traditional one, or the epistemological one – the theory of recollection in the *Meno* presents us with a dilemma. I argue that an adequate reading of the role of the theory of recollection in the *Meno* must, at least, offer a satisfactory answer to one horn of this dilemma: the problem of interpretation.

In Chapter 2, I critically assess a prominent version of the *Epistemological Reading* of Meno's paradox – the *Standard Reading* – and show that in denying that the theory of recollection is an innatist theory, it fails to provide a satisfactory response to the problem of interpretation.

Chapter 3 focuses on another prominent version of *Epistemological Reading*: the *Hybrid Reading*. I argue that while this reading acknowledges that the theory of recollection is an innatist theory, it nevertheless fails to offer a plausible account of its role in the dialogue, and as such, it too fails to answer the problem of interpretation.

Chapters 4 and 5 then move away from the *Meno*, and delve into the metaphysics of change, with the aim of uncovering whether one of the *Epistemological Reading's* central assumptions is true – the claim that Plato held that inquiry can get off the ground without the need for the theory of recollection.

In chapter 4 I explore the Heraclitean theory of flux. I argue that an adequate understanding of the theory of recollection and the theory of Forms must place them within their historical context, and interpret them in light of the epistemological and metaphysical challenges that Plato had intended for them to meet. Chapter 5 then studies the way in which the theory of Forms and the theory of recollection are meant to remedy some of the sceptical challenges that Heraclitus' theory of flux had given rise to.

Finally, in Chapter 6 I re-evaluate the theory of recollection by appeal to our everyday conception of what constitutes a ‘memory’. I argue that it is the primitiveness and simplicity of this conception of a memory that allows the theory of recollection to do the crucial work of solving the paradox, as Plato had intended for it to do; and furthermore, that an analysis of what Socrates takes to the paradox’s fatal flaw is key to discovering what he considers to be an adequate response to it: the theory of recollection. This, then, puts us in a better position to understand why Plato introduces the paradox at all, and what it is meant to be a pretext for.

The aim of this thesis is to argue that although the major motivation for the theory of recollection in the *Meno* is to provide an answer to scepticism about knowledge, it ought to be understood, first, as a theory of cognition – i.e. as a theory about the very building blocks of thought. Plato’s theory of recollection in the *Meno*, I contend, is an attempt to map the structure of the mind, and as such, to provide an account of cognition. In this dialogue, he introduces a radical theory of the mind and cognition – one that stands in stark opposition to our common-sense views about the mind: a view from which, Plato believes, the paradox arises. In doing so, he had intended to offer an account of the *preconditions* of knowledge – the sort of preconditions without which neither language, belief nor knowledge acquisition would be possible. With this theory, Plato has the *beginnings* of an argument against the kind of relativism and scepticism prevalent at his time. The story about the immortality of the soul may indeed be outdated, but Plato’s rationale for introducing it, and the philosophical manoeuvres that it affords him, are anything *but* unphilosophical.

Chapter 1

Paradox and Recollection in the Meno

The controversy surrounding the theory of recollection in the *Meno* hinges upon its role in the dialogue. More specifically, it revolves around one main question: does the theory of recollection constitute Plato's response to Meno's paradox? If so, how does it solve the paradox; and if not, what other role did Plato intend for it to play in the dialogue?

Traditionally, the theory of recollection has been taken to be Plato's response to Meno's challenge. More recently, however, this view has received criticism from those who believe that the paradox can easily be resolved without appeal to the idea of recollection at all. Rather, they argue, the paradox can easily be resolved using Plato's epistemological distinction between 'true belief (or opinion)' and 'knowledge', which he introduces towards the end of the dialogue.

The aim of this chapter is to show that, regardless of which interpretive option one chooses, the theory of recollection in the *Meno* presents us with a dilemma: *the problem of recollection*. Accordingly, I will begin by offering an account of the context within which Meno's Paradox arises. I will then offer an analysis of the paradox itself. This will be followed by a brief account of the traditional reading. Finally, I will discuss the paradoxes that arise out of the traditional reading, and will end the chapter with a summary of the problem of recollection in the *Meno*. The next two chapters then critically assesses whether the second, epistemological option fares better in the face of this problem.

1.1. Virtue, Paradox and Recollection

The overall aim of this section is to provide the context within which the paradox of enquiry and the theory of recollection appear in the *Meno*. I will begin by offering a brief account of the context within which the paradox

arises in the dialogue. I will then follow this by an analysis of the challenges posed by each horn of the paradox, and the kind of solution that each of these challenges would require. Further, I will look at Socrates' introduction of the theory of recollection, which he derives from a mystical story offered by priests and priestesses about the immortality of the soul. Finally, I will offer a summary of his demonstration of the supposed truth of this story via a discussion with one of Meno's slaves.

1.1.1. The Search for a Definition of Virtue

The *Meno* begins with Socrates' interlocutor, Meno, asking whether virtue (*areté*) is something that can be taught, to which Socrates answers that we cannot know until we first discover what virtue *is*,⁴ adding that "far from knowing whether or not it is teachable, [he hasn't] the faintest idea what being good (*areté*) *is*".⁵ Despite this disavowal of knowledge, Socrates, nonetheless, insists that he and Meno conduct a joint enquiry into what virtue is. They then embark on a search for an answer to the question: 'What is virtue?'

Meno makes four attempts at defining virtue. Initially, Meno seems to be unaware that Socrates is looking for a very specific kind of answer to this question. In his first attempt to answer the question, for example, he offers Socrates a list of what virtue could be, relative to different types of people in society, where the difference in kind is based on physical, and hence *material* differences. For example, he states that virtue *for a man* is to have what it takes to handle the city's affairs, help his friends and hurt his enemies; *for a woman*, to obey her husband, be thrifty with household expenses and look after her home, and so on.⁶ Socrates objects that Meno's answer doesn't tell us what all these traits have in common such that they can be termed virtue; that it should make no difference whether this common feature be found in a man, woman, child or slave, so long as it is *the* feature that makes them all

⁴ Plato, 'Meno' (70a), in *Protagoras and Meno*, A. Beresford (trans.), L. Brown (ed.), (London: Penguin Books, 2005). Throughout this work, and unless otherwise indicated, where I offer quotations or references to sections of the *Meno*, it will be from A. Beresford's translation.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, (71c-72c).

(despite their material differences) virtuous. He hints here at a solution and asks Meno if these 'duties' he has assigned to these different people, the fulfilment of which he claims constitutes virtue for each one of them, could possibly be attained if they did not do them "sensibly and according to what is right".⁷

Again, Meno seems unaware that Socrates is demanding a very specific sort of answer to the question 'What is virtue?' He doesn't quite seem to get what Socrates is looking for. His second definition of virtue flatters the prejudices of the ruling classes to which he belongs: virtue, he claims, is "a matter of being able to rule other people".⁸ Socrates objects that this will give rise to the strange suggestion that virtue for a child or a slave must entail ruling others. Meno recognises his mistake and accepts Socrates' added qualification "...according to what's right, but not if it means doing wrong".⁹ Socrates concedes that "doing what's right" and being good must be the same, but that it appears to be only one *kind* of being good, alongside other kinds of virtue such as bravery, etc. And that he is still at loss as to what makes 'doing what's right', bravery, and all the other virtues, count as being the virtues that they are: the one thing that makes them all *kinds* of virtue, their common denominator.

By now Meno has grasped that Socrates is looking for some kind of trait or essence that unifies all kinds of virtue, and that isn't susceptible to counter-examples of the kind that entails, for example, that children and slaves rule others, as his previous attempt had done. Accordingly, in his third attempt at defining virtue, he claims that virtue is "wanting good things, and being able to acquire them". Socrates objects to the first part of the definition on the ground that no one would wish harm to themselves, and that if they were to know, and have the means to avoid, that which does them harm, then they wouldn't hesitate to do so; hence everyone wants good things (including the tyrants, murderers, etc.), where 'good things' is understood as benefit to

⁷ Ibid, (73a).

⁸ Ibid, (73d).

⁹ Ibid, (73d).

oneself. Meno clarifies that what he means by 'good things' is material wealth (such as gold, silver, and so on), positions of power and honour in one's city, and good health – in short, 'being good' simply means the acquisition of material goods. Seeking further clarification, Socrates asks Meno whether the acquisition of these good would count as 'being good' if they were to be acquired wrongfully and in disregard for what is right. Meno agrees that wrongful acquisition would cancel out their goodness. He also agrees to Socrates' further claim, that if wrongful acquisition is not permitted, then it follows that the non-acquisition of these material goods is, in some cases, what it means to be good. Therefore, "being good isn't a matter of acquiring those sorts of good things any more than not acquiring them."¹⁰

Meno's fourth and final attempt is a reformulation of the third one. Holding on to the idea that 'good things' *must* be understood along materialist lines, he defines being good as "being able to acquire good things with respect for what's right". Socrates objects, pointing out that they had already – in Meno's second attempt – both agreed that 'according to what is right' is one kind or one part of virtue; and so, defining the whole of virtue in terms of simply one part of it is a mistake.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid, (78e).

¹¹ It is worth noting that even if Meno had gone on to list all of virtue's other 'parts', Socrates would have objected along similar lines to his objection in Meno's first attempt: we still don't know what is the common denominator that holds all these parts together *such that* they are genuinely what we assume them to be (i.e. parts of virtue). He makes a similar move in the *Protagoras* where Protagoras compares different virtues to the different parts of the face. See, *Protagoras* (349a-352a). I read Socrates, here as well as in the *Meno*, to be objecting to the idea that virtue can be understood in terms of a 'whole' that is further broken down into 'parts', on the ground that we still won't know what makes those parts genuine parts of that 'whole' – it simply begs the question, for the only justification that we now have for calling something a 'part' is by appeal to the original assumption that it is a part of that whole. I take Socrates to mean that virtue is *one* thing, not a *whole* made of parts, since that would suggest that it is divisible, and hence, extendible in the Cartesian sense of 'mind/idea' or 'soul' vs. 'body/extension'. See also, *Sophist* (245a), "Surely a thing that's truly one, properly speaking, has to be completely without parts", and in (257d) "Knowledge is a single thing too". I take this to suggest that – perhaps – a justified-true-belief account that treats knowledge as a whole with necessary parts might not in fact be what Plato means. Perhaps he means that these are necessary, say, 'stepping stones' on the road to the 'summit' of knowledge, but that the summit (knowledge itself) is over-and-above (different from) the steps that lead to it.

Having had all of his attempts at offering a definition of virtue overturned, and frustrated at Socrates' enthusiasm for pursuing the enquiry, despite his continued profession of ignorance, Meno objects:

But how can you try to find out about something, Socrates, if you 'haven't got the faintest idea' what it is? I mean, how can you put before your mind a thing *that you have no knowledge of*, in order to try to find out about it? And even supposing you did come across it, how would you know *that was it*, if you didn't know what it was to begin with?¹²

This has generally come to be known as Meno's 'Paradox of Enquiry', Meno's 'Eristic Dilemma', or simply 'Meno's Paradox'. In the next section, I will explore the paradox, and the theory of recollection, which Plato introduces straight after the paradox and, apparently, in response to it.

1.1.2. Meno's Paradox

Socrates recognises the "famous eristic argument"¹³ and offers Meno a reformulation of it as:

[T]he one that says that it's impossible to try to find out about anything – either what you know or what you don't know. You can't try to find out about something you know about, because you know about it, in which case there's no point trying to find out about it; and you can't find out about something you don't know, either, because then you don't even know what it is you're trying to find out about.¹⁴

According to one reconstruction, this famous paradox can be recast as follows:

- 1) For anything, F , either one knows F or one does not know F .
- 2) If one knows F , then one cannot enquire about F .
- 3) If one does not know F , then one cannot enquire about F .
- 4) Therefore, for all F , one cannot enquire about F .¹⁵

¹² *Meno*, op. cit., (80d).

¹³ *Ibid*, (80e). The term *eristikos* is sometimes translated "trick" suggesting that Plato doesn't take the argument seriously. However, the term may equally refer to a specific form of argumentation that could be labelled "contentious" or "obstructionist". See, e.g., N. P. White, *Plato on Knowledge and Reality*, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1976), p. 41.

¹⁴ *Meno*, op. cit., (80e).

¹⁵ There are many possible formulations of the paradox. A more general way of casting the paradox would be to state it as if what's at issue is the answer to *any* question, not merely those regarding Forms or definitions. For example, the dilemma could be presented thus:

What does the above argument aim to show? Clearly, it threatens the possibility of fruitful enquiry because it is impossible to search for what one doesn't know, and it is impossible and/pointless to search for what one already knows.

Note, however, that the argument contains an ambiguity. Are we to understand the argument as claiming that 'fruitful' enquiry is impossible, or that enquiry *tout court* is impossible? Or does it pose an equal threat to the possibility of both 'enquiry' and 'fruitful enquiry'? The answer to these is, in part, dependent upon our interpretation of the first horn of the paradox in (2). If enquiry is to be understood as 'searching' or 'looking' for something, then it is of course possible to search or look for something and not find it. In this case, it isn't so much that enquiry isn't possible but rather, fruitful enquiry. However, if 'searching' or 'looking' are loaded terms or notions – that is, if they already presuppose that 'searching' and 'looking' are aimed at

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- 1) If you know the answer to the question you are asking, then nothing can be learned by asking.
 - 2) If you do not know the answer, then you cannot recognize a correct answer even if it is given to you.
 - 3) Therefore, one cannot learn anything by asking questions.

R. Sorensen, 'Epistemic Paradoxes' (2011), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2014 Edition. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/epistemic-paradoxes/>> Retrieved: 23.08.2015.

As presented in the dilemma in the main text, *F* is supposed to stand for the object of knowledge, and the assumption is that it might be some *F*-ness (e.g. Form of virtue). However, there seems to be no consensus on the kind of object in question, and hence the kind of knowledge relevant to it. Some would take the challenge posed by the paradox to cover any enquiry, no matter what the object. For example, White argues that the problem posed by the paradox "is neutral on the question what manner of object constitutes the subject matter of inquiry and recollection". N. P. White, *Plato on Knowledge and Reality*, op. cit., p. 48. On the other hand, others will argue that the paradox is aimed at a very specific kind of enquiry. They will argue that the kind of knowledge in question in the *Meno* is knowledge of definitions; and, therefore, that the object of knowledge is the 'definition of virtue'. See, e.g. H. Benson, *Socratic Wisdom: The Model of Knowledge in Plato's Early Dialogues*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and to some extent, D. Scott, *Plato's Meno*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 75-91. Still, others, like Ebery for example, will argue that it isn't so much knowledge of the definition of some essence or Form that is in question, but rather "knowledge of unified, explanatory definitions". D. Ebery, 'Meno's Paradox in Context', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2014), 4–24.

What is clear from these different treatments is that the line between the *kind of object* of knowledge, on one hand, and the *kind of knowledge* in question, on the other, is blurred. For example, 'knowledge of definitions' may indicate that 'a definition' in the form of a proposition, is the object of knowledge; and this would subsequently give rise to particular kind of knowledge: one that takes 'definitions' as its object. However, we need not worry about different formulations here since they have little bearing on the issue at hand.

finding something specific, the specification of which one already knows or possesses before the searching or looking begins – then enquiry would be impossible because this kind of searching or looking *entails* that one already knows (or has some idea of) what one is searching or looking for. Without the said prior knowledge or idea, one's actions cannot, strictly speaking, amount to searching or looking for anything at all.

1.1.3. *The Theory of Recollection*

It is worth noting that once Socrates turns Meno's challenge into a crisp dilemma, and the latter asks him whether he thinks it is a good argument, Socrates replies in the negative. When asked why, instead offering an analysis of the fallacious nature of the argument, he claims that his reason for not thinking it a good argument is that he has

listened to certain men and women, people who know all about the world of the gods ... because they have taken the trouble to be able to explain the basis of their religious practices.¹⁶

From here on, he tells Meno that these priests and priestesses claim that the soul never dies; and since it never dies, but is born over and over again, it must have learnt absolutely everything that there is in this world and in the world beyond this one. More importantly, and in what seems to be an attempt to respond to the paradox of enquiry, he claims that we should not be surprised that we have the capacity *within* us to remember things about virtue and the like:

Because if the whole of nature is akin, and your soul has already learnt and understood everything, there's no reason why you shouldn't be able, after remembering just *one* thing – most people call it learning – to go on and figure out everything else.¹⁷

Socrates' response is puzzling at best. Why does he not simply tell Meno what is wrong with argument, and expose its fallacious nature? Why does he resort to offering an alternative account of how we go about learning – which on his view is 'remembering' – instead of, and/or prior to, telling us why the

¹⁶ *Meno*, op. cit., (81e-d).

¹⁷ *Ibid*, (81d).

paradox is not a genuine one, and hence enquiry is not impossible?¹⁸ As Shields rightly notes:

One puzzle about Plato's response, though, is precisely that he does not -- after indicating that he regards the eristic version of Meno's paradox as guilty of some such fallacy [of equivocation] -- provide this sort of diagnosis. ... Plato's story about the priests and priestesses deploys excessively heavy artillery, namely the immortality of the soul and the doctrine of learning as recollection, to turn back an already disarmed threat.¹⁹

If the eristic argument's fundamental flaw rests upon a fallacy of equivocation, then Shields is right to say that Plato's response via the story of priests and priestesses (and its concomitant theories about the immortality of the soul and recollection) appear to be redundant. This point is especially true if we consider that Plato could have, as Irwin points out, simply replied that, in our quest for moral truths and the acquisition of moral knowledge, we begin with a stock of common-sense beliefs that contain a mix between true and false ones. Enquiry is then the process of sifting through the true and false beliefs, retaining and justifying the true, while discarding the false. Hence, another part of the puzzle about recollection in the *Meno* is that Plato (allegedly) could "have offered a reasonable [common-sense] alternative to the belief in literal recollection"²⁰ but, for some unknown reason, chose not to.

1.1.4. The Slave-Boy Demonstration

One possible way of interpreting Plato's moves in the sections following the paradox is to say that he does not think that it is necessary to offer an analysis of what's wrong with the eristic argument; the replacement of 'learning' with 'remembering' does the job of showing that the argument suffers from some such fallacy of equivocation. Moreover, if we treat Meno's challenge as simply this: that enquiry is impossible, then all one has to do is to *show* that it is possible after all. And this is arguably what the slave passage demonstrates: that there *is* something progressive about the nature

¹⁸ Christopher Shields, 'Review: Gail Fine's *Plato on Knowledge and Forms: Selected Essays*', (2005), *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (2004), [<http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=3681>]. Retrieved: 23/06/2011].

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Terence Irwin, *Plato's Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 136

of enquiry. Given the idea that learning is recollecting indicates that the mind is not a total blank; that we *do* have something to begin enquiry with; and hence, that from “remembering just *one* thing” we can indeed “go on and figure out *everything* else”²¹ – that one doesn’t go from a total state of ignorance where one’s mind is a blank to a state of knowledge where the blank is then filled, as the paradox falsely assumes. Socrates’ task, then, is to *show* how this might be possible and reveal its progressive nature. And accordingly, we find Meno making just this sort of demand:

[W]hat do you mean by this idea that we don’t *learn* anything, and that what we call learning is just remembering? ... if you’ve got some way of *showing* me that what you say is true, then I’d like to hear it.²²

In response, Socrates asks Meno’s slave boy – after being assured that he knows nothing about geometry – to give an answer to a geometrical problem. The slave is initially confident in his responses, but with further questioning from Socrates, he begins to recognise that the initial answer he offered might not have been correct after all. Following this, and in response to further questions, the slave seems somewhat unsettled, no longer confident that his answers might be correct, and demonstrating a certain degree of uncertainty and caution. After a few failed attempts at providing the right answers, the now somewhat confused slave declares: “Honest to god, Socrates, I don’t know!”²³ At which stage Socrates points out to Meno that this now is a crucial stage in the process of enquiry:

You realize where he is now on the road to remembering? ... back then he *thought* he knew, and he answered as if he knew, without the slightest hesitation – he didn’t feel baffled. But now he does feel baffled; and as well as not knowing, he also doesn’t think he knows.²⁴

What Socrates is pointing out here is characteristic of all Plato’s dialogues: the first step towards knowledge is to rid oneself of one’s false beliefs by recognising them as such. A state of confusion is sure to follow, and out of this state, the need to replace that false belief with a true one is also born. More importantly, what this state of confusion shows the slave is that his

²¹ *Meno*, op. cit., (81e-d). [My emphasis.]

²² *Ibid*, (81e-82a).

²³ *Ibid*, (84a).

²⁴ *Ibid*, (84a-b).

initial confidence was misplaced – that being deceived about what one (erroneously) *thinks* one knows, is all too easy. Put another way, not only did the slave not know the right answer, but also – crucially - he didn't know 'that he didn't know it'.²⁵ This is important. For if the slave did not recognise that he was ignorant, then he would also not have recognised the need to enquire into the matter – in other words, he would not have been presented with the opportunity to 'recollect' truths about geometry. This, on the face of it, seems to provide some sort of verdict on the first horn of the paradox in (2) – If *F* is known, then enquiry is impossible – by shaking our confidence in our claims to knowledge. Hence, far from stating that (2) is false, Socrates seems to be conceding to it; but at the same time, he wants to cast doubt on our claims to knowledge, from which we then take enquiry to be impossible. What hinders enquiry then is not that *F* is known, but rather our false assumption that *F* is known, and on the basis of which we also falsely assume that enquiry is not possible.

So much for providing a response to the first horn of the paradox, but what of the second horn in (3) – If *F* is not known, enquiry is impossible (since one could not recognise it)? After recognising that his previous beliefs were false, the slave continues to answer Socrates' questions until he finally gets it right and provides the correct answer. At this point, Socrates tells Meno how his demonstration shows that "inside someone with no knowledge (of whatever it might be) there are correct opinions about the things he didn't know".²⁶ And that this must mean that 'learning' is merely 'remembering' what we once knew. But if that knowledge was already there, and if it was not acquired in this life, then it must have been learnt at a previous life. Furthermore, if the soul is immortal – if it has lived "for the whole of time", whether in its present form in this life, or in some other past form – then, "there's never been a time when [the] soul hadn't already learnt them".²⁷ If this is right, then (3) is false; for the assumption that the mind is blank – that

²⁵ Plato's suggests that this kind of 'double-ignorance' might well be the cause of most mistakes. See the *Sophist* (229c), where he states: "Not knowing, but thinking that you know. That's what probably causes all the mistakes we make when we think".

²⁶ *Meno*, op. cit., (85c).

²⁷ *Ibid*, (86a-b).

we know *nothing* about *F* – is false. And so, we do have something by means of which we can recognise (remember) *F* if we were to encounter it: “correct opinions about the things he didn’t know”.²⁸ This seems to suggest that Socrates is attempting to confirm a claim he’d made earlier, before the slave demonstration, viz., that “‘finding out about things’ and ‘learning’ are entirely a matter of remembering”.²⁹ In short, it seems to suggest that the whole point of the slave demonstration was to show Meno that learning is indeed remembering, and – crucially – that *this* tells us something about what’s wrong with the argument.³⁰

1.2. *The Traditional Reading*

The theory of recollection has traditionally been viewed as Plato’s response to the paradox. Some accept that Plato was proposing this theory by way of solving the paradox, but are silent on just how it is supposed to do so, viewing it as a mere trick. Grube, for example, calls the paradox “a tiresome sophism” and claims that the paradox is introduced to solve it.³¹ Others, however, are more specific. White, for example, suggests that

the paradox can be disarmed if we suppose that we do not learn anything new but instead recollect ... The theory of recollection is there to disarm the paradox, and the conversation [with Meno’s slave boy] is there to provide support for the theory.³²

However, despite their differences, the general consensus among scholars has traditionally been that the paradox commits a fallacy of equivocation, and that Plato solves this by revealing that there are two senses of knowledge: the kind that we knew in a prenatal state but have forgotten, and the kind that we know now. Although one may not know in the latter sense, one may still know in the former.

²⁸ Ibid, (85c).

²⁹ Ibid, (81d).

³⁰ This is significant for our understanding of the eristic argument’s fundamental flaw. I return to this in Chapter 6 when I reassess the paradox.

³¹ G. M. A. Grube, *Plato’s Thought*, (London: Methuen, 1935), p. 12.

³² N. P. White, *Plato on Knowledge and Reality*, op. cit., p. 41.

The main thrust of the paradox, as we saw, was to argue that enquiry is impossible. It is impossible to search for something one doesn't know. Likewise, it is impossible – or, perhaps, pointless – to search for what one already knows. Hence either way, whether one does or doesn't know, enquiry is impossible (and/or pointless). Now, on the face of it, the paradox commits an obvious equivocation of the term 'know'. Of course, there are many ways in which one could be said to know something. One way is that one could know something *implicitly* or *explicitly*. Alternatively, one could be said to have only a *partial grasp* of it, instead of a *complete grasp*. This would seem to support how the paradox has been traditionally been understood; and would seem to fit in with the theory of recollection as well.

With these differences in the way that one could be said to know, let us attempt to tackle the first horn of the paradox in (2). The challenge here seems to be that the existence of knowledge about F makes (further) enquiry into F futile. But there's another sense in which the challenge can be cast. For if one already knows F , then, strictly speaking, one cannot enquire into F , not because further enquiry is pointless, but rather because once one already knows F , one cannot acquire knowledge of F anew, so to speak. On either reading, using the distinction we made above between two possible sense of 'know', we could respond to (2) by pointing out that although an agent could know F in one sense, they may not know it in the other; and this permits us to say that although they know F (implicitly or by having a partial grasp of it), they still do not know F (explicitly or by having a full grasp of it); and hence, one can indeed enquire into F (so as to gain explicit or knowledge of it). For although I could be said to have a partial grasp of F , I may lack a complete grasp of it, and enquiry could render possible the acquisition of this complete grasp. Alternatively, I may be said to have implicit knowledge of F , but with further enquiry I could make this knowledge explicit. Hence enquiry into F is neither futile nor impossible.

A similar move can be made to counter the second horn of the paradox in (3). The challenge here, however, stems not from one's already existing knowledge of F , but rather its lack thereof. If one doesn't know F , then how

will one be able to enquire into it? Surely one cannot enquire into something of which one has no knowledge. How can one, for example, know if Edinburgh is to the east of Glasgow if one doesn't know what Edinburgh (and/or) Glasgow is? Or again, how could one know when the Battle of Trafalgar was fought if they were completely ignorant of any such thing as 'The Battle of Trafalgar'? Interpreted this way, the challenge posed by (2) and (3) can be understood thus: if you do not already know the identity of *F*, how can you know if *x* is true of *F*; but if you already know the identity of *F*, then you will – *ipso facto* – also know whether *x* is true of *F*. This seems to be the kind of order of enquiry that Socrates has in mind when he insists that we cannot know if virtue is teachable unless we first know what virtue is. This is because we cannot possibly know what something *is like* (*ti poion*) unless we, first, know what *it is* (*ti esti*). To avoid this kind of conundrum, we can invoke our earlier distinction between the partial vs. full grasp of knowing *F*. And with this, we can solve the second horn of the paradox (in 3), rendering the conclusion (in 4) false. Hence, whether one knows or does know *F*, enquiry is neither impossible nor futile.

Given this, one would expect Socrates to make a similar move. However, this isn't at all what he does immediately following his reformulation of Meno's challenge. Rather, and bizarrely, instead of exposing the fallacy of equivocation contained in Meno's argument, he claims that he simply doesn't believe that it is a very good argument. When pressed by Meno as to why he doesn't believe it to be a good argument, he replies by telling Meno that he doesn't believe it to be thus *on the basis of* a story told by priests and priestesses – a myth about reincarnation and the immortality of the soul.

This puzzling move, which Socrates makes directly after Meno's paradox, is what I shall call, the *problem of recollection*. The next section will focus on offering a brief account of how this problem arises.

1.3. Plato's Problem

Socrates' response to the paradox – if we take this response to consist of a combination of the theory of recollection in addition to the slave boy

demonstration – raises puzzles and problems. Let us consider some of the problems it faces before we go on to explore another potential reading - one that rejects the claim that the theory of recollection is intended to play any such role, but argues instead that Plato's conception of 'correct opinion' (true belief), introduced later on in the *Meno*, is capable of dispatching of the paradox without further ado. However, if it turns out that this second reading is inadequate too, then we have a dilemma on our hands.

The dilemma, or *problem of recollection* as I call it, arises out of two possible ways in which we could interpret the role that the theory of recollection plays in the dialogue, and in relation to the paradox. The first option is to follow the traditional reading and claim that the theory of recollection is intended to solve the paradox. The second option is to say that it isn't meant to solve the paradox; rather, an epistemological distinction that Plato makes towards the end of the dialogue constitutes its solution. But what if neither of these options – as they have been presented here – is satisfactory? If this were the case, then – whichever way we interpret it, whether as a solution to the paradox or not - the theory of recollection in the *Meno* is problematic. In this section, I explore the different ways in which the problem of recollection in the *Meno* arises.

1.3.1. The Paradoxes of Recollection

The slave passage shows that enquiry is possible by providing a demonstration of a successful enquiry. In doing so, it reinforces Socrates' earlier claim that the mind is not a blank before enquiry begins, as the paradox had alleged. And more importantly, that enquiry itself is an opportunity for recollecting true beliefs. Does this move solve the paradox? There are three problems concerning the theory of recollection that cast doubt on its ability to solve the paradox.

First, it seems to simply shift the problem from a paradox of enquiry to a “paradox of recollection”³³. To see how this happens, let us substitute the terminology:

- a) For any x , x is either recollected or not,
- b) If x is recollected, then enquiry is impossible (since there is nothing left about x to recollect),
- c) If x is not recollected, then enquiry is impossible (since in the absence of having x before one’s mind, where x has not yet been recollected, enquiry fails to be purposive and one risks not recognising x when one encounters it).
- d) Therefore, whether x is recollected or not, enquiry is impossible.

On this interpretation, the major difficulty facing Socrates’ theory of recollection is dealing with (c). For although the slave boy demonstration does not show that (b) is false - and we may take Socrates to concede to it - it nowhere deals with offering an appropriate answer to (c). If the slave boy has no recollection of x whatsoever (e.g. virtue) then how can enquiry be said to have an aim; for if someone were to set about searching for x , then the assumption is that they must have x before their mind (in some minimal, vague sense at least). The theory of recollection, however, does not allow this: the claim is that the slave boy does not remember x before enquiry begins. And if he doesn’t remember x , then how does he know what he is searching for; and, furthermore, how would he know that *this* is x were he to find it?

Second, if we attempt to remedy this by claiming that having a definition of a Platonic Form - i.e. a definition of, say, Virtue - aids in the recognition of a recollected Form, then, as White points out, “it would appear that one has already recollected the definition”.³⁴ Similarly, if we replace the concept of a definition with the Form Itself - i.e. a direct apprehension of it - then the recollection of the Form Itself (its apprehension) has already been recollected,³⁵ and so there is nothing left to recollect. In other words, on both reformulations, we end up facing the first horn of the dilemma: (b) If x is recollected, enquiry is impossible.

³³ Ibid, p. 50.

³⁴ Ibid, pp. 50-51.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 51.

But perhaps that's not what Socrates means: enquiry need not start with a full-blown definition, recollection, or apprehension of the Form. He merely means to state that in the absence of such full-blown knowledge, we have *some* sort of way of sketching the aims of the enquiry, or having some sort of rough idea of where the investigation is heading. This, however, leads to the third problem: it takes us back to the second horn of the dilemma – (c) If x is not recollected, enquiry is impossible. In cases where enquiry begins with a vague notion, and taking the theory of recollection into account, how would one recognise that one has indeed recollected knowledge, or the correct answer? If we say that one would simply *know*, then that amounts to saying that one now knows that this is the correct answer on the basis that one knows it (i.e. has recollected it). But surely one needs an independent warrant to avoid a circularity of justification - otherwise one would, in effect, be appealing to the (allegedly) recollected item to justify that it is a (genuinely) recollected item.

1.3.2. *The Reductionist Reading*

On the other hand, if we claim that we are indeed capable of recognising a correct answer when we encounter one on the basis of a difference in phenomenological feel – i.e. the 'Aha!' feeling, *Aha-erlebnis*, or Archimedes' *Eureka* moment that comes with grasping, understanding, gaining insight, finding out, or recognising something to be the case – then we risk making knowledge something that is ultimately subjective and based on no more than feelings. This is especially the case when we notice that the degree of our convictions, the feelings that accompany our beliefs, are not at any rate a reliable guide to whether those convictions and beliefs are true. And Plato surely does not want to claim anything of the sort. This is evidenced, in part, by his insistence that truth is not a subjective matter,³⁶ and in another, by his negative portrayal of Meno and the slave boy as feeling initially confident about something that they should not have felt confident about – viz. that they knew the correct answers when in fact they didn't. We do not have any

³⁶ I take the claim that, throughout Plato's dialogues, a universal conception of truth and objective knowledge are consistently assumed and/or defended, to be uncontroversial and in line with most standard readings of his dialogues.

reasons, then, to believe that Plato was reducing our ability to recognise correct answers to some sort of knack that is based on the phenomenological feel of knowledge once it is recollected, since he seems to be well aware that that 'feel' can equally accompany false beliefs, as they may do true ones. Plato's views aside, it is one thing to suggest that the truth of x is discovered via some epistemically reliable method y , which is then accompanied by the 'Aha' feeling a , and quite another to suggest that the methodology for discovering the truth about x can plausibly be reduced to that feeling a – in the former, the feeling merely accompanies the discovery of truth through what might be a reliable method (y), whereas the latter suggests that the only reliable method is the feeling itself, and hence, that y can plausibly be reduced to a . Plato might have held that the former is true without needing to commit himself to the latter; for what is significant here is that the latter reductionist view is not entailed by the former non-reductionist view. This, in addition to the textual evidence stated above, warrants the rejection of any such reductionist interpretation of what Plato meant when he claimed that our recognition of a belief's being true is to be explained by the theory of recollection.

1.3.3. Epistemological Intuitionism

Perhaps what Plato had in mind was something like an intuitionist epistemology according to which some truths – e.g. mathematical or logical – are simply self-evident. They are not in need of further justification or warrant; nor do we need to explain how we recognise something to be true since, built into the notion of an 'intuition' is the idea that it is self-evident - it isn't some feeling or knack, we simply *know* (intuit) that some things just are as they are. Might ethical truths not also enjoy the same self-evident characteristics of mathematical and logical truths?

Plato's choice of a geometrical problem in the *Meno* as a demonstration of the truth of the theory of recollection would certainly point towards the idea that the kind of truth in question is *a priori*, and as such, might make an intuitionist reading all the more tempting to accept. That said, one needs to tread with care here. For although the kind of truths referred to in the *Meno*

by Plato may be similar to the kind of truths that intuitionists have in mind, their views on how these truths are acquired, recognised or explained, may vastly differ. A defining feature of intuitionism, for instance, is the claim that there are different grounds for knowledge. According to Price, there are three grounds for knowledge: (i) intuition; (ii) immediate consciousness or feeling; and (iii) argumentation.³⁷ However, Socrates, in the *Meno* at least, seems to be more concerned with argumentation (iii) as a means of arriving at truth and acquiring knowledge than then self-evident intuitions (i). What Plato has in mind here in the *Meno*, then, cannot be similar to what intuitionists have in mind. For although both may aim at similar kinds of truths, their means of acquiring such truths seem to be markedly different.

1.4. The Problem of Interpretation

The challenge now is to say how *else* we can interpret the connection between the theory of recollection on the one hand, and our ability to recognise truth in the course of enquiry, *such that* we can plausibly assume that progress in enquiry is indeed possible, on the other. Having rejected the reductionist and intuitionist views, and given the paradoxes of recollection discussed earlier, what other interpretative options are available? This is especially puzzling when we consider that despite stating that the eristic argument isn't a good argument, Plato does not spell out why it isn't so, nor does he offer an analysis of its fallacious nature, but rather offers some story which seems, at best, an irrelevant digression within the given context, or at worse, a poor response to the paradox via a unphilosophical, religious myth.

As we have just seen, the traditional reading takes Plato's theory of recollection to be his answer to the paradox; and it takes that answer to be, generally speaking, a philosophically bad one: an extravagantly metaphysical answer which could have been easily replaced with a far more straightforward one that simply exposed the equivocation by pointing to the two notions of 'know' involved in the paradox. Instead, Plato's answer

³⁷ P. Stratton-Lake, 'Intuitionism in Ethics', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/intuitionism-ethics/>>. Retrieved: 23.02.2015.

comes in the form of a theory whose justification is a religious myth about the immortality of the soul and incarnation. As such, it is a theory whose justification is philosophically lacking, so to speak, and thereby constitutes a poor attempt by Plato to respond to the paradox. The problem of recollection in the *Meno* is, in this sense, Plato's problem. Accordingly, let us call this version of the problem of recollection *Plato's problem*, since the blame for the problem lies squarely on his apparent failure to respond to the paradox via a theory whose foundations rest upon a rationally indefensible and empirically unsubstantiated religious myth. This is, generally, the traditional way in which Plato's response to Meno's paradox, via the theory of recollection, has been interpreted. Call this way of reading Plato's response to the paradox via the theory of recollection, then, the *traditional reading* (hereafter TRM).

However, should it – upon further investigation – turn out that the theory of recollection isn't Plato's answer to Meno's paradox, after all, but rather, that his answer comes in the form of the epistemological distinction he draws between true belief and knowledge (allegedly) aimed at exposing the equivocation of 'know' in the paradox, then Plato has been redeemed – or so it would seem. Indeed, it is in this vein that some contemporary commentators on the *Meno* have proceeded to defend Plato against criticism. They have argued, in effect, that Plato's problem arises out of TRM's mistaken assumption about what constitutes Plato's response to the paradox. Call this more recent reading – which takes Plato's answer to the paradox to consist in an epistemological distinction between 'true belief' and 'knowledge' - the *epistemological reading* (hereafter ERM).

Now, on the face of it, ERM does appear to rescue Plato from the charge of being metaphysically heavy-handed, as it were, in the face of an otherwise easily resolved dilemma; and if accurate, then it would seem to solve Plato's problem by rendering his solution to the paradox more palatable, and hence, more acceptable. However, while ERM brings Plato's thinking closer to our contemporary way of thinking, and in doing so, makes his solution to the paradox seem more acceptable to us, it gives rise to a new problem. Straight after Meno launches the eristic dilemma, he asks Socrates whether the latter

thinks that it is a good argument. When Socrates tells Meno that he does *not* think it is very good argument, Meno asks him: “Can you tell me *why* not?”³⁸ At this point, Socrates answers:

Yes, I can. *Because* I’ve listened to certain men and women, people who know all about the world of the gods... A claim, in my view, that was beautiful as it was true. ... And what they say is this ... they say that a person’s soul can never die ... since the soul can never die, and has been born over and over again, and has already seen what there is in this world beyond – i.e. absolutely everything – there’s nothing it hasn’t already learned about. So it wouldn’t be at all surprising if it managed to remember things, the things it used to know, either about being good or about anything else. ... So you shouldn’t pay attention to that quibbler’s [eristic] argument. The claim is just an excuse for being lazy, and music to the ears of slackers; whereas mine give us reason to be energetic and eager to find out as much as we can. And it is the one I trust and believe is true, and that’s why I’m willing to try and find out what being good is – with your help.³⁹

Clearly, Socrates’ insertion of the word ‘because’ above indicates that what we are about to hear is his reason, his explanation, or his rationale, for not thinking that the eristic argument is a good one – whether through an explicit explanation, or implicitly by suggesting an alternative view to that presented in the eristic argument. This is crucial to our assessment of ERM. For what is important to note here is that Plato’s insertion of ‘because’ appears to directly contradict ERM’s main claim since the explanation that follows immediately after the ‘because’ is, of course, the religious story and *not* the epistemological distinction between ‘true belief’ and ‘knowledge’. Moreover, there are a couple of times where Socrates seems to be deriving conclusions on the basis of the claims contained in the religious story. For example, he draws epistemological lessons from the story’s claim that the soul has lived many times and seen everything. The first lesson is that “it wouldn’t be at all surprising if it managed to remember things, the things it used to know, either about being good or about anything else”.⁴⁰ Second – and as a direct consequence of the first – one “shouldn’t [therefore] pay attention to that quibbler’s [eristic] argument”.⁴¹ Contrary to what ERM

³⁸ *Meno* (81a). [My emphasis.]

³⁹ *Ibid.* [My emphasis.]

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* (81c).

⁴¹ *Ibid.* (81d).

suggests, then, the dialogue's text has Socrates making what appears to be an unequivocal claim about his belief in the truth of theory of recollection and its power in the face of the paradox:

So you shouldn't pay attention to that quibbler's [eristic] argument. The claim is just an excuse for being lazy, and music to the ears of slackers; *whereas mine give us reason to be energetic and eager to find out as much as we can.* And it is the one I trust and believe is true, and that's why I'm willing to try and find out what being good is – with your help.⁴²

Note how Socrates pits his own view ("mine") against the eristic argument ("quibbler's argument") so as to suggest that he is presenting these two views as contenders, in the sense that he intends to convince Meno to abandon the view contained in the eristic argument in favour of Socrates' own. This is obvious from the above quote. Plato is telling the reader that Socrates is going to set out to convince Meno that his own view that 'learning is remembering' is a better alternative to the one represented by the eristic argument – though what exactly that latter view amounts to, he never explicitly specifies. What is clear, however, is that Socrates' view is presented as an alternative and a contender to that upon which the paradox is premised.

Therefore, the challenge for those advocating ERM (or those who may, at least, be tempted by it) is to square their reading with the *Meno's* text. It consists in explaining:

- a) Why Socrates pretends to offer the theory of recollection *as if* it were his solution to the paradox, when in actual fact it isn't; and, if and when (a) has been answered satisfactorily, then
- b) To offer an otherwise plausible explanation of the role that the theory of recollection is supposed to play in the dialogue.

For if it turns out that we cannot explain why Socrates would pretend that the theory of recollection is his solution to the paradox, when in fact it isn't, then that undermines the plausibility of the epistemological reading. Likewise, if we cannot explain why else Plato would introduce the theory of

⁴² Ibid. (81a). [My emphasis.]

recollection straight after the paradox, or indeed why else he would introduce it in the dialogue at all, then this too casts doubt on whether the epistemological reading gets Plato right. Hence, unless the epistemological reading can answer (a) and (b) satisfactorily, we end up with a new problem – one that creates an inconsistency between Plato’s text on the one hand, and our interpretation of that text, on the other. Call this new problem that arises out of the epistemological reading, the *problem of interpretation*.

The traditional (TRM) and epistemological (ERM) readings, then, each give rise to their own problem. Taken jointly, both problems result in a two-horned dilemma that can be summarised as thus:

1. Either the theory of recollection is or isn’t Plato’s response to the paradox;
2. If it is his response, then it’s a bad one (*Plato’s problem*);
3. If it isn’t his response, then we can’t understand why he makes Socrates say it is (*the problem of interpretation*);
4. Therefore, whether the theory of recollection is or isn’t Plato’s response to the paradox, it poses a problem (*the problem of recollection*).

The next two chapters are aimed at a critical analysis and evaluation of two influential versions of ERM. My aim will be to assess whether their versions can avoid the problem of interpretation by meeting the challenges set out in (a) and (b) above.

Chapter 2

The Standard Epistemological Reading

The *epistemological reading* (ERM) is an interpretation of what it takes to solve the Meno's paradox. One way of reading the solution to the paradox is in terms of partial ignorance or partial knowledge; one knows enough for inquiry to get started, and to progress to knowledge, but not enough to count as full-blown knowledge. For ERM, then, a distinction between two epistemic states – one weaker and one stronger – is what it takes to disarm Meno's paradox.

As a general rule of thumb, what one takes to be a valid solution to some problem will, naturally, depend on what one takes to be the problem; and ERM is no exception to this general rule. It is here that ERM branches off into sub categories. On the one hand, there are those who adopt the *standard epistemological reading*, and who make no distinction between the challenge contained in Meno's version of the dilemma (i.e. Meno's questions), or that contained in the eristic argument (i.e. Socrates' reformulation of Meno's questions). For these commentators, given that the two formulations present an identical challenge, the solution to the challenge contained in both formulations must also be identical. However, not everyone thinks that Meno's version of the dilemma and Socrates reformulation of it in the form of the eristic argument are in fact identical; and as a result, they do not believe that what counts as a solution to one challenge will also work for the other. Given that there are two challenges, they argue, we require two different solutions. Commentators who adopt this hybrid view of Meno's Challenge – as containing two separate challenges that require two different solutions – are those who adhere to a *hybrid epistemological reading*.

This chapter sets out to critically assess the first version of ERM - the standard epistemological reading - with the aim of ascertaining whether it can cope with the problem of interpretation. I will begin by offering a

detailed summary of the standard epistemological reading's main claims (2.1). I will then go on to analyse the role that this reading assigns to the theory of recollection in the *Meno* (2.2). Finally, I will evaluate this reading in light of the problem of interpretation that was set out at the end of the previous chapter to see if it can avoid it. I will argue that the standard epistemological reading fails to adequately address the problem of interpretation (2.3).

2.1. The Standard Epistemological Reading: A Summary

The standard epistemological reading (hereafter 'STR') takes Meno's challenge to consist of two parts. The first part consists of three questions posed by Meno, and the second consist of Socrates' reformulation of these into the eristic argument. In 'Inquiry in the *Meno*', Gail Fine - a prominent defender of STR - interprets Meno's questions as follows:

- a) How can one inquire into something if one doesn't at all know what it is?
- b) Which of the things one does not know is one inquiring into?
- c) How will one recognise the object of one's inquiry, even if one finds it?⁴³

According to Fine, Meno's questions contain two objections. The first, she calls the "Targeting Objection". She understands question (b) to point out that inquiry cannot be conducted without an aim or a target; in order to inquire, one must have an aim or some target object of inquiry. The second objection in (c), however, concerns a challenge about our ability to realize that we have found the correct answer(s) to our inquiry. According to this latter objection, if one's mind is a "cognitive blank" about the said object of inquiry, then one won't be able to know or realize that one has stumbled upon what one had set out to find: the correct answer.⁴⁴

⁴³ G. Fine, 'Inquiry in the *Meno*', *Plato on Knowledge and Forms*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), pp. 51-52. I have followed Fine here and used 'inquiry' (instead of 'enquiry') since it captures nicely the formal kind of investigation that she seems to think Socrates has in mind here (as opposed to informal, general enquiries into everyday, mundane matters).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

However, and despite the seemingly valid objections, they do seem counter-intuitive. We do, after all, conduct successful inquiries all the time. Where has Meno gone wrong, then? Should we dismiss his questions as a mere trick to get off the hook and escape Socrates' incessant questioning?

2.1.1. *The Priority of Knowledge What*

According to Fine, however counterintuitive and absurd these questions seem at first blush, Plato does not seem to think that they amount to a mere trick. To see why he does, she argues, we need to understand how the challenge arises in the dialogue, and how Plato thinks that it constitutes a threat to the project of Socratic inquiry.

Recall that the *Meno* had started with Meno asking whether virtue can be taught, and Socrates replying that we cannot answer this question without first knowing what virtue is – in other words, how can one tell what something is *like*, if one does not know *what* that thing is, in the first place? From Socrates' response to Meno, claims Fine, we can extract the following presupposition, which we can call the "Principle of the Priority of Knowledge", and according to which:

(PKW) If one doesn't at all know what x is, one cannot know anything about x.

But also recall that Socrates had told Meno earlier on in their discussion that he did not know what virtue was and that he did not have "the faintest idea what being good (*areté*) is".⁴⁵ Let us call this "Socrates' disclaimer". Moreover, and despite this disclaimer, recall that Socrates had wanted Meno to join him into searching for an answer to the question 'What is virtue?' But doesn't Socrates' commitment to PKW render him incapable from embarking on such a search? In other words, doesn't the combination of PKW and "Socrates' disclaimer" on the one hand, and Socrates' enthusiasm for inquiry on the other, cancel each other out? Doesn't this 'combination' render inquiry impossible? And if so, doesn't this show that Socrates is contradicting

⁴⁵ Ibid.

himself - or worse, that inquiry itself is impossible? With these obstacles in mind, claims STR, it isn't difficult to see why Meno attacks Socrates with the triad of questions (a)-(c).

The next section looks at how Socrates, according to Fine, reformulates Meno's dilemma into the famous eristic argument, and what he takes to be the way out of the difficulties that the argument raises for his project.

2.1.2. Meno's Paradox

Immediately after Meno attacks Socrates with his triad of questions, the latter reformulates these "in the form of a constructive dilemma."⁴⁶ According to Fine, 'Meno's paradox' is the combination of Meno's questions in (a)-(c) above and Socrates reformulation of them into the (eristic) dilemma. She then recasts Socrates formulation in four steps:

- 1) For any x , one either knows, or does not know, x .
- 2) If one knows x , one cannot inquire into x .
- 3) If one does not know x , one cannot inquire into x .
- 4) Therefore, whether or not one knows x , one cannot inquire into x .⁴⁷

The argument, claims Fine, is valid. (1) is merely an instantiation of the law of the excluded middle, (2) and (3) claim that where these conditionals obtain, inquiry is impossible, and (4) then validly concludes that inquiry is impossible. Fine thinks that the argument's fundamental flaw is that it commits a fallacy of equivocation. Key to disarming the paradox, she continues, is realising that the argument rests on a false choice: that one must be in a state of either 'total ignorance' – what she calls "cognitive blank" – or 'full knowledge' about some matter.

Armed with this kind of response, let us look more closely at how she thinks that this solves the paradox. Fine takes the first horn of the paradox:

- (2) If one knows x , one cannot inquire into x

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 52.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

to be false on the grounds that one can have partial, though not complete, knowledge about many subjects. Take the example of physics as a subject matter. Surely, no one knows *everything* that there is to know about it. Hence, contrary to (2), one can indeed inquire into x (where x is understood to be a subject matter, such as, say, physics) despite the fact that one (already) knows x, because there will always be *more* facts about x that one can come to know.⁴⁸

On the face of it, Fine's move of denying the false choice between the mind's being a "complete blank" about x, or its having "full" knowledge of x, seems to deal with the first horn of the paradox in (2). Let us now turn to the second horn:

(3) If one does not know x, one cannot inquire into x

It is worth noting here that this horn of the paradox, according to Fine, contains two objections which we'd looked at earlier, and which were raised by Meno in questions (b) and (c). Recall that (b) raises the "Target Objection" according to which if one does not know x, then one's inquiry has no aim; and if this were the case, then inquiry is impossible since, without an aim, an

⁴⁸ Ibid, pp. 52-53.

Note that Fine interprets the term 'know' in (2) to mean something such as an area of knowledge or a subject about which one can know lots of things – that is to say, a holistic, as opposed to atomistic, notion of knowledge. It is holistic because, of course, as an area of knowledge and study, or as a subject matter of investigation, it covers a large (or even infinite) number of facts; and as such, no one can ever know *everything* there is to know about physics. Contrast this with an atomistic fact in the form of a single proposition, such as, for example, "Gold is the most malleable of all metals". Fine thinks that we should read the term 'know' in (2) as taking a whole area of knowledge, study or investigation as an object rather than a singular fact expressed in a single proposition. In other words, we should take (2) to be challenging the holistic type of knowledge, as opposed to the atomistic one. But why should we? Doesn't Meno's challenge (the dilemma and the eristic argument combined) stay silent on this?

Plato's text does indeed stay silent on how we should interpret the kind of knowledge in question. Some have interpreted this ambiguity as being part of the famous eristic argument's intractable character, whilst others have argued that, in light of the topic of discussion in the *Meno* – i.e. the search for a definition of virtue – we ought to understand the type of knowledge and investigation that Meno is attacking here to be of a similar kind. Fine is of this latter opinion. Moreover, there may be parts of Plato's work that could be seen to support this holistic reading – e.g. he says in the *Meno* that the slave will be recovering "beliefs that go on to become bits of knowledge" (*Meno* 86a).

However, Fine does say that she believes the paradox itself is ambiguous on what kind of knowledge it refers to. She also goes on to clarify, in a later work, the specific type of knowledge that Socrates is after. This leads her to modify PKW (the Principle of Knowledge What) to PKD (the Principle of the Priority of Knowledge of a Definition). See, G. Fine, 'Introduction', *Plato on Knowledge and Forms*, op. cit., p. 2, n. 3.

inquiry can't even begin. Meno's third question (c), however, raises a different objection, which Fine calls the "Recognition Objection", and according to which if one does not know *x*, then one cannot recognise *x* were one to find it in the course of inquiry.

Again, she argues, there isn't necessarily just one way of saying that someone lacks knowledge. I may, for instance, be ignorant of *x* in the sense that my mind is a complete blank about *x*. However, I may also be said to be ignorant about *x* even if my mind were not a complete blank about it, for "I might lack all knowledge about *x*, but have (true) beliefs about it; and perhaps they are adequate for inquiry."⁴⁹ As she puts it:

[T]he paradox is valid if 'know' is used univocally. And one would be tempted to think it sound if one thought that, for any item, one either has complete knowledge or is totally out of touch with it. For if one knows everything there is to know about a thing, there is nothing left to inquire into. And if one is totally ignorant of something – if one's mind is a complete blank with respect to it – then one can't inquire either. For in this case one can't even identify something as what one is inquiring into; one doesn't even have a preliminary description.⁵⁰

But these aren't the only options, Fine argues, for there also true beliefs.

Returning to Fine's "Target Objection", we could say that although one lacks knowledge of *x*, nonetheless, one's inquiry into *x* is possible since one can have true beliefs or roughly-accurate beliefs that can act as specifications for one's inquiry into *x*. These specifications about *x* can then function as one's 'aim'. Put another way, we have enough information about *x* to get the inquiry going, but not enough for it to count as full knowledge. This shows that the "Target Objection" relied on the false choice between the mind's being a complete blank about *x*, on the one hand, and having full knowledge of it, on the other. However, for Fine, since there are intermediate epistemic states such as beliefs in between those two extremes, the choice is a false one: inquiry into *x* can get off the ground, so to speak, with beliefs alone.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 53.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 3.

Furthermore, the same kind of false choice can be exposed as the underlying assumption in the “Recognition Objection”. Again, Fine argues that one can have enough true beliefs or roughly-accurate beliefs about x , which may indeed fall short of knowledge, but which, for all intents and purposes, act as sufficient information with which one can recognise x , should one manage to find it in the course of inquiry. The two objections contained in the second horn of the paradox in (3), then, can be shown to rely on a false dichotomy about the economy of epistemic or cognitive states that a person can be said to have with regards to a object of inquiry – there are more epistemic states in between ignorance and knowledge than this dichotomy recognises; and once these are exposed, the second horn of the paradox in (3) can be shown to be false too. Given that (2) and (3) are both false, concludes Fine, it follows that the conclusion in (4) is also false: inquiry is indeed possible in both, the absence of knowledge and the existence of knowledge.

2.1.3. Plato’s Solution

Now that we have looked at STR’s analysis of the paradox, and what it would take to solve it, let us turn to STR’s interpretation of Plato’s proposed solution to Meno’s paradox. According to Fine, the “elenctic reply” (i.e. the section of the dialogue containing an *elenchus* between Meno’s slave-boy and Socrates, where the latter asks the former to find the correct answer to a geometrical problem) constitutes Plato’s solution to Meno’s paradox - *not* the theory of recollection. More specifically, she argues that fundamental to understanding Plato’s solution to the paradox, and his epistemology more generally, is seeing that, for him, knowledge is “a high-level cognitive condition, one that goes beyond mere true belief.”⁵¹ Once we grasp this, she continues, we are in a better position to understand whether the elenctic reply constitutes Plato’s answer to the paradox, or whether it is the theory of recollection that is intended to do so. Accordingly, she sets out to answer the following questions:

⁵¹ Ibid, p.3.

- a. How do the elenchus and the theory of recollection fit together?
- b. How does either reply to the paradox?

I shall focus here on how she takes elenchus to be Plato's solution to the paradox, without the need for the theory of recollection - i.e. her answer to (b). I address Fine's answer to (a) in the next section where I discuss what she takes to be the role of the theory of recollection in the *Meno*, and how she thinks this fits with elenchus more generally. For now, let us focus on (b).

To understand how the elenctic reply could solve the paradox, she states, we must remember that Socrates' elenchus proceeds by stages. The first stage is where Socrates' questioning leads the interlocutor (here in the *Meno*, the slave) to experience *aporia* (ἀπορία) – i.e. a state of being confused or baffled. This is the first stage since it rids one of one's of false beliefs – the slave, for example, thought he knew the answer, but now he realises that he doesn't know. However,

elenchus need not end in *aporia*; the elenctic method can take one all the way to knowledge. ... Plato shows that the elenchus can go beyond the exposure of ignorance to the articulation of true beliefs.⁵²

And this, according to Fine, is what the geometrical demonstration with Meno's slave is supposed to show: that the boy can rid himself of false beliefs through *aporia*. However, that's not the only thing that the geometrical demonstration shows, for it also shows us that the slave can go on to acquire true beliefs. This brings us to the second stage of elenchus, the stage where it takes one "beyond the exposure of ignorance to the articulation of true beliefs".⁵³ Hence, the elenctic method (i.e. Socratic method of elenchus) "can take one all the way to knowledge."⁵⁴

It is with this elenctic reply" then, argues Fine, that Plato goes on to reject premise (3) of Meno's paradox, and show it to be false:

⁵² G. Fine, 'Inquiry in the *Meno*', op. cit., p. 56.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

The slave can inquire, although he entirely lacks knowledge, because he has both true beliefs and the capacity for rational reflection and revision of his beliefs, and these are adequate for inquiry.⁵⁵

At first blush, it isn't clear what Fine means by the suggestion that the conversation with the slave boy shows that his ability to reflect upon his beliefs and revise them, are "adequate for inquiry", in the sense of its being Plato's proposed solution to the paradox. A closer inspection, however, reveals that what Fine means is this: the slave's possession of true beliefs, along with his capacity to reflect upon them, and as a consequence of this capacity, to then revise them – as *demonstrated* in the slave-boy example – shows that inquiry is indeed possible. Hence it is the combination of two key ingredients: (i) one's possession of true beliefs, and (ii) one's ability to reason, that jointly constitute what makes inquiry possible, and at one and the same time, what makes inquiry progress all the way to knowledge.⁵⁶

This isn't a contentious claim at all. Indeed, it seems to be a common-sensical suggestion by all counts. And this is exactly what we can then glean from the quote below, on what Fine believes it would take to justify the Socratic method. Recall earlier that Fine had suggested that the combination of PKW and Socrates' disavowal led to the suggestion that perhaps the type of inquiry that Socrates is attempting to conduct simply isn't tenable. Here, she argues, we have – at once – a solution to the paradox, and a defence of Socratic inquiry, both contained in the elenctic reply:

For although he disavows all moral knowledge, he never claims to lack true moral beliefs; and, indeed, he seems to believe he has them.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ In 'Inquiry in the *Meno*', Fine claims that it is the elenctic reply that disarms the paradox. However, our analysis shows that what's doing the crucial work of solving the paradox - based on how she describes the solution – seems to be the slave's possession of true beliefs plus his ability to reason. However, see her 'Introduction', in *Plato on Knowledge and Forms*, op. cit., p.5. In this later piece, she seems to clarify or change her position: she now claims that "Plato solves the paradox of inquiry by distinguishing knowledge from true belief, and by arguing that one can have the latter without having the former". There's still no explicit mention of the role played by reason in this process. That said, she does make an implicit reference to this role in her claim that it is the slave's ability to reflect upon his beliefs (i.e. rationally assess them) that then leads him to abandon the false ones and retain the true ones. See, G. Fine, 'Inquiry in the *Meno*', op. cit., p. 56.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 57.

And just as premise (3) of the paradox rested on a false dichotomy between ignorance (complete cognitive blank) and (full) knowledge, neglecting the fact that there is an intermediary stage between the two (true belief), so too Socrates' disavowal to knowledge can mean that he does not suffer from a cognitive blank, as it were, but rather has some true beliefs with which he can conduct his inquiries and (presumably, along with his capacity to reason) he can go on all the way to acquire knowledge.

By the same token, if Socrates and Meno have true beliefs about virtue, along with their capacity to conduct a joint inquiry into, say, virtue, then this would allow them to reflect upon their beliefs and revise them where necessary, eventually leading them to successfully terminate their inquiry by finding its object: an answer to the question 'What is virtue?' As Fine puts it:

Socrates seems to assume, however, that everyone, or at least everyone rational, will, if they inquire systematically, progress in the same direction. That's because he also seems to assume that some important true beliefs are better *entrenched* than various false beliefs (or will seem more reasonable to us when we consider them) so that, in cases of conflict, we tend, upon reflection, to reject the false beliefs.⁵⁸

I shall return to what she means by her claim that "true beliefs are better entrenched than various false beliefs" in the next section. For now, what is important is to extract what she takes to be Plato's solution to the paradox. And as we saw, she thinks that the conversation with the slave-boy (or, "elenctic reply", as she calls it) is his solution. However, upon closer inspection of her explanation of how this elenctic reply solves the paradox, we discovered that there are in fact two key elements, on her view, that seem to be doing the crucial work of solving the paradox – viz., (true) beliefs and the capacity for rational thought.

But does Fine think that those initial beliefs with which one starts their inquiry must be true, could be false, or a combination of the two? Fine is not at all clear on this score. For, at times, she suggests that inquiry must have some aim with which it can start. And this aim, she thinks, can be provided

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 61. [My emphasis.]

by one's possession of true beliefs. However, she also claims that elenchus proceeds in stages; and that the task of the first stage is to rid one of one's false beliefs. Hence, she either thinks that one begins with a combination of true and false beliefs, but that these get refined in the course of inquiry so as to leave the inquirer with only true ones, or she thinks that one could potentially start inquiry with false beliefs (about, say, virtue), and that, despite their being false, they can potentially function as the 'aim' of inquiry. (This would then deal with the second horn of the paradox's denial of inquiry's having an aim.) It is worth noting, however, that if Fine means the latter, then the possibility of inquiry is in trouble again, for it isn't clear how a set of beliefs that are false (i.e. a completely false conception of virtue) is supposed to provide an aim for inquiry. For surely, an aim, even a very vague one, will have to vaguely resemble the object that one is searching for, or at least provide *some* accurate information about it by way of offering us some specification of what we are looking for. In looking for John, for example, it would help to know that John is a human being, not a Yorkshire Terrier breed of dogs. If I falsely held the latter, then I would surely miss the opportunity of identifying him were I to happen upon him in the course of looking for him. Hence, in the absence of true beliefs, our inquiry lacks an aim, as the paradox had contended. However, if she means the former, then given that true beliefs seem to play a prominent role in giving inquiry its aim (and hence solving the paradox) she owes us a story of how, on her reading, Plato thinks that we acquire true beliefs.⁵⁹

I shall leave this worry aside for the moment and come back to it at the end of this chapter. For now, what is important is that Fine thinks that

⁵⁹ Fine is silent on this score in her seminal article 'Inquiry in the *Meno*', and this silence, as I've attempted to show here, can be dangerous. However, she does return to this topic in a later work and clarifies what she means:

At the beginning of the inquiry, the slave lacks knowledge; he has a mixture of true and false beliefs. Upon being questioned by Socrates, contradictions among his beliefs are uncovered. He eventually rejects the false ones and retains the true ones; and, using the latter, he is eventually able to answer Socrates' question.

G. Fine, 'Introduction', op. cit., p. 4. Still, we are left with the question of how Plato thinks that true beliefs are acquired – an account that is missing from Fine's reading.

The elenctic reply disarms the paradox by arguing that ... inquiry is possible in the absence of knowledge. It seems to be *a good, and complete, reply*.⁶⁰

The elenctic reply is successful in so doing because it seems – on our reading of Fine – to contain two key components whose presence makes both inquiry and the acquisition of knowledge possible: (i) the capacity for reason, and (ii) the possession of true beliefs. We will also leave aside for now her further claim that true beliefs are “better entrenched” until the following section since its meaning depends on how Fine interprets Plato’s theory of recollection. For now, we can conclude that, according to Fine’s standard epistemological reading, the role of the elenctic reply in the *Meno* is twofold: it disarms Meno’s paradox by rejecting premise (3) of the eristic argument, showing it to be false, and at one and the same time, it rescues Socratic inquiry from the difficulty that we discussed earlier, viz. reconciling Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge of and his enthusiasm for inquiry on the one hand, with his commitment to the principle of the Priority of Knowledge What (PKW) on the other. Furthermore – and this is important – according to Fine, this elenctic reply not only seems to be “a good” reply, but also a “complete” one. In other words, Fine thinks that Plato neither needs the theory of recollection to solve Meno’s paradox, nor in fact did he intend for it to do so. This is a departure from the traditional reading (TRM) that we looked at in the previous chapter, and which took recollection to constitute Plato’s response to the paradox. Therefore, on Fine’s view, the elenctic reply constitutes Plato’s complete response to the paradox, and it also constitutes a philosophically adequate response to Meno’s paradox. What, then, of the theory of recollection? In the next section, I discuss Fine’s interpretation of the role that the theory of recollection plays in the *Meno*.

2.2. *Recollection and the Paradox*

If the elenctic reply does the job of solving the paradox, then what role, if any, does the theory of recollection play in solving the paradox? In other words, would Plato need the theory of recollection if the elenctic reply is

⁶⁰ G. Fine, ‘Inquiry in the *Meno*’, op. cit., p. 61. [My emphasis].

indeed “a good, and complete, reply”⁶¹ to Meno’s paradox, as Fine had suggested earlier? According to Fine, although “the theory of recollection is introduced, *not as a direct reply* to the paradox (the elenctic reply plays that role)”,⁶² Plato introduces it so as to “explain certain facts assumed in the elenctic reply” – viz. that we have a tendency “to favour true beliefs over false beliefs” in the course of inquiry.⁶³ Moreover, because this “remarkable tendency cannot be a brute fact”, Plato feels that it requires an explanation. And for him, the best theory that can explain these “remarkable features of human beings” is one that would do so “in terms of prior knowledge” – in other words, the theory of recollection.⁶⁴ In this section, I will discuss how Fine understands this theory, and what role she thinks it plays in the *Meno*.

For Fine, when Socrates conducts an *elenchus* with the slave boy, although the slave initially believes that he knows the answer, he soon comes under fire and recognises his own ignorance. From here on, and with further reflection upon his beliefs and the geometrical problem at hand, he goes on to find the correct answer to the geometrical problem. This demonstration, argues Fine, assumes that we have the capacity to favour true beliefs over false ones, in the course of inquiry or rational reflection on a given problem. What this shows, she continues, is that we have this tendency – when faced with contradictions among our beliefs – to accept the true ones, and reject the false ones.⁶⁵

It is indeed a remarkable human capacity that we do have a tendency – when choosing from among various hypotheses – to favour truth over falsehood. But this isn’t a brute fact; and Fine thinks that Plato, in the *Meno*, needs to explain how this is possible. Just why she thinks that Plato needs to do so – what possible objection, for instance, might one have raised against him, had he not done so – Fine doesn’t say. That said, she does allude to the fact that this tendency to favour true beliefs over false ones does imply that our true

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid, p. 61.

⁶³ Ibid, pp. 62-63.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ G. Fine, ‘Introduction’, p. 4.

beliefs are “better entrenched” than the false ones. In the next section, I will take a closer look at what she could possibly mean by this and considers some objections to her reading.

2.3. The Standard Reading and the Problem of Interpretation

As discussed in the last chapter, the epistemological reading (ERM) gives rise to the problem of interpretation. Hence, any version of ERM (STR included) must show that it can offer a valid explanation of the role that the theory of recollection plays in the *Meno* and the reason(s) why Plato may have been tempted to introduce it – in short, it needs to present its new interpretation of what it takes to be Plato’s solution to Meno’s paradox in a way that is faithful to the text of the dialogue. Can STR meet this challenge by avoiding the problem of interpretation? As I shall go on to argue in this section, it cannot do so because it simply fails to offer a plausible account of the role that recollection plays in the *Meno* or offer a convincing rationale for why Plato would need any such theory at all. Moreover, in the course of doing so, it creates too large a wedge between the text and its interpretation of that text, leaving us with more questions than the ones it had originally sought to answer.

2.3.1. The Objection to STR’s Conception of a “Mental Blank”

On STR’s analysis, Meno’s paradox suffers from an obvious flaw: it relies on a false choice about the possible epistemic states available to us. It assumes that we only have two options available to us: ignorance (i.e. the mind’s being in a state of mental or cognitive blank) or (full) knowledge. Hence when one is said not to know, one’s mind is a “mental blank”; and if one’s mind were a mental clank, then – for obvious reasons – one’s inquiry will lack a specification – that is to say, an aim. Given that Socrates goes on to distinguish between true belief and knowledge later on in the dialogue, as we saw, STR suggests that the solution to this horn of the paradox is to use its conception of ‘true belief’ as the intermediary epistemic state between “mental blank” and full knowledge. One can have true beliefs that furnish the specifications required for inquiry to have an aim.

However, STR's suggestion that Meno's paradox relies on the assumption that the mind's being in a state of "mental blank" is a threat to the possibility of inquiry, has come under fire. The objection states that the sections of the dialogue preceding the introduction of Meno's paradox do not support STR's reading. The main contention focuses on whether STR's reading of Meno's phrase "not know *at all*", in 80d, should be read as implying that Meno's mind is a "total blank" about virtue. Earlier in the dialogue, so the objection goes, Meno had much to say about virtue in the course of searching for a definition. Therefore, the objection continues, his being confused about virtue does not imply that he holds no thoughts, beliefs or views about it; indeed, he seems to have aired plenty before he finally launched the eristic argument. Hence, when he says that he does "not know at all", this could not possibly mean that his mind is a "mental blank". Moreover, the discussion between Meno and Socrates, prior to the latter's introduction of the eristic argument, revolved around finding an answer to the question: 'What is virtue?' – an instance of the questions 'What is F-ness?' Typical of the (allegedly) earlier dialogues of Plato, where Socrates searches for some definition. If we add this to the point earlier about the meaning of "not know at all", then what we get is this: what Meno means by "not know at all" isn't that his mind is a "total blank", but rather that he lacks knowledge of a definition of virtue (an instance of the more general kind of 'knowledge of a definition' with which the earlier dialogues is supposedly concerned).⁶⁶

However, STR may have an answer ready to this kind of objection. It could simply remind us that it had never denied that Meno (and Socrates, for that matter) had many beliefs and opinions about virtue; and that the voicing of these was the main topic of the earlier sections of the dialogue. And yet this need not contradict the claim that the second horn of the paradox plays on a false economy about the choice of epistemic states open for us to choose from; nor need it contradict that the best method of rejecting this false economy is by introducing a third epistemic state (true belief) in between ignorance and knowledge. In other words, it isn't clear why we cannot maintain both: that Meno has many beliefs about virtue, and that the eristic

⁶⁶ See, D. Ebery, 'Meno's Paradox in Context', *op. cit.*, especially pp. 5-7.

argument trades on the idea of this false choice between ignorance (understood as a mental blank) and knowledge.

A counter-objection, along similar lines to what we've just seen, would argue that this would make no sense. For unless Meno is indeed himself in a state of "mental blank", then why would he attack Socrates with an eristic argument that contains this type of assumption?

One possible reply would be to say that although Meno himself doesn't suffer from being in a state of a "mental blank" about virtue (after all, he did have much to say about virtue earlier), he is using the paradox as an eristic – a trick to ensure him a quick exit from the gruelling Socratic questioning that he'd been subjected to earlier. While it is certainly open to STR to take up this kind of position in response to the objection, we saw earlier that Fine was not willing to do so: she denied the dismissal of Meno's paradox as a mere trick. She believed that Plato took it seriously since it threatened the project of Socratic inquiry. Moreover, she believed it posed a threat due to the conjunction of Socrates' commitment to the Principle of Knowledge What (PKW) on the one hand, and his constant disavowal of knowledge (but continued enthusiasm for conducting Socratic inquiry), on the other.

2.3.2. The Objection from Meno's Lack of Motivation

Another objection brought against STR targets one of its main claims vis-à-vis Meno's motivation for launching his challenge, arguing that the latter makes no sense in light of the former. STR had claimed that the distinction between true belief and knowledge solves the paradox. Moreover, it had claimed that Plato shares this view, and this is precisely his proposed solution to it. It did so by pointing us to the parts of the conversation between Meno's slave and Socrates where the latter had claimed that the former had come to possess true beliefs, but that despite his now possessing true beliefs, they do not yet count as knowledge. This, for STR, was sufficient proof that Plato, here, is doing two things: introducing his reader to an important epistemological distinction between true belief and knowledge, and at one and the same time, offering the solution to Meno's challenge via

that distinction. However, since Plato doesn't make Socrates actually spell out what it is that makes the dilemma so puzzling, or even what solves it, it is – to some extent at least – open to readers to interpret these differently. Hence, the burden of proof lies on any interpretation of Plato's solution to specify the textual – and/or philosophical – evidence that supports its claims.

It is precisely here that the objection currently under discussion targets STR. It raises doubts about STR's appreciation of the difficulties contained in Meno's challenge. Isn't it bizarre, so the objection goes, that a puzzle that has exerted the greatest minds in antiquity should have a solution so simple and obvious as the mere claim that, in the absence of knowledge, we can have true belief? To be sure, Meno, though lacking philosophical expertise, himself clearly demonstrates an adequate grasp of the distinction between true belief and knowledge. Towards the end of the dialogue - when Socrates gives the example of the Road to Larissa to illustrate that true belief is as valuable a guide to action as knowledge – Meno is puzzled: "If that's the case, why on earth is knowledge so much more valuable than true opinion, and why are they treated as two different things?" (97d1-3). Surely, then, Meno is aware of the distinction between true belief and knowledge – indeed, his words indicate that the distinction is a commonly held one that he had heard of before his encounter with Socrates here. Therefore, Meno already knew that there were epistemic states above that of ignorance (or "total blank"). This raises doubts about STR's suggestion that Plato's solution consists in merely pointing out that there is such an epistemic state.⁶⁷

Now, if the distinction between true belief and knowledge were a commonly held one at Plato's time, and if Meno already knew it, then why should anyone who knew that distinction – Meno included - find the eristic argument to be so contentious and puzzling at all? Surely, the author of the eristic argument, and those appealing to it, like Meno, recognised that, if it

⁶⁷ W. Schwab, 'Review of Gail Fine, *The Possibility of Inquiry: Meno's Paradox from Socrates to Sextus*', *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (2014). <<https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/54789-the-possibility-of-inquiry-meno-s-paradox-from-socrates-to-sextus/>> [Retrieved: 15.10.2015.]

were to have its intended effect, it needed to pose some considerable difficulty for anyone attempting to solve it. If we take this away, it loses its status of being a 'dilemma' and renders inexplicable why anyone should have taken it to be so.⁶⁸ However, on STR's reading, the eristic argument's potency, in this respect, seems to be severely trivialised. In the context of the *Meno*, this doesn't quite make sense; for not only does it cast doubt on Meno's motivation for launching the argument as an attack on Socrates, but it also makes us wonder why Plato should need to include it in the dialogue at all. Therefore, STR's suggestion that true belief is all it takes to solve the eristic argument should be viewed with suspicion.

2.3.3. The Objection to the Role of Recollection

A third objection can be brought against Fine's version of STR on account of her inconsistency and/or lack of clarity about the role of recollection in solving the paradox. On the one hand, she categorically denies that the theory of recollection solves the paradox, or that Plato had ever intended for it to do so. But when faced with the task of explaining what role, if any, the theory of recollection has in the elenctic reply, she claims that it is here to explain a remarkable fact about our tendency to favour true beliefs over false ones, in the course of inquiry. From these two claims, we can conclude that she thinks that the theory of recollection plays no role whatsoever in solving the paradox. The task, then, for us as readers, would be to evaluate her claim – that is, to examine whether this remarkable human tendency to prefer true beliefs over false ones does indeed make no difference to solving the paradox, or whether – contrary to Fine claims – it does indeed play a significant role.

At times, we find Fine moving between two views: on the one hand denying that the theory plays a role whatsoever in solving the paradox, and on the other, claiming that it does indeed play some role, albeit an indirect one. Take, for instance, her claim about the elenctic reply's constituting the response to Meno's challenge below:

⁶⁸ Ibid.

- 1) "The elenctic reply disarms the paradox by arguing that ... inquiry is possible in the absence of knowledge. It seems to be a *good*, and *complete*, reply."⁶⁹

The above suggests that Fine takes the "elenctic reply" to be "a good, and *complete*, reply" to Meno's paradox, thereby indicating that *nothing* else is required to disarm the paradox - as evident from her use of the word "complete" - and that Plato need not supplement it with anything else since it is a philosophically adequate response to the paradox - as indicated by the word "good" above. However, a little later we find her claiming that:

- 2) "Notice that whatever account one favours of how the soul once knew, the theory of recollection (in contrast to the elenctic reply) *does not by itself provide a sufficient answer* to the paradox - for if one once knew, but now lacks the ability to inquire, the prior knowledge is idle. We should, therefore, be *reluctant to put the whole weight* of Plato's reply to the paradox on the theory of recollection; and on my account of its role, we need not do so."⁷⁰

By contrast to the earlier claim in (1), the elenctic reply is no longer treated as a "complete" reply (and as a consequence of this, one is left assuming that Fine, perhaps, no longer thinks that it's a "good" reply on its own either). For note how suddenly we are told that we should not "put *the whole weight* of Plato's reply to the paradox on the theory of recollection", suggesting that we would be justified in thinking that it plays *some* role nevertheless. She also claims now that "theory of recollection (in contrast to the elenctic reply) *does not by itself provide a sufficient answer* to the paradox," indicating again that, perhaps, it plays a necessary condition, or that, although not sufficient on its own, it could be supplemented with something else. Again, this is a change in position from the earlier claim that it is a "good" and "complete" reply to the paradox, which had suggested complete adequacy and sufficiency.

Finally, Fine thinks that Plato's intention for introducing the theory of recollection is that:

- 3) "The theory of recollection goes beyond Socrates, not by replacing elenchus with an alternative route, but by explaining how something

⁶⁹ G. Fine, 'Inquiry in the *Meno*', op. cit., p. 61. [My emphasis].

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 64. [My emphasis].

he took for granted (the possibility of inquiry in the absence of knowledge, and the remarkable fact that in so inquiring *we tend towards the truth*) is possible. ... The theory of recollection is introduced to vindicate, not vitiate, Socrates' claims about the powers of elenchus."⁷¹

Fine is now acknowledging that the theory of recollection does indeed go some considerable way to solve the paradox; and that in doing so, Plato had intended for it to "vindicate, not vitiate, Socrates' claims about the powers of elenchus."

The shift in emphasis on the role of recollection in (1), (2) and (3) may be subtle, but it is powerful. For it shows a clear discrepancy in what Fine takes to be the role that recollection is supposed to play in disarming the paradox – or, at least, it shows a lack of clarity with regards to the role that the theory plays in solving the paradox. For we cannot say that it plays no role *whatsoever*, as claimed in (1), but then suggest that it plays *some* role after all (though not a sufficient one to solve the paradox) as suggested (2), *such that* it could then be seen "to vindicate, not vitiate, Socrates' claims about the powers of elenchus"⁷², as suggested in (3). The theory of recollection either plays *some* role – trivial as it may be – to disarm the paradox, and hence lead to the conclusion that, in doing so, it vindicates Socratic elenchus, or it plays *no role whatsoever*, but despite this, and given that the "elenctic reply" on its own is a "good, and complete, reply", Socratic elenchus is vindicated. But both can't be held simultaneously as Fine does.

A charitable reading of Fine might be possible here – one that could potentially reconcile (1) and (2). Where she claims, for instance, that

Socrates seems to assume, however, that everyone, or at least everyone rational, will, if they inquire systematically, progress in the same direction. That's because he also seems to assume that some important true beliefs are better *entrenched* than various false beliefs (or will seem more reasonable to us when we consider them) so that, in cases of conflict, we tend, upon reflection, to reject the false beliefs⁷³

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 64. [My emphasis.]

⁷² Ibid, p. 64.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 61. [My emphasis.]

we could potentially understand her as attempting to say that although the theory of recollection is not introduced here by Plato to solve the paradox, and that it is not necessary for his rejection of the second horn of the paradox - If one does not know x , one cannot inquire into x - it nonetheless constitutes some preconditions of Socratic elenchus - viz. that in order for inquiry to progress, we need to have some tendency through which we are brought to favour true beliefs over false ones. In other words, perhaps what she means is that the theory of recollection is supposed to explain our pull towards truth, and as such, it explains some of the preconditions necessary for the success of Socratic elenchus. This new reading of Fine would then resolve the discrepancy between (1) and (2) by saying that although the theory of recollection does not play a direct role in solving Meno's paradox, it, plays an *indirect* one. This is due to the fact that it explains some of the preconditions of elenchus (or rational inquiry). And at times, it would seem that Fine does want to say something along those lines. However, given that this role isn't a direct one; and - in addition - given that *we*, modern commentators, need not share Plato's explanation of how we have come to possess this "remarkable" tendency to favour true beliefs over false ones, one would be justified in saying that it does not play a substantial role. And from here, it's not a far stretch to claim that it plays no role whatsoever in solving the paradox - either for Plato (since he does not assign it a direct role in solving the paradox), or for us (since, "[h]owever one spells out the details of the theory of recollection, few nowadays are likely to believe it"⁷⁴ anyway). And this is precisely how Fine concludes the matter about the role of recollection in the *Meno*: it is both out-dated and philosophically redundant (save explaining some interesting fact).

Nonetheless, Fine goes on to concede that this tendency to favour true beliefs, and which Plato explains via his theory of recollection, is a fact *assumed* in the elenctic reply. Hence, by her own admission, the theory of recollection is the explanation of some fact that constitutes a part of the elenctic reply - trivial as she may take that fact to be. And if this fact does

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 64.

indeed turn out to be as trivial as Fine paints it, then STR has nothing to worry about.

That said, two things are necessary in order for this sort of argument in defence of STR to go through. First, we would need STR to offer us a convincing account of *how* our tendency towards truth, or our favouring true beliefs in inquiry, is supposed to play this *indirect* role in solving the paradox. Moreover - and this is important - it needs to do so in a way that does not reduce its solution to the paradox - i.e. true beliefs - to the theory of recollection, to which it aims to relegate a subordinate or inconsequential role. Second, we need a valid explanation of Plato's motivation for wanting to explain this "remarkable tendency" of favouring true beliefs at this point in the paradox.

With regards to the first, however, we do not find anywhere in Fine a discussion about the exact role this "remarkable tendency" toward truth plays in the acquisition of true beliefs.⁷⁵ So far, then, STR lacks this kind of response. As for the second, if the theory of recollection is meant to explain a trivial fact that is assumed in the elenctic reply to the paradox, but which - so far as the paradox is concerned - is an inconsequential one, then it merely states a truism. If this were the case, then it's hard to see why Plato would need to explain it in the first place. Indeed, the fact that Plato does go on to offer an elaborate, metaphysically excessive theory straight after the paradox, and assigns a considerable portion of an otherwise very short dialogue to it, should make us pause for thought. One would be justified in assuming that the theory's inclusion in the dialogue, given its short length, must be an indication of Plato's assigning a far greater role to it than Fine would have us believe.

As things stand, then, (1) and (2) are mutually exclusive claims that cannot both be true. Therefore, Fine needs to abandon (1) if she wants (3) to follow

⁷⁵ Other than, of course, claiming that it explains that we favour true beliefs over false ones in the course of inquiry. She states *that* they fulfill this role, but does not explain just *how* and *why* they do so.

logically from (2). Furthermore, if she keeps (1), then she needs to abandon not only (2), but also (3), since she cannot claim that the theory of recollection vindicates Socratic elenchus. But left as it is, her claims about the role of recollection contain a contradiction – one that demonstrates her lack of clarity about the theory’s relation to Meno’s challenge. Finally, her attempt to downplay the theory’s role in solving the paradox is unconvincing since it renders Plato’s choice of including it in the dialogue inexplicable. So far, then, Fine’s STR does not fare well with regards to the problem of interpretation since it raises many unanswered questions about the theory’s role in the dialogue and Plato’s motivations for introducing it there. Equally problematic is STR’s failure to address the reasons why Plato makes Socrates claim that he thinks that the eristic argument is a bad one *because* he has listened to the story of the priests and priestesses - indeed, Fine’s STR is completely ignores this.

2.3.4. *The Objection from Innatism*

According to STR, the theory of recollection plays no role in solving the paradox and we should not read Plato as having intended for it to do so either. Fine, however, goes further than this. Not only does recollection not play this role traditionally assigned to it, but also – more controversially – it is not an innatist theory at all. The only thing that the theory of recollection shares with innatist theories is Plato’s motivation for introducing it. As she puts it:

The theory of recollection is often thought to be a theory of innate knowledge. And it is often thought that Plato appeals to it to reject premise (2) of the paradox: though we all have knowledge innate in us, we can none the less inquire by making our innate but tacit knowledge explicit. In my view, however, the theory of recollection is not a theory of innate knowledge. For Plato emphasises that, though we once knew, and can come to know again, we do not know now. If we do not know now, we do not have innate knowledge.⁷⁶

And again:

Plato believes that certain remarkable features of human beings require explanation in terms of prior knowledge – though for Plato, in

⁷⁶ G. Fine, ‘Introduction’, op. cit., pp. 4-5.

contrast to Innatists, the knowledge is had not from birth, but only in a previous existence. Even though the theory of recollection is thus not a theory of innate knowledge, its motivation is similar to the motivation for innatist theories of knowledge. As such, it is vulnerable to similar objections.⁷⁷

Furthermore, Fine argues that there are two ways in which innatism could be understood: the first, she calls a “cognitive-condition sense”; the second, she calls the “content” sense. The first is a claim about our being in a state of knowing from birth. However, the second sense means that we have “contents” from birth that do not count as knowledge, but that could go on to become knowledge. She claims that Plato’s theory of recollection should not be interpreted as innatist in either one of those senses.⁷⁸

There are several points in Fine’s claims above that require careful unpacking. To start, it is worth taking note of her claim that, traditionally, Plato was taken to be an innatist. On the basis of this (or indeed, as a consequence of it), the traditional reading took Plato’s rejection of premise (2) of the paradox to amount to claim that although one already knows (in the sense of having tacit knowledge), one can still go on to inquire (in the sense that one can go on, through inquiry, to make that tacit knowledge explicit). However, she thinks that this traditional reading is wrong. Since the theory of recollection is not an innatist theory. How does she arrive at this controversial conclusion? Below is a summary of Fine’s argument:

- i. Innatist theories of knowledge posit (a) that one knows – i.e. one has knowledge *now*; and, (b) that one knows from birth.
- ii. Plato, however, does not say anywhere that the slave has knowledge within him *now*, nor does he claim anywhere that he had this knowledge from birth.
- iii. [Hidden premise:] Knowledge forgotten is as good as non-existent.
- iv. Therefore, Plato is not an innatist.

⁷⁷ G. Fine, ‘Inquiry in the *Meno*’, op. cit. pp. 62-3.

⁷⁸ G. Fine, *The Possibility of Inquiry: Meno’s Paradox from Socrates to Sextus*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 140-147.

- v. However, we have a remarkable tendency to favour true beliefs over false ones, in the course of inquiry,
- vi. This is not a brute fact; it requires explanation,
- vii. Plato thinks this is best explained in terms of prenatal knowledge (which – based on (i), (ii) and (iii) - isn't the same as innate or tacit knowledge)
- viii. [Hidden premise:] Innatists appeal to tacit knowledge in order to explain this remarkable tendency.
- ix. Therefore, despite not being an innatist theory – as per (i)-(iv) - Plato's theory of recollection shares the same motivation as innatist theories (and the same weaknesses).

There are several problems with Fine's above argument. Let us begin with the second premise in the above argument (ii). It is not clear how we could reconcile (ii) with several sections of the *Meno* where Socrates seems to be stating the contrary. A crucial phrase from the dialogue comes from Socrates' conversation with the slave boy. In this passage, Socrates tells Meno that the slave is retrieving knowledge from within himself, all by himself, and without anyone having taught him:

So that means he'll have knowledge without anyone having taught him, just through being asked questions – by retrieving (*analabôn*) the knowledge from within himself?⁷⁹

Fine deflects this difficulty by appealing to an analysis of the term "*analambanein*", arguing that we ought to understand this to mean "to take up", but not in a sense that would entail taking up that which has already been taken up before.⁸⁰ We can then read the above line as meaning that the slave has acquired (taken up) knowledge by himself, where this "taking up" is not the retrieval of something that has already been acquired before.

However, this move could be viewed as problematic. Schwab, for instance, argues that it ignores that Socrates not only claims that the slave takes up knowledge, but that he also does so *himself from himself* (*autos ex hautou*).

⁷⁹ *Meno*, (85d).

⁸⁰ G. Fine, *The Possibility of Inquiry*, op. cit. pp. 150-151

Fine's assumption here seems to be that this phrase means that the slave works things out by himself, for himself – and not *from within* himself. But as Schwab argues:

We need some justification for Fine's reading, however, since it is hard to imagine a more misleading way Plato could have put the point. He could have made it clear by putting "himself" in the dative (as he does, for example, in referring to the soul figuring things out with no sensory input at *Phaedo*, 66e1 (cf. *Gorgias*, 523e3)), or by using the phrase "through himself" (as he does, again in reference to the soul, at *Theaetetus*, 185e1).⁸¹

The anti-innatist reading via "*analambanein*", then, is vulnerable to the charge of lacking support. Schwab is right to point out that the reading is not justified – in the sense that her reading of the phrase "*himself from himself*" (*autos ex hautou*) is not entirely consistent with how Plato uses this phrase elsewhere. However, Fine does motivate her reading by presenting us with a dilemma concerning what Plato *could* have meant. She offers us two options with regards to what "*analambanein*" could possibly mean:

- a. "If this means that to recover knowledge is to recollect, the remark is a near tautology."
- b. "An alternative is that, in 85d6-7, Plato is saying that the slave's ability to work things out for himself is best explained on the assumption that he is recollecting"⁸² [where the latter, as we saw earlier, for Fine, means simply to explain his "remarkable tendency" to favour true beliefs over false one].

Fine urges us to accept (b) since it fits better, in her opinion, with the discussion that preceded this line, in that section of the dialogue. She does not explain how or why she thinks it fits better. That said, it is clear from the way that she puts the options that she thinks (a) is philosophically problematic, and seems to be swayed on its account of being so towards favouring (b) as an interpretation of Plato. Is (a) as philosophically unsound as Fine thinks it is? And should we, on account of its being so fallacious, not

⁸¹ W. Schwab, op. cit.

⁸² G. Fine, *The Impossibility of Inquiry*, op. cit. p. 150.

even contemplate that Plato could have taken “*analambanein*” to mean anything like (a)?

Fine thinks that if “recollecting” means “to recover knowledge”, then it is a “near tautology”. It is not clear how Fine distinguishes a ‘tautology’ from a ‘near tautology’, but the tone of her remark suggests that she takes the latter to be as philosophically problematic as the former. And she takes its supposed problematic aspect to motivate our rejection of (a), and our acceptance of (b) in lieu of it, as an interpretation of what Plato means to say in this passage.

However, if ‘to recollect = to recover knowledge’ it is a tautology, then it is an unavoidable one. Similar unavoidable difficulties arise, for instance, from attempts to define ‘memory’ in the cognitive sciences. Cognitive psychologists know that - whichever way one tries to put it - the definition of ‘memory’ will always have a circular ring to it. However, they also argue that, nevertheless, the definition can be illuminating.⁸³ If Plato did mean (a), then this circularity in defining or describing the mental acts of ‘recollecting’ or ‘remembering’ is as unavoidable (and perhaps even as benign) as cognitive scientists find them to be today; and for all we know, as far as defining ‘memory’ or ‘recollection’ goes, it may be as inescapable – and perhaps, as much a tautology - as saying that ‘retrieving’ something means ‘getting back what was once had’.

Moreover, Fine claims that we should understand Socrates’ search for a unifying definition of virtue in the *Meno* as his search for something like the essence of, say, gold – where this essence is best understood as a Lockean ‘real’ essence, its atomic number or its inner constitution. The example she

⁸³ M. H. Ashcraft, *Cognition*, 5th edition, (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2013), p. 6.

See below, for example, where Ashcraft claims that when it comes to the notion of ‘memory’ its definition is “hopelessly circular”:

Most of us have a good idea of what the term memory means, something like “being able to remember or recall some information” or “the act of recalling previously learned facts or events.” Note that both of these definitions are hopelessly circular; memory is “being able to remember” or “the act of recalling.” However, the definitions do point to several critical ideas.

Ibid. p. 6.

gave there was gold. She had also claimed there that when Socrates tells Meno that he's looking for a definition of virtue early on in the dialogue, we should understand what he means by 'definition' along the lines just indicated.⁸⁴

Finally, she also argued that *this* is how we should read Socrates' conception of knowledge of virtue in the *Meno* – the object of knowledge of virtue is the definition of virtue, where the definition is something like its Lockean real (not nominal) essence, or like the atomic number of gold. If this were correct, and applying Fine's recommendations above, we would be right in stating that the definition of water is:

'Water = H₂O'.

But isn't this definition also a tautology? If what we mean by tautology is that identity propositions will always be similar (or even identical in meaning), then, on Fine's own recommended account of what constitutes a 'definition', tautologies are always unavoidable. For whatever one attempts to define – i.e. whatever is to the right of the '=' symbol would always give rise to a tautology. And if that too were right, then why should 'gold = its atomic number' or 'water = H₂O' be any less of a tautology - or any less problematic - than the idea that remembering is retrieving knowledge once had? For if we are going to be consistent, we are going to have to concede that 'water = H₂O', or 'gold = its atomic number', 'bachelor = unmarried man', and 'memory = knowledge remembered', etc., are all tautologies; and, on their account of being thus, are all problematic. What we cannot do, however, is claim that it is not problematic in the Lockean case - e.g. for gold and water - but that it is problematic in Plato's case, for memory or recollection. Alternatively, we could, of course, accept (a) as a reading of "*analambanein*" on account that *all* identity propositions will necessary have a circular or tautological ring to them; and furthermore, that this is an unavoidable and benign tautology which – where identity propositions are concerned – is simply inescapable.

⁸⁴ G. Fine, 'Inquiry in the *Meno*', op. cit., p. 47.

Fine rejection of (a) and acceptance (b), then, comes on pain of inconsistency. In addition, as Schwab pointed out, her interpretation of the term “*analambanein*” is not consistent with Plato’s usage of this term elsewhere in his dialogue. This means that Fine does not provide adequate justification for us to read Socrates’ claim in 85d as meaning anything other than how it appears: that the slave boy is retrieving knowledge by himself, from *within* himself. And this, of course, suggests that we should read this passage (85d) as arguing that – whatever it is that the slave is retrieving – this act of retrieval is indeed a *recollection* of something once had, from within himself.

What this means is that we can reject at least part of premise (ii) of Fine’s above argument as false – Plato makes Socrates say that the slave is indeed retrieving *something* from within himself, though what exactly this thing amounts to, will have to be further investigated. For now, however, we can reject Fine’s premise (ii) on the basis of our findings: there is an undeniable innatist element in 85d. And this should cast doubt on her anti-innatist conclusion in (iv).

What of premises (i), (iii) and (vii) of the above argument? The claim in (i) seems to be that (a) innatism is committed to the idea that the innate knowledge is somehow always present to consciousness and before one’s mind; and that (b) this kind of knowledge is present from birth. This seems more of a straw man argument than something that innatists would actually accept. Innatists do not claim that innate knowledge is always present to consciousness – the majority of our knowledge is not constantly present before our minds, so it isn’t clear why innate knowledge needs to be. Just like any other kind of knowledge, one only calls to mind information relevant to the situation at hand. Innatists appeal to the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge to make this point. Second, although innatism would claim that we are born with innate knowledge, they do not mean, of course, that it is always there at the fore of our minds from birth till death – they allow that the process of making this tacit or innate knowledge explicit is a long process that may take time and effort.

This brings us to the assumption in (iii) that given that Plato's theory of recollection claims that we knew before both, it follows that we no longer possess any of this knowledge once we are born; Plato doesn't mean that we have it now, only that we had it before we were born, but not now. Again this isn't the best way of interpreting what Plato means by prenatal knowledge. Plato invokes the idea of 'remembering' and claims that we have *forgotten* what we've learnt before birth; and that all learning subsequent to birth is, therefore, 'remembering'. From this it is clear that he does not mean to say that the information that we learnt prior to birth has somehow been wiped out of our memory altogether or been deleted from our minds, but rather that it is stored away deep within the mind awaiting to be triggered or recalled, in the same way as ordinary, everyday remembering occurs. Take the example of a computer with information stored in some files on the hard drive. Even if I am unable to retrieve this information because I can no longer remember where I have stored the files, nor do I know how to give the computer the appropriate commands with which to retrieve the information, *it does not follow that the information is not there*, but rather that I simply cannot retrieve it. By the same token, in cases where I have learnt some information but then completely forgotten it, and forgotten that I had learnt it in the first place, it does not follow that the (information contained in those) memories are not there awaiting to be recalled at a suitable moment, using the appropriate triggers, but rather that I cannot access it at this moment simply because I have forgotten it – but, despite this, the information is still there. This view of the theory of recollection as being analogous to how memory works, of course, shares a core feature with innatism, viz., that the information, truth or knowledge is there awaiting to be, as it were, awakened, made explicit, brought to the fore of one's mind, etc.

With this we can also reject that the notion of prenatal knowledge in (viii) is any different – in essence, at least – to innatism more generally. The only difference between Plato and other innatists such as Descartes, for example, is that where the latter will claim that God created us with this knowledge, the former thinks that we acquired it in a previous existence in the

immaterial realm of the underworld. But the main innatist point remains the same.⁸⁵

To conclude, we must reject any attempt to strip innatism away from our understanding of the theory of recollection in the *Meno*. For from what we've just seen here, and given Plato's substitution of 'learning' with 'remembering', it is clear that what he has in mind is, in essence, no different from innatism. Therefore, theory of recollection is best understood as *one kind* of innatism.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to critically assess an influential version of version of ERM - the standard epistemological reading (STR) - with the aim of ascertaining whether it can cope with the problem of interpretation. I argued that STR fails to deal with the problem of interpretation since: (i) it fails to offer a consistent account of what role, if any, the theory of recollection plays in the dialogue; and (ii) in attempting to argue that the theory of recollection plays no role in solving the paradox, it strips the theory of its main characteristic: innatism. This latter move, as we've seen, is particularly problematic given the textual evidence from the *Meno* against it, and given that it fails to recognise the philosophical similarities between Plato's theory of recollection on the one hand, and innatism more generally, on the other. We should, therefore, reject STR as an interpretation of Plato's response to Meno's paradox.

The next chapter will critically assess another influential version of ERM, the hybrid epistemological reading.

⁸⁵ Note that despite this difference, the similarities between the two are striking. For whether one thinks that God instills this knowledge in us whilst we are in the womb, prior to being in the womb, or whether it something we have acquired through evolution and is passed down to us through our genes, the point remains the same: we are born in possession of it, in a tacit form awaiting to be triggered.

Chapter 3

The Hybrid Epistemological Reading

The previous chapter looked at criticisms against the *Standard Reading* (STR) and identified a particular weakness: it cannot cope with the problem of interpretation surrounding the role of the theory of recollection in the *Meno*. More specifically, it ignores certain parts of the dialogue where Socrates seems to be making reference to some innatist components in the soul. This chapter will look at another version of the *Epistemological Reading of Meno's Paradox* (ERM) - one that attempts to avoid the difficulties associated with a complete denial of innatism in the *Meno*, while retaining its main commitment to ERM. Call this version of ERM the *Hybrid Epistemological Reading* (HYR).

In this chapter, I will begin by offering a summary of HYR's main claims, starting with what it takes to be the conception of knowledge involved in the *Meno*. I will then look at HYR's account of the two distinct challenges contained in Meno's questions, and Plato's alleged response to each. Finally, I will critically assess whether HYR fares any better than STR did in dealing with the problem of interpretation in the *Meno*. I will argue that while HYR might initially appear to avoid most of the difficulties that confronted STR, upon further investigation, it becomes clear that it too cannot cope with the problem of interpretation.

The next two chapters will then delve into the metaphysics of change in ancient ontology with the aim of offering a diagnosis of why no version of ERM could possibly avoid the problem of interpretation.

3.1. Knowledge as Explanatory Understanding in the *Meno*

Readers of Plato's work will often notice that Plato frequently attributes disavowals of knowledge to Socrates. In the *Meno*, this disavowal appears at the very beginning of the dialogue (*Meno* 71b3), where Meno asks Socrates

whether virtue can be taught. Offering an analogy, he asks whether it is reasonable to suggest that one would know that Meno is well-born or good-looking, unless they first knew who Meno was. According to Dominic Scott, an advocate of HYR, if Socrates had never heard of Meno, then his mind would be a complete blank about Meno. However, for someone who is ignorant about virtue, Socrates seems to have much to say to Meno about it in the course of their discussion. How can this tension be resolved?

We saw earlier that STR resolves the tension by acknowledging that although Socrates has much to say about virtue, these pronouncements are the result of his having beliefs about virtue that fall short of knowledge. This then qualifies him to disavow knowledge of virtue whilst continuing to discuss its potential characteristics and inquire into it. Despite agreeing with STR that Socrates does indeed possess a number of true beliefs about virtue, Scott denies that he is in a state equivalent to a total blank about virtue.⁸⁶ He points out that the analogy provided earlier – where if one does not know who Meno is, then one cannot know if he is rich or good-looking either – does not allow for this kind of interpretation. According to this analogy, the only way in which one’s mind could be a complete blank about something (or someone) is if one has never even heard of that thing (or person). But given that Socrates does have so much to say about virtue, argues Scott, he cannot be in the same position as someone who has never heard of it – and hence, his mind cannot be in a complete blank about virtue. How, then, do we characterize Socrates’ grasp of virtue in the *Meno*?

For Scott, Socrates’ definition of knowledge, which appears towards the end of the dialogue (*Meno* 98a1-8), is informative. In distinguishing between true belief and knowledge, Socrates reveals that “knowledge requires that one has reasoned out the explanation”.⁸⁷ This warrants the assumption that the kind of knowledge at play here in the *Meno* is “explanatory understanding (98a3-4); anything less is relegated to the status of true belief.”⁸⁸ Hence, according

⁸⁶ D. Scott, *Plato’s Meno*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 19-20.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 19.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 20.

to Scott, when Socrates claims not to know what virtue is, we should take him to be saying that he lacks “explanatory understanding” of virtue.⁸⁹

3.2. *Meno’s Challenge and the Eristic Dilemma*

During Meno’s discussion with Socrates about virtue, and after several unsuccessful attempts at offering a definition of it, Meno reaches a point where he simply cannot think of any other way in which he could satisfy Socrates’ demands for a definition of virtue. Angry at Socrates, Meno launches a verbal attack on him, comparing him to a fish⁹⁰ whose sting numbs its victims. Immediately after this numb-fish speech, Meno continues the offence with the triad of questions. Socrates then reformulates these questions into a dilemma. Scott points out, however, that it is important to notice that Plato structures Meno’s challenge into two parts: in the first part, Meno challenges Socrates with three questions, whereas in the second part we find a reformulation of this challenge into what Socrates calls the “eristic dilemma”.⁹¹ For Scott, this supports the idea that what we have are, in fact, two challenges. He thinks that the ‘eristic dilemma’ – Socrates’ reformulation – contains a dilemma about the impossibility of inquiry.⁹² In the following sections, I will offer Scott’s analysis of Meno’s questions and the eristic argument, both of which give rise to a hybrid reading of Meno’s paradox.

3.2.1. *Meno’s Questions*

According to Scott, Meno’s questions conceal two distinct challenges, only one of which Socrates uses in his reformulation:

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Some scholars, like Scott, for instance, have translated Plato’s term ‘νάρκη’ (*narke*) into ‘Stingray’, whilst others, like Ebery, for example, argue that the correct interpretation ought to be a ‘torpedo fish’. See, e.g. D. Scott, *ibid.*, p. 69; D. Ebery, *op. cit.*, p. 6, n. 8. For our purposes, however, the exact kind of fish that Socrates has in mind here is irrelevant. What is relevant is that what he has in mind is a kind of fish that stings its victim and numbs them into inaction. The moral of the story – what Meno’s analogy purports to show – is that Socrates’ continued questioning and demand for a definition have left Meno confused, and numbed both his tongue and mind. Accordingly, I will simply refer to the fish *narke* (which literally translates ‘numb’ or ‘sleep’) as a ‘numbfish’ - a group of electric rays (of the order Torpediniformes) in the family of Narcinidae (from the Greek *narke*) whose sting numbs their pray. See: ‘Narcinidae’, in *ITIS Report: Integrated Taxonomic Information System*. Retrieved 16th July 2015.

<http://www.itis.gov/servlet/SingleRpt/SingleRpt?search_topic=TSN&search_value=564006>

⁹¹ D. Scott, *Plato’s Meno*, p. 75.

⁹² Ibid.

(M¹) And how will you inquire, Socrates, into something when you don't know at all what it is? Which of the things that you don't know will you propose as the object of your inquiry? (M²) Or even if you really stumble upon it, how will you know that this is the thing that you didn't know before?⁹³

He argues that the questions in M¹ go on to form part of Socrates' reformulation. The question in M², on the other hand, goes on to form a distinct problem, which he calls the "problem of discovery". Let us begin with Scott reading of M¹ first.

The added qualification "at all" in M¹ confirms, for Scott, the idea that STR had earlier put forward – that Plato is "imagining the would-be inquirer to be in a total blank, lacking any specification of the object in question."⁹⁴ Moreover, continues Scott, no doubt Meno is echoing Socrates' claim at the very beginning of the dialogue when he had claimed that he didn't know "at all" what virtue meant, nor had he met anyone who had.⁹⁵ And like Fine, Scott takes this to pose a problem only if one were genuinely in a cognitive blank about something – a position that can hardly be attributed to Socrates in the *Meno*, who seems to have much to say about virtue throughout the dialogue.⁹⁶ How should we understand the tension between Socrates' disavowal of knowledge, then, and the fact that he is not in a cognitive blank about virtue? Scott claims that we should take Socrates' notion of knowledge as 'explanatory understanding' into account here; from this we can deduce that when Socrates claims that he does not know "at all" what virtue is, he means, not that he lacks any beliefs at all about virtue or that he's in a cognitive blank, but rather that he lacks "true philosophical understanding" of what virtue is.⁹⁷

⁹³ Ibid, p. 76.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid, pp. 76-7. Fine, Ebery and Scott are all in agreement on this point about Socrates' mental state: all three argue that he cannot possibly be in a cognitive blank about virtue, and all use this assumption as a premise in their arguments in defence of their favoured version of the epistemological reading (ERM).

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 76.

What is really at issue in M¹, however, is not simply the lack of the kind of knowledge that amounts to philosophical understanding. Rather, Scott argues, M¹ assumes that one's mind would indeed be a cognitive blank at the start of inquiry into some given object; and that from this kind of complete blank, inquiry would be impossible since the agent would lack the specifications with which to start inquiry. Hence M¹, for Scott, is a challenge that focuses on the beginning of inquiry.⁹⁸

While the questions in M¹, according to Scott's reading, focus on the beginning of inquiry, the question in M² focuses on the end – in other words, the former poses a dilemma about how one would *start* inquiry, whereas the latter poses a dilemma about how one could possibly *complete* it.⁹⁹ The first dilemma arises due to the assumption that we lack the initial specifications with which inquiry could begin,¹⁰⁰ whereas the latter arises due to the assumption that we lack what it takes for inquiry to end in “discovery”.¹⁰¹ The next two sections will offer an account of how the hybrid reading offered by Scott arises out of this distinction between M¹ and M² that we've just looked at.

3.2.2. *The Eristic Dilemma*

We saw earlier that Scott thinks that Plato's division of Meno's challenge into two sections – one containing Meno's questions, and the other containing Socrates' supposed reformulation of them – is instructive. In particular, Scott believes that Socrates' reformulation is not faithful to Meno's original questions. This is important. For it is on the basis of this assumption that Scott then goes on to build his hybrid reading (HYR). To see what he means,

⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 77.

⁹⁹ For a similar way of dividing Meno's questions (and the problems arising from them) targeting different *stages* of inquiry, see, D. Ebery, 'Meno's Paradox in Context', op. cit., p. 9. But where Scott divides Meno's three questions into essentially two challenges, Ebery takes each of the three questions to pose a different challenge:

(1) points to a problem with inquiring when you do not have a definition. ... Questions (2) and (3) present challenges to two different stages of inquiry: (2) challenges part of the process of inquiry and (3) challenges our ability to succeed at inquiry, which is generally called 'discovery'.

¹⁰⁰ What Fine had called the 'aim' of inquiry is what Scott calls the initial specification; but the two mean the same thing. See, e.g., Chapter 2 (2.1) of this thesis.

¹⁰¹ Note that, for Scott, the end of inquiry is discovery. Fine, on the other hand, believes that inquiry – in the *Meno* at least - ends in knowledge. See, e.g., Chapter 2 (2.1) of this thesis.

let us look at his summary of Socrates reformulation of Meno's questions, and which he had called the 'eristic dilemma':

- S¹ If you know the object already you cannot inquire into it.
- S² If you do not know it you cannot inquire, because you do not even know what you're inquiring into.
- S³ [Implicit premise: Either you know something or you do not.]
- S⁴ Therefore, you cannot inquire into any object.

Scott argues that although Socrates claims to be re-articulating Meno's questions, the resulting dilemma that he produces is in fact different. It is continuous with only part of Meno's questions, but not all of them. More specifically, he thinks that the above dilemma does two things: It drops M² and adds S¹. As he puts it:

S¹ is Socrates' own addition which together with S² and S³ is used to generate a conclusion that is broader in scope than Meno's challenge, which had not attacked the possibility of all inquiry, only inquiry into what you do not know.¹⁰²

But why would Socrates drop M²? Scott believes that we have good grounds for assuming that the eristic dilemma existed prior to Meno bringing it up, and that, due to stylistic similarities between the formalised version of the dilemma and Gorgias' *On What Is Not* – for example, the latter's use of dichotomies, repetition and assonance - the author may well have been Meno's tutor, Gorgias, after all. Consequently, Meno might find the way that Socrates formulates the dilemma to be familiar. From this he concludes:

If this is right, we have some explanation of why Socrates allows M² to drop out of view: although Meno has raised two different questions in his original challenge, his real interest was in recalling M¹ rather than M².¹⁰³

It is unclear, from Scott's account, why Meno's supposed familiarity with the eristic argument is an incentive for Socrates to drop M². It is even less clear why any of this should point to the assumption that Meno's real interest was in recalling M¹ rather than M². However, let us set these worries aside for a moment. For now, what is important to point out with reference to the eristic argument above is this: like Fine, Scott believes that the theory of recollection

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 78.

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 79.

is not Plato's solution to the paradox (or, the eristic dilemma, as Scott calls it). Instead, like Fine, he claims that Socrates' distinction between true belief and knowledge is Plato's intended solution to it. The next section focuses the problem of discovery, which Scott believes isn't part of the above eristic dilemma, and which he thinks arises out of M^2 .

3.2.3. *The Problem of Discovery*

Scott believes that there are two distinct ways in which M^2 could be read; and depending on how it is read, the solution to the problems arising from it vary accordingly. Recall that Meno had asked a set of three questions (which Scott divides into M^1 and M^2):

(M^1) And how will you inquire, Socrates, into something when you don't know at all what it is? Which of the things that you don't know will you propose as the object of your inquiry? (M^2) Or even if you really stumble upon it, how will you know that this is the thing that you didn't know before?¹⁰⁴

For Scott, the first reading of M^2 makes the problem arising from it seem continuous with the two questions in M^1 . This would have the knock-on effect of making it seem as though Socrates' reformulation may mirror Meno's questions faithfully. Imagine a case where an agent is attempting to make an assertion such that one thing (what one has stumbled upon in the course of inquiry, x) is another (what one had initially started inquiry with, or one's initial specifications, y). On this reading of M^2 , it would be impossible for the agent to make sense of the statement ' x is y '; for even if the agent were to grasp x , without any initial specification, y , the statement would make no sense to them. Viewed this way, he continues, it isn't surprising to see the problem as being continuous with M^1 , and hence, as requiring the same solution – viz. the introduction of an intermediary state that could function as the initial specification, y , and which Plato's distinction between true belief and knowledge offers.¹⁰⁵ Read this way, then, 'discovery' is not an issue.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 76.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 77. Scott's "first reading" above is akin to Fine's: this is exactly how STR conceives of the problems in Meno's questions, and that it how it claims they can be solved via the distinction between true belief and knowledge. However, the manner in which Scott

That said, there's a deeper reading of M^2 , according to Scott - one that reveals that the problem in M^2 isn't continuous with the problem arising from M^1 at all, and hence it isn't continuous with the eristic argument either. To see this, he urges us to imagine a situation in which we have the initial specifications of the object of inquiry. Suppose further that we are to test a candidate answer against these initial specifications to see if the two match. The problem here does not seem to be one of making sense of the statement ' x is y '. Rather, argues Scott, it is one where, unless we already know that the initial specification is correct, we won't have the means of knowing that the proposed answer is correct, even if it were indeed so. So the problem seems to be, on Scott's reading, not just about having some initial specification of the object of inquiry, but rather about having the means of telling that this initial specification is indeed true of the object. He calls this problem, arising out of the deeper reading of M^2 , the problem of discovery.¹⁰⁶

To bring this point home, Scott ties this problem to the problem of searching for a definition of virtue. He asks:

Someone might launch a definitional inquiry with true beliefs about the object in question; it is also possible that they might find the right answer. Nevertheless, it might be said, all they can claim is that this answer matches their *beliefs* about virtue. But why should this amount to *knowing* that the definition is true of virtue? ... For Socrates and Meno might well have some true beliefs about virtue from the very outset; they might have gathered others in the course of discussing the first three definitions. Even so, it may be claimed, they will never get knowledge of what virtue is: they will always be trapped within a circle of belief.¹⁰⁷

expounds the problem into one about the impossibility of making sense of an "assertion" is his own. Fine had simply argued, as we saw earlier, that without an aim (initial specification), inquiry cannot get off the ground. However, she had assumed that this was sufficient to solve the paradox since she had also added that our remarkable tendency to favour true beliefs over false would *eventually* leads us to choose the correct answer from among the original stock of beliefs (or proposed candidates for an answer) that we had started with. Scott seems to think that this added "tendency" should be replaced with something else. I discuss this in his deeper reading of M^2 and his reading of the solution to it.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, pp. 83-4.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 84.

Fine, on the other hands, thinks that it does not matter - from the would-be inquirer's point of view - whether they recognise which of their initial beliefs (specifications, on Scott's terminology) are true and which are false. For Fine, so long as one has *some* true beliefs, then they would be reliable tools that help inquiry to progress, regardless of the agent's

For Scott, this shows that while it was possible to solve the eristic dilemma with Socrates' distinction between true belief and knowledge, the same cannot be said of the problem of discovery since it does not admit of the same solution. Crucially, he believes, what seems to be "distinctive about the problem is its underlying assumption that discovery or learning is a process of realising that one thing matches something that one already knows."¹⁰⁸ A natural candidate for this role of prior knowledge, one might assume, is Plato's theory of recollection. However, this is a point that requires some defence. We will look at Scott's reasons for rejecting the theory of recollection as Plato's solution to the paradox in the next section. For now, let us take a closer look at his account of the origins of the problem of discovery, and the principles that he thinks underpin that problem.

3.2.4. The Origins of the Problem of Discovery

Scott believes that Socrates takes the problem of discovery seriously; and that the theory of recollection – although not intended as an answer to the eristic argument – is Socrates' answer to this problem. Scott also believes that Socrates betrays an allegiance to two important principles, which taken jointly together, give rise to the problem of discovery and suggest what kind of solution it requires.

The first principle that Socrates betrays in the dialogue in the *foreknowledge principle*, according to which in order to come to know, you must already know. This principle, Scott continues, may have its origins in the writings of Xenophanes. He takes the following quote from Xenophanes to have striking similarities to Meno's:

No man knows, or will ever know, the truth about the gods and about everything I speak of; for even if one chanced to say the complete truth, yet oneself know it not, but seeming rules over all.¹⁰⁹

recognising them to be thus at the outset. See, e.g. G. Fine, 'Introduction', *Plato on Knowledge and Forms*, op. cit., p. 4. However, Scott is arguing here that this is not possible – unless we know the belief is true, we cannot match the correct answer to the specification, and hence we cannot have knowledge (that this is the correct definition of, say, virtue).

¹⁰⁸ D. Scott, *Plato's Meno*, op. cit. p. 84.

¹⁰⁹ Sextus M. vii 49 (DK 21 B34), trans. Kirk, Raven and Schofield 1983: 179, as quoted in D. Scott, *ibid.*

Scott does not state what he takes these similarities between Xenophanes' words here and Meno's to be. According to the problem of discovery, our specifications of the object of inquiry play an important role – they guide our inquiries towards a suitable answer. So if we do not know if those initial specifications are correct, then we won't know if the answer is correct either. Xenophanes seems to be putting forward a somewhat similar sceptical claim – because we do not know the truth about the gods and what he [Xenophanes] speaks of, we will not, even if we were to utter the “complete truth”, know that this is it (i.e. the complete truth). A similar problem, to the problem of discovery, seems to arise here: both cases are characterised by an inability to tell that we have found the ‘correct answer’ or “the complete truth”.

Moreover, the principle of foreknowledge may seem to invoke the famous Parmenidean claim that ‘what is’ cannot be derived from ‘what is not’. According to Scott, the problem of discovery may in fact be the epistemological application of this problem. If so, then what we have is this: you cannot acquire knowledge unless you already know (i.e. have foreknowledge).

For Scott, the above two points, about the influence of Xenophanes and Parmenides, are significant: they suggest that learning something new (discovery) is a matter of matching the new item learnt to something one already knows. And this, of course, has striking similarities to the theory of recollection, which postulates that learning is a process of recalling what one already knows. If this is correct, then contrary to what Fine had suggested, we have evidence that Socrates does endorse a theory of latent knowledge after all.

But what evidence do we have from the text of the dialogue to suggest that Socrates adheres to any such principle? We can find evidence of this, argues Scott, in the slave boy demonstration - in particular, at the end of that section, where the slave boy has found the correct answer to the geometrical

problem. Here, Scott continues, Socrates is projecting into the future and imagining a situation in which the slave boy has acquired knowledge (*Meno* 85d):

- a) So without anyone having taught him but only by being asked questions, he will recover for himself the knowledge within him?
- b) And recovering knowledge for oneself that is in oneself – is this not recollection?
- c) So the knowledge, which he has now, he either acquired at some point or else always possessed.¹¹⁰

Scott argues that (a), (b) and (c) jointly indicate that the boy has (latent) knowledge in him now; and whatever (conscious) knowledge he goes on to acquire in future, this will come from the (latent) knowledge which he now has within him, and which is awaiting to be recovered. Moreover, (c) seems to suggest that this latent knowledge the slave boy currently has within him pre-exists the current time. Therefore, for Scott, tracing the origins of the problem of discovery allows us to recognise the textual evidence in support of the claim that Socrates took the problem seriously. In particular, it reveals that he adheres to a principle of foreknowledge according to which if one is to come to know, one must already know – the seed of the theory of recollection.

The second principle that Socrates adheres to in the *Meno*, and which, according to Scott, along with the principle of foreknowledge gives rise to the problem of discovery, is the principle of the *priority of definition*. The problem of discovery implies that the initial specification of the object of inquiry consists in knowledge of the thing that we are looking for. Suppose, for instance, that we are inquiring into virtue. Wouldn't examples of virtuous actions be sufficient for allowing us to specify what all these examples have in common, to find the property in virtue of which they are called virtuous actions? If this were the case, then it seems that we do not need to know the initial specifications of virtue (the object of our inquiry) before we embark on

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p. 85.

an inquiry into virtue. Nor for that matter would we require a definition of virtue.

To offer a response to this kind of objection, Scott first makes a distinction between two senses in which Plato gives priority to definitions in his dialogues. Scott's distinction can be reformulated as follows:

PDA To know whether F is X, you need to know F.

PDI To know whether the particular *f* is an F, you need to know F.¹¹¹

Recall that at the start of the *Meno*, Socrates had declared that he couldn't know whether virtue can be taught unless he knows first what it is. On Scott's reading, to understand what Socrates means, we need to make a metaphysical distinction between features of a thing that are essential to it ('what it is') and non-essential features ('what it's like'). PDA captures Socrates' claim that he cannot know for certain if virtue is the kind of thing that can be taught ('what it's like'), unless he knows first 'what it is'. PDI, on the other hand, implies that to know whether this or that particular action counts as virtuous, one must first know what virtue is. Scott argues that although Socrates makes clear at the start of the dialogue that he adheres to PDA, it is less obvious if the same goes for PDI.¹¹²

Scott argues that Socrates also adhered to PDI in the *Meno*. He offers two considerations for this: (i) Socrates discusses virtue as a genus in 72c7-8 to explain its parts or kinds. This makes it plausible to say that virtue will play the same role in the identification of particular instances as well. The second consideration is a continuation of the first, (ii) it is equally plausible to suggest that what counts as an explanation of a particular being *f* is the form it possesses (F); failing to say this, it isn't clear what else could play this explanatory role.¹¹³ For as Scott had argued before, the *Meno* only recognises

¹¹¹ Ibid, p. 22.

¹¹² Ibid, p. 86.

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 87.

one type of knowledge: “understanding that requires explanatory reasoning”. Therefore,

If someone knows that a particular (e.g. action) is virtuous, they would have to be able to give the explanation for this. The explanation in question, I would argue, has to be the form of virtue.¹¹⁴

Hence, to know a particular *f*, one must know its form, as this form is expressed in a definition. We ought to read Socrates, then, as adhering to the priority of definition both senses: PDA and PDI. If this is so, concludes Scott, the problem of discovery comes about, in part, because of Socrates’ commitment to the priority of definition, and in another, because of his commitment to the principle of foreknowledge discussed earlier.

What all of this suggests, claims Scott, is that commitment to these two principles leaves Socrates “boxed into a corner”, as it were, with regards to “definitional discovery”. He has no recourse to any knowledge to fall back on. For without a definition, inquiry can’t get off the ground – not even through particular examples of the thing whose knowledge (definition) is being sought. This signals Plato’s introduction of the theory of recollection: the theory according to which we can “discover something that we already know, so long as we have forgotten it.”¹¹⁵

With this, Scott concludes that – contrary to Fine – the theory of recollection is a theory of latent knowledge. However, like Fine, and in keeping with ERM’s general claim, the theory of recollection is *not* Plato’s solution to the paradox. In the next section, I will critically assess the reasons that Scott offers for this latter claim and ask whether the hybrid reading (HYR) he has offered here can cope with the problem of interpretation that we had considered earlier in chapter 1.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ See, e.g., Chapter 1 (1.3 & 1.4) of this thesis.

3.3. The Hybrid Reading and the Problem of Interpretation

Scott's reading of Meno's questions and of Socrates' reformulation of them, and his subsequent treatment of these as pointing to two distinct problems that require two different solutions, gives rise to a hybrid reading of Meno's challenge. This *Hybrid Reading* (HYR) maintains – in line with the *Epistemological Reading* (ERM) – that Plato's solution to Meno's paradox consists of his epistemological distinction between true belief and knowledge. All versions of ERM (the *Standard Reading* (STR) and HYR included) adhere to this basic claim in their reading of Meno's paradox. However, STR and HYR part company with regards to the role that each assign to the theory of recollection in their respective readings. STR, as we have already seen, delegates its role to explaining an interesting fact about human beings' remarkable tendency to favour true beliefs over false ones in the course of inquiry – an 'add-on' theory of little, or no consequence to the paradox, or to its solution, *per se*. By dividing Meno's questions into two distinct challenges, however, HYR argues that a reading of one of those questions is possible such that it gives rise to a problem of discovery – a problem whose solution lies in the idea of prior knowledge.

What reasons do we have for accepting HYR's claim that the theory of recollection should *not* be read as Plato's proposed response to the paradox, but rather, it should be read as his response to the problem of discovery instead? This section critically evaluates the reasons that Scott offers for this claim. The following section will then examine whether HYR can cope with the problem of interpretation, or whether it too, like STR, cannot cope with it.

3.3.1. Against the Traditional Reading

Scott offers three reasons against the *Traditional Reading's* (TRM) main claim that the theory of recollection is Plato's response to Meno's paradox (or, the eristic dilemma, as Scott calls it).

The first reason concerns the inappropriateness of the theory of recollection as a solution to the dilemma. More specifically, Scott argues that recollection

is neither necessary nor sufficient as a solution to the paradox. It is not necessary because the dilemma is a logical one that capitalises on an “all-or-nothing” conception of knowledge, for which the introduction of the notion of a “partial grasp” of some object of inquiry, as distinguished from a “full” grasp, is sufficient as a solution – a notion readily provided by Plato’s distinction between true belief and knowledge.¹¹⁷ As he puts it:

Recollection is an account of where our cognitive states come from, and as such is not necessary to the solution. The partial grasp could come from a number of sources – perception or hearsay, for instance.¹¹⁸

Scott argues that the theory of recollection is not sufficient either as a solution to the paradox. To clarify, he urges us to imagine a situation in which we espouse the theory of recollection as a solution to the paradox, whilst simultaneously dropping the distinction between true belief and knowledge. But without the distinction between the partial and full grasp, what we are left with is merely an unhelpful distinction between a latent and an explicit grasp of something. Understood along the lines of the theory of recollection, this would imply that

if we know something explicitly, we either know everything about it explicitly or nothing about it explicitly. As a result, our theory of recollection will be powerless to solve the dilemma, because if we recollect we have to recollect everything about it at once. But if recollection is to solve the problem of inquiry, we would need to be able to recollect some partial knowledge, which will allow us to specify the object of inquiry. On the view under consideration, any act of recollecting about the object will land us with full knowledge, hence making the inquiry superfluous.¹¹⁹

We have already encountered this kind of objection. However, there, it had been an objection to Plato’s *choice* of theory – not to our *reading* of Plato. The objection there had been premised on the traditional reading (TRM) that the theory of recollection does indeed constitute Plato’s response to the paradox – albeit an objectionable one since it raises, what the author there had called,

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p. 80.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

the “paradox of recollection”.¹²⁰ We also looked there at some potential responses to this kind of objection, and ruled them all out as inadequate.¹²¹ However, the topic under evaluation there had been the philosophical adequacy of the theory of recollection as a response to the paradox of inquiry. What we are concerned with here, on the other hand, has to do with an evaluation of whether the theory of recollection – despite its (alleged) philosophical inadequacy for the task at hand – is indeed Plato’s solution to the paradox, or not. And consequently, whether HYR is right in its rejection of TRM. What Scott has presented us with here, however, isn’t a reason for endorsing his *reading* of Plato, but rather a potential reason for dismissing the theory of recollection as a philosophically adequate solution to the paradox. But as we have already seen, its apparent philosophical inadequacy need not rule out that Plato believed that it was a good enough response to the paradox; and hence, it does not rule out TRM’s main claim that the theory of recollection is Plato’s response to the paradox.

Moreover, the assumption that the theory of recollection solves the problem of discovery need not rule out the possibility that it may also solve the paradox of inquiry. Indeed, the only reason why we were led to believe that the problem of discovery is distinct from the problems contained in paradox of inquiry is because, on Scott’s reading of Meno’s questions, Socrates drops M^2 when he reformulates the challenge into a crisp dilemma. However, Scott fails to offer any reasons why we should drop M^2 from our reading of the paradox of inquiry. Might it not be possible, for example, to read M^2 into one of the horns of the dilemma? More importantly, he does not offer any convincing reasons for why Plato would drop M^2 – he simply tells us that he does, and that this gives rise to a distinct problem of discovery. But we are still left wondering what would motivate Plato to do so – especially that, if Scott’s reading were right, then Plato could not have been more misleading on this score. We should reject Scott’s first reason, then, for his claim that the theory of recollection isn’t Plato’s response to the paradox. For as we have

¹²⁰ See, N. P. White, *Plato on Knowledge and Reality*, op. cit., p. 50, where he raises for raises a similar objection, as discussed earlier in Chapter 1 (1.3) of this thesis.

¹²¹ Ibid.

just seen, Scott's claim about the inadequacy of the theory of recollection as a solution to the paradox hinges on two contentious moves: the first consists of his dropping M^2 from his reading of the paradox without adequate warrant, and the second – arising from the first¹²² – amounts to the assumption that if the theory of recollection is inadequate as a solution to the paradox, then we ought not to take Plato to have endorsed it as a solution either.¹²³

The second reason that Scott offers for rejecting the claim that Socrates introduces the theory of recollection as a solution to the paradox has to do with what he takes to be the dynamics of the relationship between Socrates and Meno. There are three elements of this relationship that Scott believes are relevant here. First, the term 'eristic', although a pejorative, must not be interpreted as meaning that the argument to which it is referring to is bad. Rather, it simply implies that Meno's motives for using it are bad. Moreover, Socrates' use of the term is indicative of his disapproval of Meno. He believes that only those who are weak would welcome it, and that Meno's use of it shows his lack of genuine epistemological concern¹²⁴ and reveals that he is "daunted by the prospect of further, post-*aporia* inquiry."¹²⁵ Finally, Socrates' use of the label eristic is supposed to tell the reader that Meno has not accepted the argument on its logic alone, and presents the argument as something that Meno has not considered impartially.¹²⁶ Scott then concludes that

¹²² As I have argued, the second assumption about the inadequacy of the theory of recollection as a solution to the paradox (or the eristic dilemma, to use Scott's terminology) hinges – crucially – on his first assumption that the problem M^2 is *not* present in the paradox because Socrates has dropped it. Without this first assumption, the second one wouldn't hold.

¹²³ In principle, I do not think this latter move is completely wrong. However, I think that Scott would need to provide more, by way of textual evidence, to support it.

¹²⁴ See also, Tarrant, for example, who believes that the style in which this section (*Meno* 80a-c) is written betrays the mockery and humour with which Socrates replies to his young interlocutor. From this he draws a similar conclusion to Scott:

Though [Socrates] accuses Meno of descending to the use of 'eristic' argument, the type aiming solely at scoring points against an opponent, the only sense in which Meno's questions had been eristic is that they were not raised with any intention of finding the answers.

H. Tarrant, *Recollecting Plato's Meno*, (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 2005), p. 37.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

This supports the claim that Socrates is not trying to solve the eristic dilemma directly with recollection. Having introduced it, he makes no attempt to explain in logical terms how it disarms the dilemma.¹²⁷

Instead, Socrates uses a “carrot and stick” strategy to “arouse a sense of shame in Meno for being weak”; and “he uses recollection as an incentive to make Meno eager to inquire”.¹²⁸ Just in case we are wondering how the theory of recollection is supposed to induce this sense of shame and eagerness to inquire in Meno, Scott clarifies:

[Because Socrates] panders to [Meno’s] desire for the exotic in the initial exposé of recollection. This includes references to priests and priestesses and divinely inspired poets – all of whom immediately arouse Meno’s curiosity, as does the prospect of hearing about a new theory (81a7-9). The use of allusions to ancient myths and recitations of lyric poetry is part of the same strategy: whetting his appetite for the exotic and thus luring him into making the effort to inquire for himself. ... trying to create a gestalt shift in his interlocutor.”¹²⁹

What we have here, then, is indeed an account that is supposed to capture the dynamics of the relationship between Socrates and Meno. It is worth noting, however, that the account offered captures the *psychological* dynamics: not only something that we are supposed to be reading between the lines, but more importantly, the commentator’s interpretation of the power-games, or a psychological tug of war, between Socrates and Meno.

However, by the same token, and using the same method of psychological analysis, one could potentially construct the passage to say something different – something that would suggest the opposite, in fact. For example, why not say that Meno, who at this stage in the dialogue is completely out of ideas, intellectually spent, mentally exhausted and, no doubt, embarrassed by his lack of an adequate answer to the question: ‘What is virtue?’ has decided to bring all his guns out, as it were, and use the very last weapon at his disposal - the eristic argument? The use of the ‘eristic argument’ here may not be so much evidence of Meno’s lack of interest in finding an answer; it may simply be his last ditch attempt. Annoyed at Socrates, he is, in effect,

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

saying: 'Look, Socrates. I'm tired of trying to look for a definition of virtue, and I'm fed up with you for being so hard to please! I seem to have made no progress through your provocative method of so-called 'teaching'. Indeed, I am more at a loss now than I was at the start of our investigation. At least then I had something to say about virtue. But perhaps *you* are the problem Socrates! Perhaps it is those requirements of yours for a definition that are the root of the problem here, and *not* my inability to say perfectly reasonable, sensible things about virtue. Indeed, one wonders whether those requirements are realistic at all, Socrates. For it would not be unreasonable to suggest that inquiry into what virtue is – on the terms that you have specified, at least – is impossible. Or perhaps, there isn't answer at all – whether on your terms, or any other. I mean, if, really, after all the efforts that you and I have exerted searching for a definition of virtue, we are still at a loss to say what it is, then one wonders whether what you are suggesting may not, *in principle*, be impossible to find! Incidentally, that reminds me of something Gorgias often says; his argument aptly applies here...' On this interpretation of the psychological dynamics between Socrates and Meno, far from seeing the latter as weak, we may, in fact, sympathise with him. He has tried, and tried, and despite several failures, continued. And now, he has reached a point where he is – understandably – assuming that, perhaps, there is no answer to the question under consideration.

Indeed, up to this point in the dialogue, Meno has shown admirable courage and endurance in the face of Socrates' continuous destruction and complete annihilation of all of the former's attempts at defining virtue.¹³⁰ Meno seemed

¹³⁰ Compare Meno's responses in this dialogue, for example, to Theaetetus' cautious, and almost timid, responses in the *Theaetetus*. On numerous occasions Plato pokes fun, in fact, at Theaetetus for being - for want of a better term - an intellectual 'yes-man' who agrees with all of Socrates' proposals, including those proposals that – had Theaetetus been painted as quick-witted as Meno here – he would've realized that Socrates means to show that those views are absurd. Plato's characters are always, of course, carefully chosen to fit the theme under discussion in each particular dialogue they appear in, and fit in more generally with the philosophical or intellectual position that Plato makes them embody. Despite the praise with which the dialogue pours on Theaetetus for his bravery in battle at the opening scene, for example, it goes on to show that an equal bravery was lacking when Socrates tasks him with finding flaws in the definition of knowledge as perception and the Protagorean and Heraclitean heritage of this account of knowledge. Many times, Socrates asks Theaetetus, 'in light of what we have discussed, is position or claim X tenable?' to which Theaetetus almost always replies as he *thinks* Socrates wants him to, only to have Socrates say a few lines later

eager to inquire at the start, and was not portrayed as being lazy or disinterested in genuinely inquiring; he did not give up at the first opportunity, but showed much courage and resilience. The evidence for this comes in the very first opening line of the dialogue. It was Meno who wanted to know if virtue can be acquired – not Socrates.¹³¹ Plato portrays Meno as having *some* interest, at least, in finding out. If he didn't, then Plato wouldn't have portrayed him as asking the question, in the first place.

Furthermore – and this is important – immediately after this, Socrates tells Meno that he doesn't know 'at all' whether virtue can be taught or what it is, and that he hasn't met anyone either who does.¹³² If Meno were indeed intellectually lazy, or did not have a genuine philosophical concern or interest in the topic, then why did he not launch the eristic argument right at the very start of their conversation, in response to Socrates' first disavowal of knowledge? Why wait until half way through the dialogue, after the numb-fish speech, before he launches it?¹³³ Had Meno's main motivation been to silence Socrates and win the argument, then it would seem that he had that opportunity right at the start of their conversation, and yet he chose not to seize it. This does not mean that he did not wish to silence Socrates with the use of the eristic argument after the numb-fish speech, but only that we cannot blame him for being lazy, not having tried, or not having had a genuine interest, up to this point.

that the position or claims is in fact false, stupid and absurd. See, e.g. *Theaetetus* 155c-d, 157c-d, 158c; like Meno, Theaetetus begins to lose his false beliefs (162c-d), and once that's done, he begins to pick-up pace and do better (163b-c).

I take this portrayal of Theaetetus by Plato to be deliberate; it is meant to tell us something about the lack of critical thought in the field of mathematics, by comparison to true philosophers. In the *Republic* (510b-511a), for example, Plato tells us that mathematicians are incapable of distinguishing between Forms and sensible images of Forms; and that while philosophers go on to question, for example, 'What is the Square, itself by itself?' the geometers and mathematicians are happy not to search for definitions of the diagrams and numbers that they employ in their fields. They merely treat these fundamental principles (or hypotheses) as given. See also, e.g., J. T. Bedu-Addo, 'Sense-Experience and the Argument for Recollection in Plato's *Phaedo*', *Phronesis*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (1991), pp. 32-34.

¹³¹ *Meno* (70a).

¹³² *Meno* (70-71c).

¹³³ I shall return to this topic later in Chapter 6 and say why I think that Meno's timing is crucial for our interpretation of the dialogue's main theme. For our purposes here, it suffices to say that Meno could have launched the eristic argument far earlier, had his main motivation been to silence Socrates and win the argument.

That said, the question ought not to be whether this psychological story just offered is more accurate than the one offered by Scott, or vice versa. Rather, the question ought to be: 'In what sense, if any, does either story provide a reasons for, or against, the claim that the theory of recollection is Plato's intended response to the eristic argument?' And the answer seems to be that it is unclear how either story could confirm or deny TRM's main claim. For regardless of whether the story about the priests and priestesses does indeed whet Meno's appetite and make him eager to know more, and regardless of Meno's (real) intentions for launching the eristic argument, TRM could still insist that – as a reading of Plato – the theory of recollection is the intended solution to the paradox. The psychological story offered by Scott, then, does not seem to give us sufficient reason to abandon TRM's claim – at least, not on its own, and not without further explanation of how and why this story *rules out* the possibility of reading recollection as Plato's answer to the paradox. However, Scott does not provide any further explanation.

The third and final reason that Scott offers for rejecting the theory of recollection as Plato's response to the paradox, comes from a passage from the dialogue. According to Scott, this passage constitutes clear evidence of his hybrid reading of Meno's challenge; it contains the demarcation between the two problems that he had argued for earlier. It is a passage that comes soon after the slave-boy geometrical demonstration, where Socrates states that we have a duty to inquire, and that he'd fight both in word and deed for this duty. Here is the section where Socrates makes this statement, as quoted in Scott:

As for the other points I wouldn't absolutely insist on the argument. But I would fight, both in word and deed, for the following point: that we would be better, more many and less lazy if we believed that we ought to inquire into what we do not know, than if we believed that *we cannot discover what we do not know* and so have no duty to inquire. (86b6-c2).¹³⁴

What this passage shows, Scott concludes, is that – despite being exercised by this challenge – Socrates takes it to be different from the eristic dilemma.

¹³⁴ Ibid, p. 82.

Scott further uses an analogy to argue that where the eristic dilemma had been a challenge about the impossibility of 'inquiry', the above quote contains a different challenge - one about the impossibility of 'discovery'. The analogy that Scott appeals to is from Zeno:

Zeno had argued that it is impossible to move. This is analogous to the conclusion of the eristic dilemma that it is impossible to inquire. By contrast, the claim that it is impossible to discover and hence impossible to inquire is analogous to the claim that it is impossible to find one's way to a destination, even though one can make the attempt.¹³⁵

Taken together, what the analogy and the above passage are supposed to show is that the hybrid reading of Meno's challenge is correct; and the suggestion here seems to be that, given that this hybrid reading is correct, we have good reasons for assuming that the theory of recollection is rather Plato's answer to the problem of discovery - and not the problem about the impossibility of inquiry that arises out of the eristic argument.

It is worth noting that this third and final reason for rejecting TRM's main claim about recollection hinges on two further assumptions. First, it stands or falls depending on our reading of M²: if we accept the reading which states that Socrates drops M² from his reformulation of the paradox as being an accurate reading, then Scott's final reason for rejecting TRM's main claim about recollection gains weight. However, as we saw earlier, we seem not to have been offered any convincing reasons for supposing that M¹ and M² give rise to two distinct problems, nor do we have any reason to believe that Socrates only includes M¹ in his reformulated version of the paradox. Indeed, it seems far more intuitive – and less puzzling – to keep to the traditional way of reading Socrates' reformulation of the paradox, and to read it as being a faithful reformulation of Meno's questions; for to state otherwise is to create a perplexity about Socrates' motivation for misleading Meno.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Scott argues that Socrates' reformulation is due to him believing that Meno's real interest lies in M¹ – not M². He claims that

although Meno has raised two different questions in his original challenge, his real interest was in recalling M¹ rather than M².

Second, the analogy with Zeno does not necessarily bolster the case of rejecting TRM's main claim about recollection. To see this, recall how Scott had defined the problem of discovery earlier. He'd argued that unless we already know that the initial specification of the object of inquiry is correct, we won't have the means of knowing that the proposed answer is correct, even if it were indeed so. However, there are many different ways in which discoveries can occur. One can discover through a formal inquiry (e.g. the discovery of Higgs Boson¹³⁷); informally, by simply looking for something (e.g. where I left my house keys); by searching for one thing, but accidentally discovering another (e.g. the discovery of penicillin¹³⁸); or by complete chance, where one was not intentionally looking for anything in the first place (e.g. the accidental discovery of cosmic microwave background radiation¹³⁹). This is significant: what all these cases show is that we do not need to know that our initial specifications are true in order to match them with the object discovered later, at the end of inquiry. Indeed, in the last two cases, where discovery was made by chance, no initial specification or hypothesis was required at all for the discoveries to take place. What this suggests, then, is that the problem of discovery – on the terms defined above, at least, and so far as we can tell from the history of science and from our ordinary, everyday cases - is a non-problem. And if that is correct, then the reading of Meno's question in M^2 - as suggesting a problem of discovery that is distinct from the problem of inquiry - is also incorrect.

Ibid, p. 79. However, this is highly speculative, and, again, we seem not to have any textual evidence to support it.

¹³⁷ See more details about the discovery of Higgs Boson on CERN's website: *CERN*, <<http://home.cern/topics/higgs-boson>> [Retrieved: 21.07.2015.]

¹³⁸ Alexander Fleming was studying influenza with the aim of advancing his understanding of it and making discoveries there, but found penicillin instead, by accident. According to the BBC:

In 1928, while studying influenza, Fleming noticed that mould had developed accidentally on a set of culture dishes being used to grow the staphylococci germ. The mould had created a bacteria-free circle around itself. Fleming experimented further and named the active substance penicillin.

'Alexander Fleming (1881-1955)', *BBC*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/fleming_alexander.shtml> [Retrieved: 21.07.2015.]

¹³⁹ The discovery was made by American radio astronomers, Arno Penzias and Robert Woodrow Wilson, and for which they went on to earn the Nobel Prize for Physics. See, e.g., E. J. Wollack, (2014), 'Tests of Big Bang: The Cosmic Microwave Background', *National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)*, <http://map.gsfc.nasa.gov/universe/bb_tests_cmb.html> [Retrieved: 21.07.2015.]

Finally, and more to the point, even if we were to assume, for the sake of argument, that Meno's questions did indeed amount to two distinct challenges, and that the problem of discovery was a genuine problem, this need not rule out that the theory of recollection could provide an answer to both; nor does it rule out that Plato had provided the theory as a response to both. After all, Plato may have thought that 'recollection', as a concept, could do the crucial work of providing the initial specification of the object of inquiry (in the form of offering a partial grasp of the object), whilst also playing the role necessary for bringing our inquiries to a successful end. Hence, even if we were to grant that the problem of discovery is a genuine one, and that it is distinct from the impossibility of inquiry, this still need not rule out the possibility that Plato may have intended for the theory of recollection to play the double-role of solving both problems. But as we have just seen, the 'problem of discovery' is not a problem at all.

To conclude, Scott does not offer convincing reasons for rejecting TRM's main claim that the theory of recollection is not Plato's response to the paradox. As such, we should not be persuaded by HYR's claims against the claim that the theory of recollection is Plato's solution to the paradox.

3.3.2. The Return of the Problem of Interpretation

As we have seen before, the *Epistemological Reading* (ERM) is particularly vulnerable to the problem of interpretation since, in denying that the theory of recollection constitutes Plato's response to the paradox, it faces the difficulty of squaring its reading with the text of the dialogue. In particular, it faces the challenge of explaining why Socrates would cite the story of the priests and priestesses (of which the theory of recollection is one part) as the *reason* why he thinks that the eristic dilemma is not such a good argument, and on the basis of which he then urges Meno not to believe it either, but to continue to inquire. Why would Socrates claim that it is on the basis of this story that he finds the eristic argument to be flawed, if he did not genuinely think so? Why would he mislead Meno? And why would Plato mislead his readers?

We also saw that STR was particularly vulnerable to this kind of objection via the problem of interpretation. In denying that the theory of recollection solves the paradox, it relegated it to insignificance in so far as a solution to the paradox is concerned. In doing so, not only does it fail to offer an adequate solution to the problem of interpretation, but seems not to be aware of it at all.

As a version of ERM, HYR is an improvement on STR in that it acknowledges the problem of interpretation (i.e. it sees the need, at least, to explain what role the theory of recollection plays in the dialogue and what connection it may have to the paradox or Meno's questions) and attempts to offer a response to it. However, HYR's response depends fundamentally on two contentious assumptions. The first assumption is that the third question in Meno's triad of questions (M^2) is not present in Socrates' reformulation. But as we already saw, this assumption is unwarranted since it lacks any textual support.

The second assumption arises from the first and is continuous with it: it involves the idea that M^2 contains a problem of 'discovery' that is distinct from the problems contained in the eristic argument. The assumption here is that, unlike the problem about the impossibility of inquiry contained in the eristic argument, the problem of 'discovery' is a problem about our inability to match our initial specifications to a proposed answer unless we first know that the specifications are true. However, upon closer inspection of this claim, we saw that it is difficult to defend: discovery can and does occur in situations where we either do not know whether our initial specifications are true, or in situations where we do not have any initial specifications at all. The 'problem of discovery', it turned out, is a non-problem. And with this we can conclude that we have good reasons to believe that the two assumptions that were meant to sustain HYR's claim about the theory of recollection's role in the Meno are, in fact, mistaken.

Conclusion

HYR had claimed that the theory of recollection in the *Meno* is not Plato's response to the paradox; rather, it is the distinction between true belief and knowledge that solves the paradox. Faced with the challenge of explaining what other role the theory of recollection might play in the dialogue, HYR had claimed that it was aimed at resolving the 'problem of discovery' – a problem that arises out of Meno's questions, but which Socrates allegedly omits from his reformulation of those questions into the eristic dilemma.

Upon further investigation, however, we saw that HYR hadn't provided adequate textual evidence to support this reading. The interpretive challenge aside, we also found out that there weren't enough grounds for accepting that there is a 'problem of discovery' at all – whether as an interpretation of Plato's text in the *Meno*, or as a philosophical problem in its own right. To put it bluntly, there is no 'problem of discovery' that needs solving. And if there isn't a problem to solve, nor can we find evidence in Plato's text that he believed that there is such a problem, then the theory of recollection cannot be Plato's solution to it. This brings us back at the point we had reached at the end of the last two chapters when we discussed the problem of interpretation. What we are left wondering is this: if the theory of recollection is *not* meant to solve the paradox in the *Meno*, then what other possible role did Plato intend for it to play? And if he really did intend for it to play some other role in the dialogue than that of solving the paradox, why would he make Socrates say to Meno that he thinks that the paradox amounts to a bad argument *because* he has listened to the story of the priests and priestesses (immortality of the soul, reincarnation, prenatal knowledge, learning is remembering, etc.)? Just what is it about this story that leads Socrates to think that the eristic argument is not a good argument?

The next three chapters are aimed at providing answers to these questions. For now, however, we can conclude that both versions of the epistemological reading (STR and HYR) have failed to provide satisfactory responses to the problem of interpretation.

Chapter 4

Reality & Cognition I: The World as Change

An adequate interpretation of the role that the theory of recollection plays in the *Meno* not only requires an assessment of the context within which it arises in the dialogue, but also its wider role within Plato's epistemology. But Plato's epistemology cannot be studied in isolation of his metaphysics since, despite not being explicitly mentioned in the *Meno*, the *Phaedo* does explicitly state that the theory of recollection is connected to the theory of Forms. These two theories have gone on to become Plato's most infamous legacies in the history of ideas. Why did Plato think that we need Forms? And just how is recollection connected to Forms? If they are indeed connected, then what effect could the unveiling of these connections have on our interpretation of the claim that all learning is remembering, which appears in the *Meno*; and to what extent, if any, could they influence our understanding of the challenge contained in Meno's paradox?

In order to be in a position to answer these questions, we must first gain an adequate understanding of some of the challenges that Plato was attempting to meet with his theory of recollection and with the theory of Forms. For this, we must take a closer look at the most prominent view of reality prevalent at his time, and explore the epistemological (or rather, the sceptical) ramifications of such a view. Placed firmly within their historical context - the context from which they have emerged - allows us to gain a privileged access into the philosopher's way of thinking, and consequently allows for a better understanding of the epistemological concerns that led him to believe that he needed to include Forms and recollection in his metaphysical system.

The *Epistemological Reading of Meno's Paradox* (ERM) had argued that the true belief-knowledge distinction was sufficient for solving the paradox. In doing

so, it had rejected that the theory of recollection plays any role in solving the paradox. In addition, in its claim that (a mix of true and false) beliefs are sufficient as a starting point to get us to make progress in inquiry all to knowledge, it had assumed that the theory of recollection plays no role in solving the paradox. Moreover, it had also assumed that, for Plato, beliefs are acquired empirically from the 'outside-in', so to speak. And that if this were the case, then only belief, but not the theory of recollection, plays a role in solving the paradox. The question that ERM had failed to ask is this: where, according to Plato, do our notions of truth come from, and what acts as the criterion for truth in our world? In judging (whether correctly or incorrectly) that a table is rectangular in shape, or that an action is good, do we resort wholly to information given to us via the senses, or are we relying on concepts whose genealogy can be traced to the soul's first encounter with Forms whilst the soul was in a disincarnate state (i.e. prenatal knowledge)?

The aim of Chapters 4 and 5 is to counter ERM's assumption that, for Plato, recollection plays no role in our acquisition of the true beliefs gained prior to, or in the course of, inquiry. As I shall go on to argue, on Plato's account, the genealogy of *all* true beliefs, concepts and knowledge – in short, *all* truth – is traced back to the soul, from which all truth is then recollected. This is because, for Plato, reality isn't the material or natural world of flux around us, but rather the Forms, to which the *only* access we have is - *not* through the medium of eyes and ears, in short, the senses, but rather - through the recollection of truth buried deep within the soul in the form of memories of the soul's prenatal encounter with the Forms.

Contrary to ERM, then, for Plato, we cannot begin our inquiries with true beliefs whose ultimate source is not anchored in the soul's recollection of Forms. This is because the ultimate origin of all truth, for Plato, is the soul, whose encounter with Forms in a previous existence has given it a privileged access to the kind of reality that is otherwise inaccessible through the natural world.

In this chapter, I begin by considering some important aspects of Heraclitus' infamous theory of flux. I will then go on to explore some of the ontological and epistemological complications that his view of reality gives rise to, as discussed in Plato's *Theaetetus*. I will argue that when followed to its logical conclusion, this view of reality obliterates the possibility of concept formation and the classification of objects into kinds, thereby leading to the absurd conclusion that there cannot possibly be any such thing as cognition or intelligible speech.

The next chapter then explores Plato's alternative view of mind and reality, through the theory of Forms and the theory of recollection. As we shall go on to see, one of the major functions of these theories is to allow for truth and objectivity to have a basis in a stable reality, and to allow our minds to have access to this reality *such that* cognition, intelligence and – eventually – knowledge acquisition, could be made possible.

4.1. Heraclitean Flux

Is reality nothing other than a system of constant change and flux? Some among Plato's contemporaries were certainly tempted by this view. And from what Plato tells us in the *Theaetetus*, Protagoras' Measure Doctrine – perhaps unwittingly – seems to have entailed it. The theory is usually attributed to Heraclitus of Ephesus: a pre-Socratic philosopher who lived in the 6th century B.C.E. There are three aspects of Heraclitus' ideas that are of particular importance to our understanding of Plato's metaphysics and epistemology. These are:

- i. That fire is the nature and source of all things;
- ii. The theory of flux; and,
- iii. The unity / coincidence of contraries (or opposites).

Like his predecessors, Heraclitus believed that reality is made of the same stuff – one substance out of which everything that exists is made. Thales, for example, thought that everything was made of water, whereas Anaximenes believed that air was the source of everything. Heraclitus, on the other hand,

proposed that “everlasting fire” is the origin of all things. In this, he was following the same pattern of explanation as his Milesian predecessors, who had emphasized that all of reality can be reduced to the same basic stuff, thereby endorsing a material monism that reduced all of the elements and components of reality to one (material) substance: water, air or fire.¹⁴⁰

This brings us to the second aspects of his thought: the claim that reality is characterized by change. Note that, unlike other substance monists whose monism is an attempt to emphasize sameness or the stable common denominator underlying all apparent change and variety, Heraclitus’ choice of fire as the stuff of reality is a curious one. Fire is arguably the most volatile and inconstant of all elements in nature: it symbolizes change and transformation. And although reality, for Heraclitus, is a unified system, what unifies it is not that it is the same substance everywhere. Rather, reality is characterised by an ongoing process, which is governed by a law of change that underpins it. Indeed, he is famous for claiming that “everything flows”. In one surviving fragment of his writings he claims:

On those stepping into rivers staying the same other and other waters flow.

In the *Cratylus*¹⁴¹, Plato tells us that Heraclitus believed that everything moves and nothing remains the same. And as a consequence, it is impossible for someone to step into the same river twice.¹⁴² For if the person and the river are always changing, then neither the person stepping into a river, nor the river, could ever remain the same. The river, or flowing water, is a synecdoche for everything in the natural world.¹⁴³ Hence, “everything flows”.

¹⁴⁰ D. Graham, ‘Heraclitus’, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/heraclit/>>. [Retrieved: 23/11/2015.]

¹⁴¹ Plato, ‘Cratylus’, in *Complete Works*, J. Cooper (ed.), (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1997), (401d).

¹⁴² *Cratylus* (402a).

¹⁴³ C. Shields, *Ancient Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 10.

The third aspect of Heraclitus' thought is his view on the unity of opposites (or the coincidence of contraries).¹⁴⁴ For Heraclitus, opposites are necessary components of reality, unified within it by a system of exchanges.¹⁴⁵ According to Shields, Heraclitus famously claimed that

[T]he road up and down is one and the same. Likewise, seawater is both drinkable and not drinkable: drinkable to fish but not to human beings.¹⁴⁶

And again, that human beings are both wise and unwise: wise by comparison to apes, but unwise by comparison to gods.¹⁴⁷ This means that contraries - such as wise and unwise, beautiful and ugly, tall and short, white and black, etc. - can be coinstantiated in one object; and, since every object will be qualified in at least one respect, every object will coinstantiate at least one pair of contraries:

[T]he same thing in us is living and dead, waking and sleeping, young and old. For these things having changed around are those, and conversely those having changed around are these.¹⁴⁸

Note that change brings about this coincidence of contraries; and due to this, we find these contraries existing side-by-side in the same objects. For example, a person who is young now, may, in time, become old; a person who is wise relative to another, may be unwise relative to gods; the same wind that is cold to me, may be warm to someone else; a person may be beautiful in one respect, but ugly in another; and so forth. This, then, gives rise to Heraclitus' claim that contraries are in fact unified – at least one pair of opposites coexists in every single object.

4.2. What Price Change?

The idea that nature is characterised by change is certainly an attractive one. A cursory look at the natural world around us reveals that things are constantly undergoing modifications, with new objects and properties coming into being and old ones perishing and/or undergoing change.

¹⁴⁴ Heraclitus, (DK22B12), as quoted in D. Graham, 'Heraclitus', op. cit.

¹⁴⁵ D. Graham, 'Heraclitus', ibid.

¹⁴⁶ C. Shields, *Ancient Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. 11-12

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Heraclitus, (DK22B88).

Aristotle's conception of 'motion', for example, as the 'actuality' of 'potentiality', plays an important role in his understanding of the natural world.¹⁴⁹ However, despite the appeal and apparent truth of the view that nature is characterised by constant change (or motion), for many - including Plato and Aristotle - Heraclitus' views led to contradictions.

First, Heraclitus' three principles – the theory of flux, the coincidence of contraries (or opposites); and, the claim that fire is the nature and source of all things – if taken jointly, seem to contradict each other. Second, the principle of the coincidence of opposites seems to pose difficulties for our ability to reach a consensus about the qualities or properties possessed by an object. This in turn poses difficulties to describe objects accurately, and leads to all sorts of contradictions in the way that we speak of these objects. Third, attempting to resolve these contradictions by espousing a form of relativism akin to Protagoras' does not seem to solve the problem, but only shifts it elsewhere – or so believed Plato, at least. Indeed, an ancient form of skepticism seems to be the logical conclusion of Protagoras' measure doctrine: a doctrine which itself is premised upon the flux theory. Finally, the idea that all is change – if followed to its logical conclusion – would simply erase the possibility of intelligible speech. But that is surely absurd. How, then, can we do justice to the intuition that change is a fundamental element of the natural world around us and yet avoid the kind of austere subjectivism, extreme skepticism and the absurdities that appear to be its logical conclusion?

In what follows, I will discuss each of the four problems stated above. I will show how the idea that all is in flux and change seems, at first blush, to lead to skepticism, but when explored further, leads to absurdity by denying the most fundamental of all human characteristics: the ability to speak intelligibly and be understood by other members of the human community. The next chapter will then discuss how Plato constructs a metaphysical system in which his account of mind and reality is supposed to remedy the

¹⁴⁹ See, e.g., J. Sachs, 'Aristotle: Motion and its Place in Nature', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/aris-mot/>> [Retrieved: 25/11/2015.]

problems discussed here – a system that is aimed at reconciling our intuitions about change being a characteristic feature of the natural world, on the one hand, with our ability to speak intelligibly, classify objects into classes and kinds, and hence, to make objectively true claims about the world and about ourselves, on the other.

4.2.1. *Fire as Unity and Disunity*

On the face of it, Heraclitus' three principles,¹⁵⁰ taken together, entail a contradiction. For how can reality be made of the same stuff, as indicated in (i) - that is to say, how can reality be *constant* in some sense - and yet be characterized by ongoing change, as stated in (ii)?

A charitable reading of Heraclitus could potentially provide a response to this kind of objection. One might, for instance, take him to be saying not that everything is *made* from fire as such, but rather that fire *symbolises* all things. Where Heraclitus claims that:

All things are an exchange for fire, and fire for all things, as goods for gold and gold for goods.¹⁵¹

We could take him to mean that fire is the standard against which we measure all things, just as gold is the standard against which we judge the value of all things. But just as gold is not identical to the goods against which we measure it, so fire is not identical to the things in the world, for which it is the standard.¹⁵² If everything is symbolised by a process of constant change, then everything is just like fire, which is itself characterized by constant change. On this picture, all existent things are constantly being transformed into other things, and never remaining the same. Contrary to what his Milesian predecessors had claimed, then, what is constant in reality is not the same *stuff*. Rather, the one constant thing about the world is what characterises it; and what characterises it is the process of *constant change*

¹⁵⁰ That is:

- i. That fire is the nature and source of all things;
- ii. The theory of flux; and,
- iii. The unity / coincidence of contraries (or opposites).

See Section 4.1 above.

¹⁵¹ Heraclitus, (DK22B90), as quoted in Graham, 'Heraclitus', op. cit.

¹⁵² Ibid.

symbolized by fire. Hence, for Heraclitus, the only constant in reality is the law by which there is an order and sequence to the process of change that characterises that reality.¹⁵³

Should this be what Heraclitus meant, it could be objected to on the grounds that if everything in the universe is a modification of fire, then everything is – in some sense at least – unified at the source; and hence, at the atomic or most fundamental level, it must be made of the same stuff, despite the fact that different objects may manifest different modifications of this stuff. For example, we consider everything to be made out of matter, despite the fact that matter manifests itself very differently in various objects. Hence, the different modifications of matter may lead to surface differences, or differences at the molecular, atomic level, or even quantum levels, but nonetheless, they are still all made out of matter. Something similar could arguably be said of Heraclitus' understanding of how fire constitutes the origin of everything in the natural world. This, then, would stand in stark contradiction to his other claim that there is no constant in nature. Either this, or Heraclitus himself was not aware of the contradiction that the joint principles (i-iii) would lead to. This may, however, explain why philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle had believed that his principles lead to all sorts of contradictions.

Heraclitus could, of course, defend himself against the charge of contradiction here by appealing to his principle of the coincidence of opposites (see iii above). He could say that he told us already that opposites coexist in everything, and that the same could be said of the natural world as a whole. On this principle, fire is both unity and disunity; the one thing that is constant in the world, and the thing which represents the fact that nothing is stable at all: that everything is forever changing and mutable. In other words, he could argue that contradictions are an inherent feature of everything as he'd claimed in his principle of the coincidence of opposites. It is very unlikely, however, that Plato or Aristotle would have found any such defense satisfactory since it is clearly circular.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

4.2.2. Protagoras' Measure Doctrine

Besides the principle that all is both fire and change (i), Heraclitus' principle of the coincidence of opposites (iii) is another problematic aspect of his philosophy. Recently, commentators such as Barnes have argued that it leads to contradictions and scepticism. On a traditional reading, Heraclitus is viewed as a material monist who believed that all things are modifications of fire. Moreover, that the truth of the theory of flux and the coincidence of opposites is supported by empirical observations. From these observations, claims Barnes, we notice that "everything is always flowing in *some* respects".¹⁵⁴ This, in turn, reveals that "every pair of contraries is somewhere coinstantiated; and every object coinstantiates at least one pair of contraries".¹⁵⁵ Needless to say, such a metaphysical picture makes the prospect of knowledge impossible.

But why would the principle of the coincidence of opposites threaten the possibility knowledge? According to Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, the problem posed by this principle concerns our ability (or rather, our inability) to classify or identify objects.¹⁵⁶ If the properties that we attribute to objects in nature are always present in those objects along with their opposites, then how can the classification of those objects be possible? If an object were both *F* and not-*F* (where *F* may refer to any property, such as 'tall', 'large', 'red', or 'just', for instance), then its opposite would also be true of that object. Hence, an object may be said to be both: large and not-large (or, small), tall and not-tall (or short), just and unjust, red all over and not-red all over, all at one and the same time. Heraclitus' view, then, entails that a particular object is both *F* and not-*F* at one and the same time.

If the classification of objects is not possible because they always are both *F* and not-*F* at one and the same time, then by the same token, knowing whether an object is *F* or not-*F*, at any particular time, cannot be possible

¹⁵⁴ J. Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, revised ed., (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 69.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹⁵⁶ *Theaetetus* (152d-e).

either. Therefore, Heraclitus' theory of the coincidence of opposites makes object classification impossible; and as a consequence of this, it makes knowledge of objects - where this knowledge is concerned with their classification into categories or kinds based on their properties - also impossible. The same wind, for example, may be cold to me but not-cold to you; and the same wine may taste sweet to me, but not-sweet to someone who is sick.

As Plato recounts in the *Theaetetus*, the main thesis of Protagoras' *Truth* is that "man is the measure of all things". This is otherwise known as the *measure doctrine* (hereafter MD). It is implied here that Protagoras' infamous book, *Truth*, is an attempt to equate knowledge with perception in order to avoid the kinds of contradiction that arise from objects appearing to be both *F* and *not-F* at one and the same to different people. In doing so, argues Socrates, MD does both: accept a principle of radical change (indeed, the suggestion is that it is a hidden starting premise for Protagoras' MD), whilst attempting to solve some of the contradictions (that is to say, some of the anomalies) that may arise from it. In doing so, Protagoras is accused of both: accepting a theory of radical change as a foundation for his MD, and at once defending it by putting forward a doctrine that aims at resolving contradictions arising from it. In order to see why Plato believed that Protagoras' austere subjectivism (i.e. skepticism about the objectivity of truth and knowledge) is premised upon the idea of radical change, and why – ultimately – it leads to all sorts of absurdities, we need to explore his treatment of MD in more detail.

In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates suggests that MD alleges to resolve some contradictions contained in our ordinary ways of speaking. However, in the course of a discussion between Socrates and a young mathematician, Theaetetus, about the possibility of defining knowledge as perception, Socrates argues that MD in fact *entails* Heraclitean metaphysics. What Plato means to show here is that these supposed contradictions in our ordinary ways of speaking which MD proposes to avoid arise out of Protagoras' adherence to a view of reality somewhat similar to Heraclitus'. But if this

right - if man is indeed the measure of all things, as Protagoras had claimed - then there cannot be such a thing as objectively true statements. And if there aren't *any* objectively true statements, then how could there possibly be any true moral statement? This kind of claim, of course, threatens the kind of moral realism advocated by both Socrates and Plato. For what is the value of a life of contemplation if the possibility of progress – in particular, moral progress – is dimmed by the lack of objectivity in matters of value?

To see how the view of reality as flux and Protagoras' MD threaten the Socratic and Platonic projects, let us turn to how they are presented in the *Theaetetus*. At 151d in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates considers whether the definition of knowledge as perception (*aisthêsis*) is a valid one. Socrates then immediately equates this claim with the famous Protagorean claim that "man is the measure of all things – of the things that are, that they are; of the things that are not, that they are not".¹⁵⁷ He argues further that this claim entails a form of *phenomenal subjectivism*, according to which things are just as they appear to a given subject.¹⁵⁸ Imagine, urges Socrates, that the wind may

¹⁵⁷ *Theaetetus* (152a).

¹⁵⁸ S.G. Chappell, 'Plato on Knowledge in the *Theaetetus*', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), [<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2013/entries/plato-theaetetus/>] > [Retrieved: 02/12/2015.]

Chappell calls this 'phenomenal' subjectivism. It is worth noting that this kind of subjectivism's application could be wide enough to encompass all kinds of subjectivism. How we interpret 'appearance' or 'perception' here is key. On a restricted interpretation of appearance and perception, they mean simply how things look, perceptually, to a subject (that is, through the organ of sense perception, viz., eyes), with appearance being the object of perception. It is also true that the topic of discussion in the *Theaetetus* is whether knowledge is perception. This, coupled with Socrates' examples of an object appearing to be red or white, may initially give the impression that knowledge here is reduced to (visual) appearances only. However, Socrates also speaks of how the winds appear to someone (that is to say, how it *feels* to them) and how wine appears to someone (that is, how it *tastes* to them). From this we can deduce that he thinks that 'appearances' apply to the impressions that a given object could make on a subject via the senses. This is what Socrates has in mind when he states that:

[E]xamples of perception have various names: cases of seeing, hearing, smelling, sensations of heat and cold. (*Theaetetus* 156b)

This would suggest that 'perception' and 'appearances' relate to how information about the world is gained through our senses. But immediately after this Socrates goes on to say that we should also include

what we called pleasure, pain desire and fear; and there are infinite numbers of others which have no name, though very many have got names. (*Theaetetus* 156b)

There is a much wider scope, then, for our interpretation of appearances and perception. To be sure, Socrates discusses this wider sense of 'appearances' at length with Protagoras himself, in the dialogue that Plato named after him (i.e. *The Protagoras*). There, Socrates argues – in his infamous substitution argument, where he equates 'good' with 'pleasure'

appear as cold to one person, and yet warm to another. In such a case, it isn't the wind itself that is either cold or warm. To speak as though the wind is both cold and warm at the same time would no doubt lead to contradictions. Rather, what we ought to learn from this is that such talk would necessarily lead to contradiction; and hence, that it should be abandoned for the relativised kind of talk championed by Protagoras. It is important to notice, Socrates points out, that according to this kind of (subjective) relativism, the distinction between the 'appearance' of an object and its 'being perceived' (i.e. known) is obliterated – the two are in fact one and the same (152c). This implies that for any object to be known simply means for it to appear to be such-and-such to some individual subject. For if the criterion for truth is the individual subject to whom an object appears to be such-and-such, then truth is relativised to the individual for who the object may be said to appear a certain way.

If this were the case, then the statement that 'X is F' is true for the subject, S, just in case X appears to be F for S. Therefore, true for S (on the basis of how things appear to S) is true *tout court*.¹⁵⁹ On this Protagorean picture, a

(*Protagoras* 358b) and his allegedly paradoxical claims, which see him equating virtue with knowledge – that appearances play a fundamental role in confusing agents, depending on perspective (*Protagoras* 356d-e). From a distance, objects appear small, and yet when near, they appear large. What is important to note here is that although the analogy is visual, it is supposed to apply equally to our *value* judgments. Hence, for example, an object may appear as pleasurable/good, and hence desirable, at close proximity, and yet unappealing, and hence undesirable, when out of sight. Or again, a difficulty may appear as small and insignificant (or easy to overcome) from afar, and yet it may appear large and hence insurmountable and overwhelming from nearby.

This is important because it suggests that Protagoras' measure doctrine (that man is the measure of all things) potentially has a much wider scope than that suggested by Chappell's reading. For given what Socrates says in the *Protagoras*, the interpretation of 'appearances' could be wide enough in scope to include not only perceptual judgments, but also aesthetic and value judgments based on pleasure and pain, fear and other emotions. This would, in turn, give rise to an austere kind of subjectivism according to which all judgments (including moral and value judgments) are true just in case that is how they strike the person for whom they appear to be thus. Given that this view entails that all judgments based on how things appear to each agent are *ipso facto* true, objectivity - whether in moral, mathematical, practical, or any other sphere of knowledge - would thus become impossible. (See, e.g. in the *Theaetetus*, where Socrates claims that MD makes Protagoras' own claims to wisdom sound self-defeating, *Theaetetus* 161b-162a.) Evidently, then, MD leads to an extreme kind of solipsism that is absurd. It is unclear whether Protagoras ever intended for his measure doctrine to lead to such an austere form of subjectivism. What is clear, however, is that his measure doctrine allows for it.

¹⁵⁹ This is why Socrates thinks that Protagoras wants us to drop all talk of 'F is true of X for S', and replace it with simply with 'F is true of X'. For if we didn't, then as we saw earlier, it would lead to all kinds of contradictions. Protagoras' impetus for dropping 'for S', then, is to

reduction becomes warranted, such that, how things appear to be become how things, in actual fact, are:

$(A_S) = X$ appears to be F for S .

is equivalent to:

$(T_S) = X$ is F for S (based on the infallibility of (A_S)).

This warrants our dropping “for S ” from (T_S) , such that an ontological claim is now derived from it:

$(O_S) = X$ is F .

Hence, (A_S) is reducible to (O_S) ; and this is presumably the ‘Truth’ that Protagoras wanted to share in his work *Truth*, which is referred to in the *Theaetetus*.¹⁶⁰ The measure doctrine (MD) simply means that each individual’s subjective appearances constitute the criterion of truth for any subsequent assertions that they make about the ontological status or properties of any given object. And if this is correct, then Protagoras’ notion of knowledge simply means that

$(K_S) = X$ is known by S to be F just in case $(A_S) X$ appears to be F for S .

In Socrates’ own words:

Perception, therefore, is always of something that is, and it is infallible, which suggests that it is knowledge.¹⁶¹

Therefore, what goes by the name of Protagorean relativism is, in fact, ultimately reducible to a crude form of subjectivism.¹⁶² What should be clear

avoid contradictions. However, the avoidance of contradiction, Socrates seems to suggest, comes at the cost of adopting an austere kind of subjectivism.

¹⁶⁰ See, also, *Cratylus* (385e): “Is the being or essence of each of them something *private* for each person, as Protagoras tells us? He says that “man is the measure of all things,” and that things *are* to me as they appear to me, and *are* to you as they appear to you. Do you agree, or do you believe that things have some *fixed* being or essence of their own?” [My emphasis.]

¹⁶¹ *Theaetetus* (152c).

from this is not that each individual is the author of their own truth, for that would suggest that there are different *kinds* of truth: mine and yours. Rather, there's only *one* kind of truth: mine.¹⁶³ This much is clear, but what has this subjectivism in common with Heraclitean metaphysics? In the next section, I will offer an account of how Plato links the Heraclitean flux theory with Protagoras' measure doctrine in his *Truth*.

4.2.3. *Scepticism and the Secret Doctrine*

In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates isn't just highly critical of Protagoras' *Truth* but also of a "secret doctrine" that it takes Protagoras' theory to be premised on. This secret doctrine, claims Socrates, is allegedly responsible for a host of views put forward by many prominent thinkers and poets, such as, Protagoras, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Epicarmus and Homer – "the whole succession of past sages (with the exception of Parmenides)";¹⁶⁴

Their starting-point – the one on which all that we were saying [about Protagoras] depends too – is that the universe is change and that *there is nothing but change*.¹⁶⁵

Moreover – and this is key - the doctrine claims that properties such as 'white' or 'large' or 'cold' do not exist anywhere; rather, they are born out of the union of two elements. These elements cannot themselves be termed objects *per se* since that would involve a commitment to the kind of stability that the doctrine denies (recall that *all* is change, including objects and their perceivers). Hence,

There are two kinds of change, which may be distinguished not by their frequency of occurrence (for both manifest in an infinite number of ways), but by their powers: one is active, the other is passive. The

¹⁶² Socrates objects that this kind of talk destroys the distinction between illusions and dreams, on the one hand, and reality, on the other, since, according to this Protagorean view, how things appears to be to someone (in a dream or a hallucination) is how things are (on the basis of their appearing thus to them). It is not Socrates' objections here that are important. The purpose of this section is merely to illustrate how, according to Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, Heraclitean metaphysics lead to various forms of relativism, subjectivism and ultimately to skepticism; and if followed to its logical conclusion, it leads to absurdity. *Theaetetus* (157e-158b).

¹⁶³ Plato mounts an attack on this claim in the *Theaetetus* by arguing that Protagoras' MD is in fact self-defeating. *Theaetetus* (161b-162a). See, also, *Cratylus* (386c) where Socrates claims that if Protagoras' MD in the *Truth* is true, then no one can be wise or foolish.

¹⁶⁴ *Theaetetus* (152e).

¹⁶⁵ *Theaetetus* (156a).

intercourse and friction of these two with each other give rise to an infinite number of offspring, which are always born as twins: there is the perceived thing and there is the perception.¹⁶⁶

Note that that which is perceived is born out of this union between the active and passive kinds of change; and so, for example, an eye may be an active kind of change, and an object that it comes in contact with, may be another. The eye does not perceive the 'whiteness' of the object; rather, whiteness and the perception of the whiteness are the twin offspring of two kinds of change (the eye and the object). And given that everything is change – nothing ever *is*, but rather always *coming to be* – this implies that the ontological status of properties is radically different from how we would normally conceive of them:

The colour white [for example] is nothing distinct in itself either outside your eyes or in your eyes – in fact, you may not locate it anywhere. If you did, it would have a position and it would be stable – in other words, it would not be undergoing a process of generation [or, 'coming to be'].¹⁶⁷

This is important. Not only is change the only reality, and the objects of reality are themselves constantly changing, but also properties aren't fixed either – they come into being and go out of existence with each union and intercourse between the passive and active elements of change in the universe. Crucially, however, they come and go *in relation to* two kinds of change: the passive and the active. Properties are the offspring of the intercourse of all things in the universe that fall under the active and passive kinds of change. Properties don't belong to things, they come to be and cease to be as a result of continuous and ever changing interactions between passive and active elements of change in the world.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ *Theaetetus* (156a-b).

¹⁶⁷ *Theaetetus* (153d-e).

¹⁶⁸ The union between active and passive kinds of change is akin to the ying-yan, or male-female pairs – except, unlike these, they are not constant or stable kinds or properties in any sense, for they themselves are change. One can sympathise with those who claim that the theory leads to all sorts of contradictions. For even the ascription of two *kinds* of change (passive and active) to this reality is underpinned by an assumption that there are two constant categories or kinds in the universe. If we attempt to defend the theory against this kind of objection by reminding the objector that they are two kinds of *change*, then our defense will still fall short of specifying how, if at all, can there be stable, constant 'kinds' in

Recall that Protagoras had relativised truth and knowledge to the perception each individual has. Recall also that he had premised his entire theory on the assumption that the same object, X , can appear as both F and not- F to different individuals. For example, wine may taste sweet to Simon but bitter to Oliver, who is ill. Or again, that the wind may feel warm to Simon, but cold to Oliver, who is feverish. But instead of endorsing the principle of the coincidence of opposites, which would state that the wind is both cold and not-cold, or that the wine is both sweet and not-sweet (bitter), Protagoras acknowledged that it leads to contradictions. To avoid the contradictions that this principle would yield, Protagoras relativised the truth of all statements to how things appear to each individual. What Protagoras' view entails, then, is that properties such as 'white', 'large' etc. have no specific location, just as the secret doctrine claims. For if each individual and their perceptions were the sole criterion for truth, then this picture raises important questions about the ontological status of objects and their properties. Indeed, it leads to bizarre conclusions – just like the example that Socrates gives of the colour white – about the status of properties. 'Smoothness', 'largeness', 'goodness', 'sweetness', 'beauty', etc. are never properties that *belong* to things – they are the bizarre ontological offspring of two kinds of change. Protagoras' *Truth*, then, relies on the secret doctrine's claim that all is change (just like Heracliteanism relies on it as a major starting premise in its overall argument).

Needless to say, the secret doctrine robs all objects in reality of their ability to provide the standard for truth. A reality or world characterized solely by change, with no kind of stability whatsoever underpinning it, bodes ill for truth and objectivity; for it fails to provide the kinds of stability necessary for it to play the role of acting as our criterion for truth. And if reality cannot play this role, then there is nothing left other than the individual perceivers who can play this role. If truth cannot come from the external world since

a universe of radical, all-encompassing, constant change. In other words, substance monism *must* be right; and cognition depends on its being true.

See, e.g. Spinoza's *Ethics* (especially Part I, Props. I-XXXVI). B. Spinoza, *On the Improvement of the Understanding, The Ethics, Correspondence* (v2), R. Elwes (trans.), (New York: Dover Publications, 1955); and, the second half of Plato's *Parmenides*.

that world fails to provide it, it becomes relative to each individual's perception of how things are. The world is no longer that independent standard for truth, its criterion. Rather, truth is adjusted to each individual's take on the world, or on particular matters.¹⁶⁹ And whatever that world may be, nothing could be said of it *except* what each individual perceives *for himself or herself*. Therefore, the picture that emerges from the secret doctrine is one of a radical, unrelenting skepticism.¹⁷⁰ But unlike contemporary skepticism that deals with puzzles and questions about the possibility of our epistemic *access* to the external world – that is, to the world beyond our immediate, subjective perceptions and experiences – this ancient form of skepticism denies that there is anything there to be accessed in the first place – ‘appearance’ is all that there is.

4.3. Radical Flux and The Impossibility of Intelligible Speech

For Plato, then, ontological instability is both, the logical consequence and the defining feature of the metaphysics of change that underpin the secret doctrine.¹⁷¹ This doctrine is, in turn, the starting premise for many philosophical views prevalent at Plato's time. It is important to note that Plato takes this metaphysical worldview to pose a threat to our ability to acquire knowledge and discover facts that are objectively true. But how it does so, I suggest, is connected to the possibility of intelligible speech.

There has been much discussion about Plato's views on the implications of the secret doctrine for epistemology, but less has been said about its implication for the possibility of concept formation and intelligible speech. And yet this too is a logical consequence of the secret doctrine's theory of

¹⁶⁹ On this picture, not only will each individual's perspective be unique, but each single experience or perception they have, and each judgement they make that are based on those perceptions, will also be unique. In a sense, of course, all our experiences are unique to *us* and *us* alone. This need not, on its own, imply any sort of scepticism. However, whereas a more optimistic view would allow that we do have common grounds on the basis of which we can then form similar and objective judgements, this secret doctrine of constant change doesn't. Our everyday, common sense world-view, for instance, assumes that there is a reality or world independent from us, which could then unify our judgements, and thus bring stability to them. Or that there are mathematical and logical truths penetrable through reason and accessible to all rational beings, that could then stabilise our judgements about what is or isn't true.

¹⁷⁰ See, *Theaetetus* (160b-d).

¹⁷¹ See, *Theaetetus* (179d-184b).

radical, constant change. In fact, our inability to identify stable properties that belong to objects has the unwelcome effect of producing yet another inability: to classify object into kinds. And if we are unable to classify objects in the world into kinds, then the schema of naming them on the basis of their classifications won't be possible either.¹⁷² In other words, concept formation, and object identification on the basis of concept manipulation, won't be possible.

To understand the extent to which the conception of constant change and radical flux threatens our ability to name things, and hence threatens the possibility of intelligible speech, let us take a closer look at how Socrates describes the conception of a 'property' and 'perception' of a property, according to the flux theorist. Recall that there are two kinds of elements in this kind of world: passive and active change; and that properties and perception are born (or come into existence) as these two elements come into contact with each other. So an eye may be an example of active change and a stone may be an example of passive change. When the eye comes into contact with a stone, a twin offspring is born: the stone *becomes* white (*not* whiteness) and the eye *becomes* a seeing eye (*not* sight). Hence, out of this union, both the eye's coming to see the stone (which has now become white *because* of its interaction with the eye) and the stone's becoming white, come into being. In fact, even the notion of 'active' and 'passive' change is a relative notion that lacks any stability, for something *becomes* an active kind of change through contact with another, which, in turn, *becomes* passive. Yet the passive elements may become active in relation to yet another object in their vicinity, and so forth.¹⁷³ This has a devastating implication for our use of certain verbs and concepts in our speech. As Socrates explains it to Theaetetus:

The upshot of all this is that nothing *is* in its own right but is always being generated in some relation. The verb 'to be' should be deleted from all contexts, despite the fact that habit and ignorance often force us to employ it, and did so even in our discussion. But, the experts are telling us we shouldn't, nor should we connive at 'it' or 'his' or 'mine' or 'this' or 'that' or any other term which suggests stability. We should

¹⁷² *Theaetetus* (157a).

¹⁷³ *Theaetetus* (156d-157a).

instead adapt our speech to the way new things are, and describe them as undergoing generation, production, destruction and alteration ... this is how we should talk, not just where the constituents of things are concerned but also about conglomerations of many constituents, such as the conglomerates which are called 'a man', 'a stone', and each creature and entity of any kind.¹⁷⁴

It is difficult to imagine how we could say that something *is* such and such if things are always *becoming*. Surely, if things are always *becoming*, then nothing ever *is*; and if nothing ever *is*, then how can we say anything about any object? And if we can't say anything, then we can't think anything either; and the converse would also hold true: if we can't think anything, then we can't say anything. A metaphysical system that does not allow any kind of stability for the attribution of properties - and classification of objects into kinds on the basis of those properties - is one that would make naming and concept formation, acquisition and manipulation, equally impossible. As Waterfield puts it, it is "unclear how an out-and-out fluxist would communicate at all".¹⁷⁵ Therefore, any metaphysical outlook that is premised upon the secret doctrine of constant change will make language impossible. And if concepts are the mental correlative of words, statements the correlative of thoughts, and thinking the correlative of reasoning aloud (i.e. a form of speech), then none of these would be possible either. But they are possible, and so is communication via language; hence, the secret doctrine leads to absurdity and must be rejected. Or, so it seems.

It is worth noting here that the Heraclitean theory of the coexistence of opposites is a logical conclusion of the secret doctrine's theory of extreme change. For if properties and perception are always born out of the union of two types of change (e.g. an eye and a stone), and if, for me, the perception of a white stone is a unique and private experience that occurs relative to my eyes and the stone only, then this allows that relative to another perceiver, the stone might look different. The easiest way to see this is to examine it with properties such as 'tall', 'large', 'beautiful' or 'good'. Recall that a property and a perception of a property is a pair that is born through the

¹⁷⁴ *Theaetetus* (157a).

¹⁷⁵ R. Waterfield, in *Theaetetus*, R. Waterfield, (trans.), op. cit., p. 40, n. 2.

union of two types of change, the passive and the active (for example, an object, such as a table; and, an agent eye). Moreover, the property of the object (for example, that it is 'solid') does not belong to the object (the table) but is rather relative to the special occasion (the particular time and context) that brought the agent and object together – a union from which both the property (being solid) and perception of the object having that property (i.e. seeing a solid table) are born. There is no such thing as the table itself being solid. Rather, the table is solid *because* I see it.¹⁷⁶ On this view, an object might be beautiful to me.¹⁷⁷ However, to another agent, the same object may be ugly. This is because the property of 'not-beautiful' or 'ugly' may be the one that was born out of the union between that agent and the object. Hence, in one sense, the object is both: beautiful and not beautiful, relative to each perceiver. And yet, in another sense, the object is neither beautiful nor not-beautiful, since properties, we are told, don't actually belong to objects, but are born once that object comes into contact with, say, a perceiver. From here, it is a small step to solipsism: the view that the self is all that can be known to exist.¹⁷⁸

In light of this we can make a useful distinction. The theory of flux or change refers to two kinds of flux or change: *diachronic flux*, which effects how things change *over time*, and *synchronic flux*, which refers to how things change, at any given or particular time, *relative to context or comparison*.¹⁷⁹ And as we have seen, the secret doctrine entails that both types of change are occurring

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Schrödinger's cat, quantum indeterminacy and the observer's paradox. According to Quantum theory, something can occupy both opposite states (so, Schrödinger's cat in the famous Schrödinger experiment could be both dead and alive at one and the same time, whilst not being observed).

¹⁷⁷ Recall that, on Protagoras' account, for example, how something *seems* to me, is how that thing *is*, in actual fact, and what appears to me to be true, *is* true; and hence, my subjective phenomenal experiences are reality.

¹⁷⁸ If nothing could be said of objects in and of themselves – i.e. if their properties and identities are, strictly speaking, always relative to the individual perceiver – then those properties and identities come into existence whenever an object is being perceived, or coming into contact with something that brings the said property of the object into existence. If this is the case – if properties and identities come into existence and go out of existence relative to each perceiver – then there is a reality for each perceiver. Either this, or there isn't such a thing as an independent reality at all; reality is merely a neutral, malleable, vacuous substance that *becomes* this or that in given times and contexts, relevant to each perceiver, or each subject's experiences of it. In a sense, this is the absurd conclusion that Protagoras' theory leads to. See, *Theaetetus* (160b-d).

¹⁷⁹ C. Shields, *Ancient Philosophy*, second edition, (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 11.

simultaneously in all objects in reality. Things become 'tall' or 'short' relative to this, but not that object, in this but not that context. In addition to this, given that no stability underlies all the change, things are constantly changing over time, all the time, and everywhere.

As Plato presents it, Protagoras' *Truth* is an attempt for the sophist to, as it were, have his cake and eat it. We are told that two kinds of absurdities arise from Protagoras' MD:

1. It denies the possibility of false beliefs or false claims;¹⁸⁰ and,
2. It denies the possibility of assigning qualities and properties to objects, whether conceptually (i.e. in thought) or verbally (i.e. in speech, or through naming them).

It is important to remember that Protagoras' MD is presented in the *Theaetetus* as a consequence of the great sophist's acceptance of the secret doctrine's radical change principle – the idea that *all* is change (diachronically and synchronically). And that the principle of the coincidence of opposites is a natural consequence of the principle that all is change; for if all is change, then it is unavoidable that things will be both *F* and not-*F*. It is also worth noting that Plato presents Protagoras' MD as aiming to solve the contradictions and anomalies caused by the parent theory (i.e. by the secret doctrine) – anomalies that arise, in particular, out of the coincidence of opposites. Therefore, Plato portrays Protagoras as being both: a follower of the secret doctrine and a defender of it.

However, saying that a stone is white *for me* but may not be *for you* makes not only the properties and their perceptions relative to each individual, but also their classification into kinds, and hence their names – in other words, properties, qualities, kinds, classification schema and names, would *all* become relative to each individual's subjective phenomenal experiences. If things are so different to each of us, then each of us lives in a private world

¹⁸⁰ *Theaetetus* (157e-158d).

that may look radically different from each agent's point of view.¹⁸¹ So much so that we will never be able to speak about the same thing, and we will necessarily speak past each other. Our ability to acquire language necessitates that we have shared access, cognitively speaking, to the same things. For example, when a mother points at an apple and tells her child: 'Look! Red apple', she relies upon the world doing her and her child a kindness: remaining constant in some sense. Moreover, she relies upon it for being equally accessible to both of them: similarly accessible to her mind and to her child's mind. Finally, she relies upon the fact that – in some important respects – there are shared features between her mind and her child's mind which then give rise to more-or-less similar cognitive abilities.¹⁸² It is then on the basis of all these conditions obtaining that she can safely assume that he is capable of seeing the red apple and cognising it – in some rudimentary way at least – as she does. Take away these conditions, and the possibility of naming, or shared discourse, would not be possible.

Now, add to this Heraclitus' earlier claim that no one can step into the same river twice, since not only the river flows and changes from one moment to the next, but also the person stepping into it, and what you have is not even a stable conception of each individual that can remain constant in space or time. Out goes, then, the idea (and hence possibility) that each one of us could have a private language based on our private individual experiences; for no stable conception of an individual (over the course of time, or motion in space) is possible either since we are diachronically and synchronically changing all the time. Identity attribution (whether personal or otherwise) becomes impossible; and as a consequence, acts of identification (whether

¹⁸¹ See, also, *Cratylus* (385e) where Socrates says:

Is the being or essence of each of them something *private* for each person, as Protagoras tells us? He says that "man is the measure of all things," and that things *are* to me as they appear to me, and *are* to you as they appear to you. Do you agree, or do you believe that things have some *fixed* being or essence of their own?
[My emphasis.]

¹⁸² I'm not denying, of course, that a child's mind will be considerably underdeveloped by comparison to an adult's. However, the fact that it is underdeveloped need not rule out that there are features that it shares with an adult's mind, and hence, that there are cognitive abilities that can be preformed by both the child and adult, albeit it to varying degrees. Therefore, it is important to note that the difference between a child's cognitive abilities and an adult's is a matter of degree, not a matter of a difference in kind (as would be the case when considering the differences between, say, the mind of a child and that of a dog).

self-identification, other-identification or object-identification) would also become impossible.

With this we can conclude that Protagoras' MD does not escape the kind of absurdity that plagues the secret doctrine despite Protagoras' attempt to relativise all experience each agent by way of avoiding the supposed contradictions that would arise in the way that we speak. For even on his picture, concept-acquisition, concept-application, and hence naming and intelligible speech, become an entirely private affair and no two individuals could ever possibly have a meaningful exchange. But we *do* speak intelligibly, and we *do* have the capacity to understand others and be understood by them. Indeed, thinking – if we follow Plato's lead and take it to mean no more than each individual's dialogue with themselves, or with their own soul – could never be possible. Protagoras' MD, then, and the secret doctrine upon which it is premised, must both be false.

4.4. Objections and Responses

There are two possible objections to the claim that the flux theory (and the cognate coincidence of opposites) threaten our ability to attribute qualities and properties to objects, acquire shared concepts about them, and to the idea that we can engage in meaningful discourse. The first objection is premised upon the belief that we have misunderstood Heraclitus' ideas because of some spurious fragments that have been handed down to us from antiquity, and which have erroneously been taken to have been written by him. The second objection focuses on questions about the prevalence of change in the natural world, and from this it argues that change is compatible with objectivity, knowledge and hence, the possibility of intelligible speech. However, both these objections are not valid since they are both premised on a mistaken assumption about the degree and prevalence of change in the Heraclitean world of flux.

4.4.1. The River Objection

Heraclitus famously claimed no one steps into the same river twice. In Plato's *Cratylus* we are told that in saying "everything gives way and nothing

stands fast,' he is "likening the things that are to the flowing (*rhoe*) of a river", and on the basis of it concluding that: "you cannot step into the same river twice".¹⁸³ Three extracts where the river passage appears have been handed down to us since antiquity. These are:

B12. *potamoisi toisin autoisin embainousin hetera kai hetera hudata epirrei.*

On those stepping into rivers staying the same other and other waters flow. (Cleanthes from Arius Didymus from Eusebius)

B49a. *potamois tois autois ...*

Into the same rivers we step and do not step, we are and are not. (Heraclitus Homericus)

B91[a]. *potamôi ... tôi autôi ...*

It is not possible to step twice into the same river according to Heraclitus, or to come into contact twice with a mortal being in the same state. (Plutarch)¹⁸⁴

Traditionally, following Plato's interpretation, these passages have come to be understood as meaning that neither the river nor the person stepping into the river, ever remains the same. This, then, has been taken to be paradoxical since it is never the same person who steps into the river, nor indeed is it the same river that is being stepped into. Hence, the traditional reading that we have inherited claims that Heraclitus meant that no one (person) steps into the same (identical) river twice (since both the person and river are forever changing).

However, some have argued that this traditional reading is inaccurate since it is based on spurious writings attributed to Heraclitus. Of the three extracts quoted above, Heraclitus himself has allegedly written only the first – the other two were probably written by different authors who thought they were paraphrasing him, but in fact misrepresented his ideas. If B12 is genuine, it tends to disqualify the other two. B49a, for example, is written in Attic, not

¹⁸³ Plato, 'Cratylus', C.D.C. Reeve (trans.), in *Plato: Complete Works*, J.M. Cooper (ed.), (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

¹⁸⁴ D. W. Graham, 'Heraclitus', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/heraclitus/>> [Retrieved: 24/11/2015.]

Heraclitus' Ionic dialect in which B12 is written. Moreover, the principle of the coincidence of opposites contained in B12 need not lead to contradictions, nor entail sceptical conclusions about the impossibility of knowledge, as it has been traditionally argued.¹⁸⁵

Indeed, for Graham, B12 makes perfectly good sense; and although it may appear as paradoxical, it is not in fact so. Key to the misunderstanding seems to be the connection between 'same rivers' and 'other waters' – they are either the 'same' or 'other', but the river cannot allegedly be both. And yet, that is precisely what a river, by definition, seems to be: a body of water that consists of many flowing waters. If it were any different – if it did not consist of many flowing waters – it would not be a river *per se*, it would be either a pond or a lake or a dry streambed. Hence, the philosophical message contained in B12 is not the same as that contained in the others: here, what is remarkable is the nature of the river: it is the kind of thing that remains what it is by constantly changing what is contained within it. As Graham puts it:

Heraclitus derives a striking insight from an everyday encounter. Further, he supplies, via the ambiguity in the first clause, another reading: on the same people stepping into rivers, other and other waters flow. With this reading it is people who remain the same in contrast to changing waters, as if the encounter with a flowing environment helped to constitute the perceiving subject as the same. ... B49a, by contrast, contradicts the claim that one can step into the same rivers (and also asserts that claim), and B91[a], like Plato in the *Cratylus*, denies that one can step in twice. Yet if the rivers remain the same, one surely can step in twice—not into the same waters, to be sure, but into the same rivers.¹⁸⁶

And if this is correct, then the 'river' is constituted by the changing 'waters'; and it remains the very same 'river' despite the changing 'waters'. Hence, according to Graham, B12 can genuinely be attributed to Heraclitus, while the other two fragments are incompatible with this genuine one. If Graham's interpretation is correct, and the message in B12 is different from B49a and B91[a], then it is the allegedly spurious fragments that lead to contradiction and not the genuine B12 attributable to Heraclitus himself. The 'river',

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

Graham argues, is a constant, though the 'waters' are not. More importantly, however, if the river is indeed a 'constant' as Graham argues, then the claim that Heraclitus' flux theory necessarily leads to the kind of scepticism about the possibility of intelligible speech and meaningful discourse, is false. For it would show that despite the rampant change that characterises Heraclitus' system, quality and property-attribution, and concept formation or acquisition, are indeed possible.

That said, Graham's argument does not go through; for there is an underlying assumption here - one that is arguably mistaken - which imposes features on Heraclitus' world which it takes it to share with ours - features that cannot, on Heraclitus' account, constitute a part of the world of flux. Although Graham's charitable reading of B12 may be reasonable by *our* contemporary accounts of change in *our* conception of the physical world, nonetheless, it does not sit well with what Heraclitus had claimed elsewhere. Remember that he had fiercely advocated that *all* is change - that is to say, *everything, everywhere, in all respects, is always changing*. This is not the kind of world in which one can cherry-pick what changes and what doesn't, when it does and when it's doesn't, or in what context it would and in what context it wouldn't. Indeed, Heraclitus even disallowed saying that all is made out of fire since that too would introduce a conception of something being 'constant' amid the sea of change - something he did not wish to allow (indeed he *could* not allow, if *all* is *always, everywhere and in every context and respect* indeed changing). Hence, we were told that everything is symbolised or characterised by fire (i.e. acquires the instability, constant change and every-changing character of fire but isn't itself constituted by fire as such). How, then, on such an extreme view of change, is any action, such as the positing of a constant or fixed concept, such as 'river', going to be possible? Especially that even *I* am not the same, from one moment to the next. For even if 'river' means "flowing waters", then we are suggesting that there is a constant - the 'river' itself. Likewise, my ability to recognise this river for what it is, name it, and communicate information about it to other, itself relies on the assumption that part of me never changes - it continues from one moment to the other, providing continuity to my experiences and to my

identity. Indeed, the same could be said of fire, human being, and all other objects in nature. Things cannot be changing in all respects, all the time, otherwise – without some stability – assigning properties to them, applying concepts or identities to them, naming them and identifying them, would simply not be possible. Something constant must remain.

Pervasive change of this kind is a threat to the notion of identity attribution, and the identification of objects on the basis of their identities – i.e. to our ability to recognise things. For example, my identity relies on part of me remaining the same over time. Our ability to identify human beings relies on some kind of ‘sameness’ that members of the species share – some common defining features across time and space. As we saw, Heraclitus’ metaphysical world-view implies the radical theory of change that Plato had equated with the secret doctrine: the idea that *all* is change, hence things are always *becoming* and never *are*. From this it followed that property, concept and word attribution – in other words, *identity* attribution, whether in *thought* or *speech*, was simply impossible.¹⁸⁷ Recall also that the concepts of flux and change involved here aren’t just of the diachronic type: it’s not just that the ‘flowing waters’ are making the river constantly change over time, ‘river’, as the identity of particular streams of water that I may be looking at a particular time, is itself not a constant. All is change, so ‘river’ is how it appears to me, and for me, ‘river’ is what it *is*. But to another perceiver, things may be different. This was the idea contained in the synchronic conception of change, according to which properties, identities and attributes shift relative to context and comparison. And if all this is correct, then I too, as the subject of these experiences and perceptions, am changing. I change

¹⁸⁷ Puzzles about identity are closely connected to the concept of change. Cf. the Campanile di San Marco (the bell tower of St. Mark’s Basilica in Venice, Italy). Built originally as a watchtower as early as the 9th century, but the construction was not completed until the 12th century. Since then, it has suffered damage on numerous occasions (for example, it was severely damaged by lightning in 1388, set on fire in 1417, and again severely damaged by fire in 1489, to name but a few occasions). Finally, on July 14th 1902, it collapsed and was completely destroyed. It was subsequently rebuilt in 1912, allegedly exactly as it was before the collapse. Like the river, which is constituted by many flowing waters, the campanile is made out of the bricks, stones and wood that make it what it is. Does change in these elements make it the same campanile that it was before the extensive renovations and rebuilds, or does it lose some of its identity because of the change? If it retains its identity despite the change, then what is it that holds that identity in place?

both diachronically and synchronically. By the same token, then, I – the person stepping into the river – cannot possibly step into the same river twice; for neither will the river be the same, nor will I be the same by the time that happens. And now, contrary to what had been suggested by Graham, regardless of whether fragments B49a and B91[a] are genuine or spurious, the message contained within them is the same as the allegedly genuine fragment B12. Given that all is change, change must occur both diachronically and synchronically; and if that is correct, then no constants such as ‘river’ or even ‘I’ as a person is ever possible.¹⁸⁸ Solipsism – the idea that the self is all there is – already assumes a constant: the self. But any theory that claims that change is so persuasive so as to infect both subject and object, would necessarily deny the possibility of the existence of a ‘self’; for then it would have to assume that there is one constant, stable element in nature/reality (i.e. the ‘self’) whose phenomenal experiences, past and present, can form a cohesive and coherent whole forming its personal and phenomenal identity.

Therefore, the river objection’s claim that the river’ remains constant is built upon the assumption that Heraclitus was claiming that although some things change, others remain constant. It defends its view by claiming that some of Heraclitus’ fragments which would indicate that he means that “everything flows” - the person stepping into the river included – are spurious. However,

¹⁸⁸ I said earlier that, by our contemporary standards of what counts as change in the physical world (conceptions not as radical as the ancient ones under discussion here), the problem of identification may not be such a serious one. What I meant is that, on our contemporary views, the question of identity doesn’t become such a pressing one. I did not mean to imply, however, that the concept of ‘change’ itself does not give rise to serious puzzles and difficulties about identity. As I suggested in the previous note, our conception of the identities of buildings and structures, for examples, can lead to puzzles in cases where they undergo modifications over time, or where they have had to be rebuilt from scratch. The same, however, could be said about questions of *personal* identity over time. What is it that keeps *me* constant in time and space? What if I have parts of my brain removed after a tragic accident – am I still the same person? If I am not *identical* to how I was before, do I, nonetheless, have the same *identity*? Surely, ‘identical’ and ‘identity’ go hand-in-hand to some extent, and the former must, to some extent at least, constrain conceptions of the latter. These questions have stayed with us since ancient times; and there are lively debates in metaphysics about these issues. For a view that claims that so long as my physical body remains intact, I remain the same person, see, Judith Jarvis Thomson’s paper, ‘People and Their Bodies’ in *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics*, T. Sider, J. Hawthorne & D. Zimmerman (eds.), (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), pp. 155-176. For a critical response to Thomson’s paper, see Derek Parfit’s paper ‘Person’s, Bodies, and Human Beings’, in *ibid.* pp. 177-208.

those fragments seem to stand in perfect harmony with Heraclitus flux principle according to which everything flows; for he didn't claim that *some* things flow, whilst others don't - he'd unequivocally claimed that *everything* flows. Hence regardless of whether Heraclitus wrote those allegedly spurious fragments or not, neither 'river' nor 'I' can remain constant – not ontologically, since everything changes from one moment to the other; nor epistemologically, since nothing remains stable enough for long enough to allow for cognition.

4.4.2. The Objection via Moderate Change

Another possible objection to the claim that radical flux would eliminate the possibility of quality and property attribution and the identification of objects is the objection from moderate change. According to this objection, it isn't clear why a more moderate account of change shouldn't be able to cope with some of the problems that pointed out above. After all, things don't change *all the time, everywhere, and in every respect*. Hence, the conception of change, and that of the possibility of objectivity in thought and speech, can indeed be reconciled; and if they can be reconciled, then they are not mutually exclusive, as it may have been suggested thus far.

However, like the previous objection, there is an underlying assumption here too about the similarities between our world, on the one hand, and the kind of world that Heraclitus' flux theory assumes, on the other – similarities that do not exist. To clarify, recall our discussion earlier about the devastating consequences of the idea of radical change for the possibility of identity formation, attribution and recognition. The claim that the natural world around us does not involve radical change, but only moderate change confuses two issues: (i) a benign conception of change, and (ii) an ontologically and epistemically malignant one. The former is only possible within a world in which change is *not* prevalent - in other words, in a world in which some things remain stable and constant somewhere, some of the time, and in some respects. For example, our contemporary conception of change in the natural world is rendered benign, to no small extent, by a material monism according to which matter is the unifying substance

underlying all change. It is then our reliance on this stability that makes scientific investigation and scientific knowledge possible; for without it how could we assign physical qualities to properties, measure and monitor them over time, or have them stable enough such that we could then recognise and identify them? Indeed, both our common-sense and scientific world views naturally assume the falsity of Heraclitus' flux theory: radical change of the kind that Heraclitus and secret doctrine advocated would lead to an ontologically bizarre world in which nothing ever remains still enough for long enough – agents and observers alike – and hence, no one and nothing is the same, from one moment to the next. Quality, property, and identity attribution and/or recognition are simply not possible in this kind of world.

Therefore, like the river objection before it, the objection via moderate change, in assuming that not everything is always changing in every respect, is in fact acknowledging the falsity of Heraclitus' theory of radical flux. Both objections rest on the idea that change need not threaten knowledge, but both objections ignore the fact that knowledge is only possible in a world where some kind of stability coexists alongside the change. It is, therefore, not change that allows for knowledge, but rather stability. The confusion arises out of thinking that just as *we* can happily accommodate a conception of change that sits comfortably alongside objectivity and knowledge, so too it must be possible for Heraclitus to do so. In making this assumption it ignores that our common-sense world-view does not deny stability: it does not claim that *all* is change, as Heraclitus had done. Indeed, the objection via moderate change, in saying that our world-view can reconcile change with objectivity and knowledge, is, perhaps unwittingly, assuming Plato's answer to this problem. As we shall see in the next chapter, instead of dismissing the flux theory out of hand, Plato reconstructs it such that it constitutes part of a two-tiered metaphysical view of reality characterised by the duality of change and stability – that is to say, Forms and particulars.

Conclusion

I explored in this chapter some of the important and prevalent metaphysical and ontological assumptions about the nature of the natural world and the

nature of reality prevalent in Plato's time – in particular, the Heraclitean theory of flux, the secret doctrine and Protagoras' measure doctrine, as discussed in Plato's *Theaetetus*.

We saw how Heraclitus' flux theory espouses a radical conception of change that is so pervasive that it logically leads to the principle of the coincidence of opposite. This principle, along with the idea that everything changes all the time, in turn, pose difficulties for our ability to speak coherently of something being a certain way, or possessing a certain quality. To avoid the conundrums arising from this theory of flux, Protagoras' measure doctrine – as presented in the *Theaetetus* – can be viewed as a defence of it. The theory is, in effect, attempts to solve some of the anomalies that arise out of saying that something is both *F* and not-*F*. It does so by accepting the theory of radical flux – properties and qualities do not belong to objects, they are relative to each individual. In other words, truth and objectivity are not something that the world can provide: they aren't the sort of things that come from without. Rather, each individual (i.e. their subjective experiences) is the arbiter of truth and validity in thought or speech. Therefore, man is the measure of all things.

This, however, as we saw, was problematic. At a superficial level, Protagoras' measure doctrine would lead to the kind of solipsism that fails to explain our ability to speak intelligibility to each other. At a deeper level, it fails to explain our ability to even develop a form of communication at all, whether inter or intra-personally. If Plato did genuinely believe that Protagoras' measure doctrine is premised upon the secret doctrine of radical change, then this explains why he thought that it leads to absurdities by making concept and language acquisition impossible. But we know that concept and language acquisition are possible, and Plato knew that too – intelligible speech *is* possible. Therefore, both the secret doctrine of radical flux, in addition to Protagoras' measure doctrine upon which it is premised, must both be false.

The aim of discussing Heraclitus' views, and Protagoras' attempt to complement it with his measure doctrine, was to offer a sound grasp of the background against which Plato goes to construct his theory of Forms and the theory of recollection. It is only when we understand some of the difficulties that he faced, that we can then come to adequately interpret, and perhaps even appreciate, some of the theories that he puts forward; for without this context, some key philosophical moves that he makes in dialogues such as the *Meno*, *Phaedo* and *Republic* would, at best, pass us by unnoticed, or at worse, appear to us as metaphysically extravagant, unnecessary or downright bizarre. In other words, to see his solutions in the light that he wanted us to, we must see the problems that they were meant to solve. While this chapter explored those problems, the next explores his solutions.

We saw that the view of reality prevalent at Plato's time does not allow the possibility of concept formation and the classification of objects into kinds. This is a threat to objectivity and truth. Plato's strategy for undermining this theory was to follow it to its logical conclusion and to show that it is absurd. The theory renders cognition and intelligible speech impossible. But they are possible, so what must reality be like, and what is the foundation of truth if we, and the nature that we are a part of, are indeed in constant flux?

In the next chapter, I will explore Plato's alternative view of mind and reality, through the theory of Forms and the theory of recollection, where I will show how they play a fundamental role in Plato's epistemology and what he saw as the necessary preconditions for knowledge acquisition.

Chapter 5

Reality & Cognition II: The Bountiful Mind

The aim of this chapter is to explain how Plato's theory of Forms is an attempt to meet the epistemological challenges that were raised by the theory of flux, as discussed in the last chapter. I will argue that Forms have two very specific functions in Plato's metaphysics: (i) an ontological one: to cause particulars to be what they are; and (ii) an epistemological one: to cause basic concepts in the mind whilst the soul is in a disincarnate state, which are then recollected after birth. This second function is key, for it is the route or path that Plato carves out for our mind to gain access to Forms (reality), and hence, to have access to a criterion for truth.

Accordingly, in this chapter, I begin by looking at what it would take to solve some of the challenges raised in the last chapter. Following this, I will offer a brief account of the distinction between Forms and particulars. I then turn to their ontological and epistemological functions, focusing on the central importance of Forms, and recollection of Forms, for the possibility of cognition and truth-recognition. Finally, I will consider an objection via hybrid sources of cognition, and show how it rests on a misunderstanding of the kind of innatism that Plato puts forward via his theory of recollection.

5.1. Forms and Flux

The last chapter detailed the epistemological challenges and untenable consequences that can arise from the theory of flux. In particular, it explored how the principle of the coincidence of opposites – which arises from the flux theory – leads to all sorts of contradictions when we attempt to ascribe properties to objects, or when we attempt to point out their qualities. The wind is both hot and cold at one and the same time; the baker is both guilty

and innocent, at one and the same time; and so forth. We can never objectively claim what something *is* if the world and its contents are always *becoming* something other than they were from one moment to the next. But we do make judgements; and furthermore, we assume that these judgements could be true. This is a challenge to the flux theory: an anomaly to the paradigm of flux.

In light of this, Protagoras' measure doctrine could be viewed as an attempt to provide an explanation of the anomaly in a manner that accords with the general view of the world as being in constant flux. In this sense, then, his measure doctrine is both, a continuation of the flux theory, and a defence against one of the main challenges facing it. If I am the measure of all truth, then where the wind seems cold to me, it *is* cold: my point of view is the only one of genuine epistemic consequence.

However, despite Protagoras' ingenious attempt at deflecting the charge of incoherence away from the theory of flux, the difficulty remains. Indeed, his measure doctrine serves to add to the charge of incoherence since it nicely brings out the solitary and private aspects of the account of cognition that the theory of flux is accused of. The kind of world that two theories now describe would make inter-personal discourse impossible. If my truth and your truth are not the same truth, then either there is no truth, or there is a truth for every single one of us; and if that were the case, then in pointing towards an object, no one will ever be speaking of the same thing and everyone must always be speaking past one another. Furthermore, a world characterised by diachronic change may be slowed down so as to allow for property and quality attribution, but when the conception of synchronic change is added to the mix, the resulting view of the world becomes one in which nothing simply 'is', and everything is always, everywhere, and in every respect 'becoming' something other than what it is. In other words, nothing is ever still enough for us to even so much as name them and recognizably identify them. In this world, concept-acquisition, and hence language-acquisition, would simply not be possible.

Given that we do speak intelligibly, both concept and language acquisition must be possible. Plato's task now is to explain just how this is possible. In other words, he needs to provide an alternative account of reality that captures the intuitions provided by the flux theory and go beyond it, by explaining the anomaly. Plato needs to propose an alternative paradigm – one that can cope with all the difficulties and challenges that face the flux theory, anticipate any new ones that may arise, and provide adequate explanations to these as well.

Faced with these challenges, Plato's task is to rescue knowledge and objectivity in thought and speech. This involves finding a criterion for truth and objectivity. One option would be to reject the theory of change outright, provide an antithesis to Heracliteanism and the secret doctrine that it entails, and claim that reality is unchanging. Parmenides is famed for making a similar move, but his theory is equally problematic. Plato's task, then, involves providing an alternative to both these extremes: to introduce something that would bring about some sense of stability into the world of change; and thus, to provide the necessary criterion for truth, and reinstate the possibility of objective knowledge and objectively true statements of fact. But providing an account of reality that includes this kind of stability and permanence, whilst also doing justice to our intuitions about the presence of change and activity in the world requires a delicate balancing act – one that Plato executes with great philosophical panache.

How Plato does this, I suggest, is by providing an important metaphysical distinction between the two realms of reality: the realm of Forms and realm of particulars. The realm of Forms is the realm of eternal, timeless, unchanging reality. By contrast, the realm of particulars is the material realm of all that is bound by space-time; it is a transient and temporary realm that is characterised by change. Indeed, it is as if Plato has taken Heraclitus' thesis that 'all is change', and Parmenides' antithesis that 'all is One', and hence nothing ever really changes, and put them together so as to produce a synthesis of their opposing views: a double-aspect reality in which a temporal world of change sits alongside the unchanging, eternal world of

Forms. The aim of doing so seems to be that he wishes to preserve the intuitions about change being a defining feature of the natural world around us, whilst also being able to explain how cognition, language-acquisition and the ability to make objective claims about ourselves and the world are all indeed possible. To see how Plato does this, let us briefly consider why Parmenides' antithesis fails.

The antithesis of change is absolute stagnation, inertia, sameness and unity. A metaphysical system built on the antithesis of change, however, would lead to equally paradoxical and absurd conclusions. Take, for instance, Parmenides' attempt to argue that all is One (i.e. that reality is characterised by unity), and that it is motionless. He famously made an attempt to counter Heraclitean flux by claiming that thought and speech necessarily entail that things *are* – not that things are constantly *becoming*. His argument can be summarised into three steps. First, he pointed out that whatever object or thing someone thinks or speaks about, that object or thing must exist. Nothingness is a vacuous concept, and hence, if a thing is-not, then it cannot be conceived of by the mind, let alone spoken about. Hence, whenever we think or we speak of something, we do so about 'a thing' that we assume exists in some sense or other. The proper object of thought and speech is what *is* – since what *is-not* (nothingness) is not a possible object of thought or speech.¹⁸⁹ Second, and on the basis of the first, he claims that to say that something comes into being or goes out of being would entail the thought that there was a time during which the change came about; and this further entails the idea that there was a time at which the object did not exist. But we already saw that to speak or think of anything, it must exist. Therefore, anything that *is* cannot come into existence: it cannot *come to be*, or *become*.¹⁹⁰ Third, and this seems reasonable given the first two points, all *becoming* – that is to say, all change – is an illusion.¹⁹¹ Parmenides' antithesis to change, however, is problematic. It is not so much his monism – the claim that all is One, or that there is a unity underlying reality – that makes it problematic.

¹⁸⁹ G. Kirk & J. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1971), p. 276 (350 - Fr. 8, I.26, Simplicius *Phys.* 145, 27).

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 269 (344 – Fr. 2, Proclus in *Tim.* I, 345, 18 Diehl).

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 273 (Fr. 8, Simplicius *Phys.* 145, I).

Rather, what is unconvincing is his starting premise, where he claims that to think of something, it must exist.¹⁹² We can and do think and speak of things that do not exist: unicorns, Medusa, the Bigfoot monster, etc.

What this suggests is that what seems to be required to solve the problems brought about by the theory that all is change is not an antithesis to change, but perhaps a synthesis of change and stability. The following section considers Plato's theory of Forms in light of this required solution.

5.2. Forms and Particulars

Reality, for Plato, has two aspects: a temporary shifting one characterised by change and plurality, and an eternal one characterised by unity and a changeless stability. Forms are pure, eternal, timeless, unchanging beings,¹⁹³ which, in their purity, are accessible through reason alone.¹⁹⁴ In the *Phaedrus*, we are told that Forms exist in the same realm as Hades.¹⁹⁵ However, it would be a mistake to assign a particular temporal or spatial location to them: their eternal character disallows both. The easiest way to understand what Forms are is to see them through the prism of the natural world around us, and in contrast to it – in particular, in terms of how they differ, ontologically speaking, from particulars. As we shall go on to see, this ontological difference gives rise to a correlative difference, epistemically speaking, between particulars and Forms. For now, let us simply focus on their ontological differences.

In many ways, Plato's realm of particulars is similar to what we would call the world of matter and all the objects that form its content: the natural world that exists in space-time. Where Forms are unfettered by space-time, and are therefore timeless, existing, as it were, everywhere and nowhere, particulars exist *within* space-time and are bound by it. This material realm is

¹⁹² C. Mortensen, "Change and Inconsistency", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/change/>>. [Retrieved: 26/07/2015.]

¹⁹³ *Timaeus* (37e).

¹⁹⁴ R. Patterson, *Image and Reality in Plato's Metaphysics*, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985), p. 1.

¹⁹⁵ *Phaedrus* (247a-249d).

characterised by the plurality of objects that exist within it. For example, all the beautiful things – this beautiful house; that beautiful painting; this beautiful bird; that beautiful sunset, etc. – all have something in common: they are beautiful. To capture this common denominator, Beauty, which is shared by all these beautiful objects, is to grasp something that is both, present in all these particular objects, and yet transcends all of them. In a sense, it is what unifies them. Forms thus bring unity to plurality. It is as if there is this thing, Beauty, itself by itself, which is at once a quality present in all these particular objects that we call 'beautiful'. We could say, then, that the various beautiful objects become beautiful in virtue of their partaking or participating in Beauty. In this sense, the many beautiful things are dependent upon Beauty for their being beautiful. However, the converse does not seem to be true: Beauty does not seem to depend upon the many beautiful things that it instantiates for being what it is. A beautiful painting, for instance, that is destroyed in a fire does not detract from Beauty itself, nor does it in any sense diminish or reduce the beauty present in all the other objects we call beautiful. Therefore, Beauty, itself by itself – i.e. the Form of beauty – is what unifies all the various particular objects that beautiful; they depend upon it for being qualified as beautiful, but it does not depend upon them for being what it is.

The same could be said of Justice, itself by itself, or Largeness, itself by itself, and so on. What Justice is does not depend upon the many just people or just institutions that are correctly called so. Justice's characteristics, features or description is not held ransom by the various people we call just – it is not *they* who make Justice what it is, but rather *it* that makes them become just when they act in accordance to it. When we survey, for example, all the artefacts in an office, we may notice that some are circular; others are triangular and most are rectangular. It is in virtue of our grasping of what all the circular objects have in common – Circle, itself by itself – that we can then correctly identify them as such. And yet, our conception of Circle is in no way amended by our encountering a hexagonal object. In such circumstances, we do not say that we must amend our conception of a circle to fit the particular object encountered – that would be absurd. Rather, it is

our conception of what a circle is that guides our ability to then recognise that some objects, which share this feature, are circular. By the same token, on Plato's view at least, it is our conception of Justice – where this conception is true – that gives us the ability to correctly identify the various people or institutions that we call just, and not the other way around. It is not *we*, human beings, who are the measure of Justice, as Protagoras would have it, but rather Justice itself that is the measure of our actions being just. It is in attributing Justice to a particular action that the action becomes 'just', and not the other way around: by attributing a particular action to Justice that it becomes what it is. Hence, it is a one-way causal relation.

Furthermore, the realm of particulars – like the view of the world that Heraclitus had described – is characterised by flux and change. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that, to some extent at least, Plato was influenced by Heracliteanism - that is to say, he believed that the natural world around us is in fact characterised by change, as Heraclitus and others had thought.¹⁹⁶ After all, things *do* come into being, and they do go out of being. For example, seasons come and go; days, weeks and years pass by; people are born and die, empires are built and destroyed, the young grow old, and so forth. By the same token, things become 'tall' or 'short', for example, by comparison to different object; they can change in respect to circumstances or context.

Hence, any metaphysical system will have to do justice to the intuition that motion, change and activity are characteristic of nature. But as we have seen, doing justice to these notions can lead to all sorts of contradictions; and denying change altogether fares no better. Plato's genius here lies in his ability to devise an intricate metaphysical system that incorporates both: our intuitions about change, on one hand, and the kind of stability necessary for explaining our ability to name things, assign properties, attributes and identities to them, and to identify them – in other words, to provide an account of reality in which change and stability, or multiplicity and unity, can sit comfortably alongside each other. To this end, he introduces the

¹⁹⁶ A. Mason, *Plato*, (Durham: Acumen Publishing Ltd., 2010), p. 36.

notion of Forms, and claims that these are the *ne plus ultra* of reality. By comparison to particulars, Forms are stable and real; they are superior, and hence suitable objects of knowledge. This brings out important aspects of the difference between Forms and particulars, in terms of their priority. The next section explores these differences in more detail.

5.3. *The Priority of Forms*

In Plato's metaphysics, Forms take priority over particulars in many different ways. This priority is, in part, due to the superior functions assigned to them in Plato's metaphysics, epistemology and ethics.¹⁹⁷ Forms have several important functions, five of which are directly relevant to our discussion here about the role that Forms play in Plato's ontology, and as a consequence of this, in his epistemology. This priority of function is then echoed in the role that they play in all levels of cognition, from elementary concept-acquisition, all the way to knowledge-acquisition – an important function that all followers of the *Epistemological Reading of Meno's paradox* (ERM) neglect or deny.¹⁹⁸

Forms have several functions, among which are:

- i. To cause particulars to *become* qualified as *F* or not-*F*;
- ii. To confer (or bestow) identities upon particulars;
- iii. To be the criterion for truth;

¹⁹⁷ Note that the priority and superiority of Forms runs in that order for Plato: it is because of their ontological superiority over particulars that they then play an equally important role in being the object of the most superior form of cognition: *episteme*. Likewise, it is because they provide us with a superior kind of cognitive access to reality – i.e. offer a comprehensive view of the reality of the thing or choice of action under (moral, or ethical) evaluation – that they then gives us the ability to make sound, accurate and unwavering judgments and choices in our day to day life; and in doing so, provide a more secure path to *eudemonia* (happiness or well-being). See, for example, *Republic* (Books V-VIII); *Protagoras* (especially, 358a-362a); and, *Meno* (96d-98e).

¹⁹⁸ I discuss the importance of this point - about recollection being at play right from the very start of the initial and rudimentary stages of cognition – for our reading of the difficulty posed by Meno's paradox, and our evaluation of the theory of recollection as Plato's potential solution to it, later in Chapter 6.

- iv. To be the object of knowledge; and, (crucial to our discussion about the role of recollection in Plato's epistemology, in general, and the *Meno*, in particular),¹⁹⁹
- v. To be the source, cause, or provider, of memories in the soul (mind) – the information that is then retrieved when recollection takes place. [In short, to provide access to truth or cause it in the mind/soul].²⁰⁰

I will discuss each in turn. The two first distinct roles that Forms play, according to Plato, in the material, physical world around us are in fact closely connected. The best way to capture the similarity and difference between them is to see the how they cause particulars to be what they *are* and what they *are like*. To see this, let us first begin to examine how Forms unify experience and the objects of experience.

There are two ways in which Forms bring unity and continuity to the particular objects we find in the world around us, and to our experience of these objects – the kind of unity and continuity that was left wanting by the theory of radical flux and the secret doctrine we'd examined earlier, and which had the unwelcome consequence of making objects, and our phenomenal – and hence, cognitive - experiences of them, disjointed, distorted, unintelligible and in disarray. In doing so, Forms solve one of the major obstacles concerning the metaphysics of change that had plagued the theory of flux. The first way in which Forms bring unity and continuity to particular objects is: (a) connected with how they are viewed *spatially*, and (b) to how things change *in time*.

First, Forms, for Plato, reveal *unity* in multiplicity (or plurality) – they are the 'one in the many'. The form of Beauty, for example, is what unifies all beautiful things: it is what all beautiful things have in common. But how do Forms bring unity to a plurality or multiplicity of particular objects? Forms *cause* particular objects to be what they are – that is to say, a particular

¹⁹⁹ *Phaedrus* (247c).

²⁰⁰ *Phaedrus* (247a-248c).

object's *becoming* what it is, is fundamentally owed to Form(s). Forms, then, are responsible for our attribution of qualities (such as 'beautiful') and identities (such as 'human being') to particular objects; they are also responsible for changes in properties over time. And in doing so – in making it possible for objects to have this or that quality or identity – they unify otherwise disparate objects by bringing them together to be classified under one 'kind', or as possessing one shared 'quality'.

Second, Forms provide *continuity* to the same object *over time*. For example, Isabelle's identity as a human being is held constant over the course of time by her partaking in the Form of human being; and her being beautiful (or, her becoming beautiful for a period in her existence) is also caused by a Form (in this case, the Form of beauty). Isabelle would cease to be beautiful when she no longer partakes in the Form of beauty. And had it not been for the Form of human being, she would not have been one either.

This is particularly important for object recognition, at an elementary level. For example, my ability to recognise an apple depends on its having that identity, and having certain qualities that it possesses in virtue of partaking in Forms (e.g. its being red, spherical, etc. corresponds to its partaking in the Form of redness, Form of sphere, etc.). This - in addition to my having cognitive access to the features or qualities that make it a red apple - give me the ability to then recognise it for what it is: an apple, red and spherical.²⁰¹

Hence, Forms are responsible for causing things to become what they are, in the sense of conferring an identity on them, or in the sense of granting qualities to them, as mentioned in our previous point. They unify otherwise disparate objects through the medium of a shared property (through which we are then able to cognise them, and organise them, into classes and kinds). They can also bring unity to the identity of objects over time. Take the example of one's identity as a human being. On this picture, one's identity is

²⁰¹ This is otherwise known as Greek *realism* about objects and properties - a position that is opposed to *nominalism*. The former appeal to universals in order to explain objects and their properties, whereas the latter deny this. See, B. Garrett, *What Is This Thing Called Metaphysics?*, 2nd edition, (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 67-76.

sustained by one's partaking in this Form despite the possibility of undergoing many physical changes over the course of one's lifetime. One remains a human being despite, for instance, going indefinitely into a coma or being in a vegetative state. What sustains their identity here despite all the changes is the particular person's partaking in the Form of human being.

Heraclitus' claim that no one steps into the same river twice is pertinent here. I argued earlier that the notion of pervasive change assumed in Heraclitus' claim constitutes a threat to the notion of identity attribution, and hence to our ability to identify objects on that basis – that is to say, to our ability to recognise things. It is not just that my ability to recognise a 'river' won't be possible, but even my personal identity. Plato's Forms provide a solution here because they bring stability to both: the idea of a 'river' and my personal identity, despite the changes that we are constantly undergoing.

From this, we can see that Plato's distinction between Forms and particulars relate to two *modes* of existence in reality: *Being* and *becoming*. Forms, according to Plato, just *are* – they are eternal, changeless and independent of the particular objects in the material realm that partake in them. By contrast, particulars *become* what they are, in a given time, context or by comparison to something else *because* they partake in those Forms. Hence, as we said earlier, particulars are caused by Forms, they depend on Forms, and they become what they are as a result of Forms. According to this account, then, the ontological story of all particular objects is explained by Forms: 'becoming' is explained by 'Being', and 'Being' is the cause of 'becoming'.

The upshot of this distinction between the physical realm in which particular objects exist and the realm of Forms is that we *can* have our cake and eat it, after all. We can account for both kinds of change, the diachronic and synchronic; and we can do so in a manner that makes property and identity attribution possible. We can explain how things come into being and go out of existence; how things acquire this or that quality; and also, how things remain what they are, in the sense of having a constant identity that underlies the many changes that these objects may undergo - in terms of

their qualities, properties or attributes over time, or changes resulting from the object being analysed by comparison with other objects or within different contexts. On this picture, although the qualities of an object may change, those particular qualities that are attributed to particular objects at a given time are themselves supported by something far greater, qualitatively speaking, and more stable, ontologically speaking. As a consequence, Forms play no small part in stabilising an object's given quality or property both ontologically (by providing a constant that underlies the change) and cognitively (by stabilising its meaning). Concept attribution and application²⁰² are stabilised because there are Forms that are unchanging and eternal that underlie all change. For example, we can make sense of something's being beautiful, tall or large, at any given time, or in relation to something else, even if we cease to assign that property to it over time. The object may, for instance, cease to be beautiful, tall or large in another context, or, when it is compared to another. However, what stabilises our reality – that is to say, what brings uniformity and unity to our phenomenal experiences and to our understanding of these properties is Forms. This is sufficient, according to Plato, to give meaning to terms and bring some uniformity to our usage of terms such as 'beautiful', 'tall', 'large', etc. Because whether we are aware of it or not, Forms act as the references for certain terms that denote these realities; and, in addition, they act as the criterion for necessary truths.

Note that regardless of whether we are aware of Forms, they bring about this stability. For we only need a rudimentary grasp of how objects that partake in any given Form may be similar in some sense, even if we cannot put our finger down on exactly what this similarity amounts to. Over time, and by exposure to various instantiations of a Form, we get the knack of applying the concept and its associated term to that Form with some level of

²⁰² I say concept 'attribution' here because, as I shall go to argue, it is best to interpret Plato as meaning that concepts (that reflect, no matter how inadequately, necessary truths) are innate: they are recollected from within the soul, and subsequently applied to particular objects (rather than being acquired, empirically, from particular objects).

correctness.²⁰³ This is important since it shows that Forms play a part in our acquisition of concepts, and stabilising (that is, bringing uniformity, to *some* extent, at least) to our usage of terms (such as 'good', 'tall', 'large', etc.). Hence, it goes a long way to explaining how assigning properties to things, perceiving properties and communicating what we see aren't private matters.

Our ability to use terms and names more-or-less uniformly correlates with our ability to apply concepts in a similar manner. Both, the correct usage of terms and the correct application of concepts, in turn, are made possible by the stability of the properties that we find in particular objects in the physical world. Now, it may seem at first blush as though this is a contradiction. How could we find stability in the material world if Plato has conceded that it is characterised by change? On the secret doctrine's theory of extreme change, the 'red' book that I am now seeing has the property of being 'red'. But this property will never recur in any of my experiences or anyone else's for that matter. Recall that no one person can ever step in the same river again, and the river, once it has been stepped into again, won't be the same river. There is no such thing as the property of 'Redness' common to all things that are red, whether conceptually or in reality. The result is an anti-realist kind of nominalism that rejects the existence of a unity underlying particular phenomenal experiences and the properties that we attribute to objects in our experiences. The point is captured well in the *Parmenides* where a young Socrates is discussing the theory of Forms with Parmenides himself.²⁰⁴ Here, Parmenides states that despite the difficulties associated with the theory of Forms,

If one does not assume an idea under which each individual thing is classed, he will be quite at a loss, since he denies that the idea of each thing is always the same, and in this way *he will utterly destroy the power of conversation.*²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Cf. *Language and Logos*, Martin Schofield and Martha Nussbaum (eds.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

²⁰⁴ See, B. Garrett, *What Is This Thing Called Metaphysics?*, op. cit., pp. 67-76.

²⁰⁵ *Parmenides* (135b-c). Plato's term here is *dialegesthai*, which could be translated technically to mean 'discourse' or 'dialectic', or untechnically to mean 'conversation'. See, e.g., 'Parmenides', M. L. Gill & P. Ryan (translators), in *Plato: Complete Works*, J. M. Cooper (ed.), (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), n. 12, p. 369

Parmenides' above point is that unless we assume that terms that fall under ideas such as 'beautiful', 'tall', 'large', etc. each refer to one thing, then we destroy our ability to communicate intelligibly – that is to say, our ability to discuss things together presupposes that there is a shared meaning that we assign to these terms, and that that shared meaning comes from our possessing shared concepts whose contents are more-or-less similar. From Plato's point of view, then, what is necessary to make thought and speech possible is the ability to group and classify ideas and names: to explain them in a way that highlights their underlying unity. In the *Republic*, for example, Socrates says that we usually associate one form in relation to the many particular things to which we apply the same name.²⁰⁶ Therefore, in Plato's metaphysics, accounting for diachronic and synchronic change are not the only difficulties that Forms are supposed to help us deal with. Forms not only bring stability through change, but also reveal unity in multiplicity or plurality – they are the 'one over the many', as it Plato referred to them. This is because Forms are realities, and therefore, they are the references of terms that denote necessary and a priori truths. It is in this sense that they stabilise meaning, and regardless of whether we are conscious of their existence or not, they bring about this stability. Of course, defining terms (and Forms) bring more uniformity and correctness to our usage of terms. But this still doesn't rule out that a superficial grasp of terms is at play in our daily usage of them through the presence of faint memories of Forms in our souls, which we recollect subconsciously.

This brings us to the third function that Forms are assigned in Plato's metaphysics – one that is fundamental to our understanding of his theory of recollection and his epistemology – (iii) that they are the criterion of truth: the very reality against which truth, in speech or thought, is measured. As we saw earlier, Plato shared Parmenides' mistrust of the world of flux and change – it is too unstable to provide a standard for objectivity. And hence, contrary to how an empiricist would see it, the realm of particulars, or the natural world, cannot be the standard against which we assess the validity of

²⁰⁶ *Republic* (596a).

our beliefs and our claims about it. This realm is far too transient and changeable to provide the kind of stability that would make knowledge infallible. To modern, empiricist ears - and arguably most of us - this sounds counter-intuitive: for us, the material or natural world is both the object of our claims and beliefs, and the standard for validating those claims and beliefs. Not so for Plato. Forms are the source of truth because they are the ultimate reality, not the realm of particulars that mimic them. Particulars are merely copies and images of forms - not the genuine article.²⁰⁷

This, in turn, influences Plato's epistemology. In the *Meno*,²⁰⁸ for example, we are told that both knowledge and correct opinion (or true belief) have one thing that they share in common: truth. And that it is not, therefore, on this account that they differ. But if knowledge and true opinion both have truth in them, then this truth is caused, in both cases, by Forms. It is not the realm of particulars, or the natural world, then, that causes both knowledge and belief to be true. Rather, it is Forms that cause both to be true, and it is they that cause any of our claims - be they in thought or speech - to be true, quite simply because it is Forms, and not the particulars that mimic them, that are - on Plato's account - what counts as 'reality'.

The first two functions of Forms discussed above were strictly related to ontology. These two functions then have ramifications for what counts in Plato's metaphysics as the reality against which truth is to be measured in thought. From this third function, a related epistemological one, arises: a fourth function of Forms is that (iv) they are the proper objects of knowledge, and not the realm of particulars that partake in them. There are two aspects of particulars that make them unsuitable objects of knowledge in comparison to Forms. Particulars are a temporary feature of an ever-changing, transient realm. In the *Republic*, for example, Plato argues that this realm is an inadequate object of knowledge since its objects are hovering between what 'is' and 'is-not'.²⁰⁹ Given the constantly changing nature of this realm, and the

²⁰⁷ See, e.g., R. Patterson, *Image and Reality*, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1985).

²⁰⁸ *Meno* (97b-d).

²⁰⁹ *Rep.* Book V, (476a-480a).

ontological instability that change brings about, it causes an equally unstable epistemic state: *doxa* (often translated as ‘opinion’ or ‘belief’). Forms, on the other hand, are just the right kind of object that can yield knowledge since they, contrary to the realm of particulars, are unchanging.²¹⁰ We are also told here that particulars are somewhat defective when compared to Forms.

This may sound bizarre and unwarranted. From a common sense point of view, there can be nothing more epistemically secure than the everyday objects in the physical world around us, and which are accessible through our five senses.²¹¹ However, for Plato and some of his contemporaries and predecessors, this realm’s liability to synchronic and diachronic change meant that it can provide nothing but appearances; and appearances can be deceptive.²¹² In the *Protagoras*,²¹³ for example, we are told that the same object can appear, at once, as both large and small, depending on one’s perspective. Viewed from afar, it would appear to be small; but from nearby, it would appear to be large. This echoes the principle of the coincidence of opposites – the same object may appear to be both *F* and not-*F*. Hence the object of *doxa* is the realm of particulars, or the realm of what ‘is’ and ‘is-not’ – the realm characterised by change, where everything is always ‘becoming’. The object of *episteme*, by contrast, is the realm of unchanging Forms – the realm of ‘Being’, and what confers existence on all else in the material realm. This is why only Forms are proper objects of knowledge, and not particulars. It is also why true beliefs are epistemically unstable, despite their being true²¹⁴ – they (epistemically) inherit the ontological instability that is characteristic of the material realm of particulars.

If Forms are the ultimate reality that cause everything else to become what they are and what they are like (i)-(ii); and if they are the only ultimate reality that can provide the criterion for truth (iii) and hence, are the proper

²¹⁰ *Rep.* (480a-485).

²¹¹ *Ibid.* pp. 1-3.

²¹² This mistrust of information given to us via the senses, their constituting how things appear as opposed to how things are, was not unheard of in Plato’s time. Parmenides refers to it in the *Way of Seeming* and Democritus of Abdera (the atomist) held a similar view.

²¹³ *Protagoras* (356e).

²¹⁴ See, *Meno*, (97c-98b).

object of knowledge (iv) because the natural world – the realm of particulars – is plagued by things always appearing to be both *F* and not-*F*, then how can our minds ever access this truth? If we cannot acquire truth from the external world around us, then where can we acquire it from? This brings us to the fifth, and last function of Forms – one that leads to another of Plato’s most infamous legacies: the theory of recollection. Forms are the *cause* of memories in the mind (soul). Memories of our original encounter with Forms in Hades prior to being incarnated makes rudimentary stages of cognition possible since they furnish us with basic concepts and *the ability to recognise if something is true*.²¹⁵ For example, we are told in the *Phaedrus* that our first encounter with Forms took place in Hades when the soul was in a disembodied state:

I must attempt to speak the truth, especially since the truth is my subject. What is in this place is without colour and without shape and without solidity, a being that really is what it is, the subject of all true knowledge, visible only to intelligence, the soul’s steersman. Now a god’s mind is nourished by intelligence and pure knowledge, as is the mind of any soul that is concerned to take in what is appropriate to it, so it is delighted at last to seeing what is real and watching what is true, feeding on all this and feeling wonderful ... it has a view of Justice, as it is; it has a view of Self-control; it has a view of Knowledge – not the knowledge that is close to change, that becomes different as it knows the different things which we consider real down here [in the material realm]. No, it is knowledge of what really is what it is. And when the soul has seen all the things that are as they are and feasted on them, it sinks back inside heaven and goes home. (*Phaedrus* 247c-e).

Note that the mind’s first contact with Forms takes place in Hades (or Heaven). The soul here is in a disincarnate state. It feasts upon these beings that constitute the *ne plus ultra* of reality: beings that really are as they are. This encounter allows for a privileged and undistorted access to these beings, and to their reality; and hence, offers an access to truth that is unfettered by “change”. This, then, gives rise to a very special kind of knowledge similar to the special kind of beings that are being met here: “not the knowledge that is close to change”, of beings that are affected by change. Rather, “it is

²¹⁵ Forms have an ontological function: they *cause particulars* to acquire properties and identities; and they have an epistemological function: to *cause memories* of Forms (impressions of truth) in the soul or the mind, and which then makes intelligence, cognition and language possible. See, *Phaedrus* (249b-c).

knowledge of what really is what it is", of beings that are unaffected by any change, shape, colour or solidity – in short, unaffected by all that constitutes the world of matter, and that exists in space-time.

Moreover, it is this encounter that allows the mind to be "nourished by intelligence and pure knowledge", bringing the soul, as it were, a step closer to the gods and bringing it in direct contact with the realm of realities that exist in heaven. It is in this sense that knowledge of Forms, for Plato, is knowledge by acquaintance – for there was an original encounter of the soul and the Forms in heaven, where the soul had perceived them directly so as to become acquainted with them, and watched the truth about them. But this was not done through the medium of the body or the eyes, which the disincarnate soul lacks, but through direct contact of the soul with the Forms, which are "visible only to intelligence, the soul's steersman". Therefore, the soul's capacity for "intelligence and pure knowledge" stems from this direct acquaintance with Forms in the timeless and immaterial realm of realities where they exist.

To sum up, the priority of the Forms in Plato's metaphysics and epistemology is connected to the important functions that are assigned to them. Although Plato accepts Heraclitus' principle of flux, and also accepts the principle of the coincidence of opposites that is its logical conclusion, he does not settle for this as a comprehensive account of reality. For Plato, our possession of intelligence, and our capacity for truth and knowledge, all rely on the existence of stable, immaterial, unchanging (and hence, eternal)²¹⁶ beings that constitute reality. If this reality cannot be associated with the natural world of matter because of its being characterised by flux and change, then it must be associated with something else more suitable to the task. On Plato's account, the realm of flux (or becoming) and its concomitant problems represent only *one* aspect of a dual-aspect world; the other aspect is

²¹⁶ In the *Timaeus*, Plato associates time with the movement or motion of the universe (38e). This would suggest that space and time are inseparable, and that he believed time to have come about with the universe, or that time is a feature of the visible order of the universe. See, e.g., F. MacDonald Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology: The Timaeus of Plato*, (London: Routledge, originally published in 1937, reprinted in 2000), pp. 102-104.

assigned to Forms (Being) and the eternal realm within which they exist. It is this realm of Being that causes particulars to become what they are; and it is also the realm that constitutes the criterion for truth: the standard against which speech and thought are verified.

This dual-aspect account of reality then correlates to a dual-aspect epistemology in which knowledge takes the eternal realm of Being (what is) as its natural object, whereas beliefs take the realm of becoming (what is-and-is-not) as their natural object. This, in turn, impacts the quality of our judgements, and the actions based on those judgements. It is the ontological superiority (i.e. stability) of Forms that makes knowledge (which takes Forms as an object) more epistemically superior (and hence stable) than true beliefs; and, it is the epistemological superiority (stability) of knowledge (based on Forms) that makes it more superior (and hence, stable) as a means to securing ethical conduct. By the same token, in evaluating particulars, we can claim similarly that it is their ontological inferiority (i.e. instability) that makes them epistemically inferior (less stable) by comparison to knowledge; and, it is their epistemological inferiority (and hence, instability) that makes them more inferior (less stable) as a means of securing ethical conduct. As Socrates tells us in the *Meno*, in the analogy of the statues of Daedalus, beliefs just won't stay put. In doing so, they faithfully represent a material world that – on Plato's account - won't stay put either.

From all this we can conclude that particulars cannot exist without Forms; and hence, in so far as they 'exist', their 'being' is, as it were, 'temporarily borrowed'. Bizarre as it may seem, as Plato paints it, their existence seems to be, as it were, 'on loan'. In this sense, particulars *exist by proxy*. Likewise, given that the realm of particulars is an inadequate object of knowledge, and only Forms can constitute its proper objects, any subsequent knowledge of particulars must also be *knowledge by proxy*.²¹⁷ On Plato's account, particulars can never exist as such nor be known as such: Forms are their proximate cause. And any subsequent knowledge that we may be said to possess about this realm is ultimately via Forms. Indeed, without Forms, Socrates tells us in

²¹⁷ See, *Republic* (529a-d).

the *Phaedrus*, not only would knowledge not be possible, but – crucially - *intelligence itself* would not be possible. For, as we have seen, given that everything in the realm of particulars is liable to change, concept formation and manipulation, property and identity attribution, and hence language acquisition and inter-personal communication, would also not be possible.

This is significant for our discussion of the role of recollection in the *Meno*. For as we have just seen, as well as being the proper objects of knowledge, Forms are also the source of truth because they are the only genuine reality, according to Plato. Access to this reality is not acquired via the sense, but through reflection on memories in the soul from our encounter with them in Hades – in other words, he believed that truth is something that is inscribed in every soul. But truth need not always be consciously excavated, as it were. For Plato, there are many true concepts and terms that we deploy on a day-to-day basis, which have their origins in the soul. What all this suggests, therefore, is that - contrary to what STR had claimed - Plato was a kind of innatist; and the theory of recollection is one kind of innatism. The next section considers an objection to this claim.

5.4. Innatism, Empiricism and The Objection From Hybrid Sources of Cognition

It may be objected that Plato is not the thoroughgoing innatist that I have painted him to be, on the ground that – contrary to what I have claimed above – he does indeed provide an alternative route to concept formation. In *Recollection and Experience*, Dominic Scott puts forward a thesis that, contrary to the prevalent view, Plato is not an innatist about ordinary, everyday concepts. This would, in effect, serve to bolster the case for the *Epistemological Reading of Meno's paradox* (ERM). For if Plato is *not* an innatist about everyday concepts, then the hidden assumption behind ERM – that Plato believed that truth can be acquired empirically from the material world around us – is, contrary to what I have suggested in this chapter, true after all.

Scott's thesis relies upon a distinction that he makes between two kinds of innatism: what he calls K (the kind of innatism allegedly put forward by

Immanuel Kant) and D (an alternative kind of innatism that he calls “Demaratus”, after an analogy that he borrows from Plutarch to explain the kind of innatism in question). Both are taken by Scott to be innatism about *knowledge*. However, the deciding difference seem to be their object:

K-innatism (K): Innatism about everyday concept formation.

D-innatism (D): Innatism about philosophical knowledge involved in the very last stages of Socratic elenchus.

Scott uses the analogy of a tablet containing two messages, an apparent one, and a hidden one, to explain what he means by D-innatism (hereafter, and following Scott’s abbreviation, D). A tablet may have an original message inscribed on it, but this message has been hidden from view: a layer of wax has been laid on top of the original message. Further, a second, different message (a superficial/misleading one) has been inscribed on the layer of wax. Now, to someone who does not know this, the superficial message inscribed on the wax is all they can see. However, when the wax has been peeled away, the real message is revealed. Scott argues that Plato’s innatism ought to be understood along similar lined to D, not K. The information gained through the senses is akin to the superficial messages etched into the wax. However, philosophical investigation (i.e. Socratic inquiry) helps us peel back the wax, reveal the true message inscribed on the tablet, and discard the misleading information that was inscribed on the layer of wax. The information we gain from the sense, then, are the superficial appearances that belong to the realm of particulars, whereas the true message is information about Forms, gained through recollection, in the very last stages of philosophical inquiry – a notoriously difficult knowledge to acquire. This is important, for if Scott is right, then Plato believed that there were not only two *objects* of cognition (particulars and Forms), as it is discussed at length in the *Republic*²¹⁸, but that there were also two *sources* and two *routes* or *methodologies* for concept formation. With this, we can reformulate Scott’s claims such that there are two routes or methodologies for concept formation in Plato’s work:

²¹⁸ See, *Republic* Bks. V & VI.

The empirical methodology (E-method): some concepts have their source in the objects of sense-experience; they are acquired – contrary to what I have argued – from the ‘outside-in’, as it were. The natural realm of particulars *gives us concepts that are not there already* in our soul.

The recollection methodology (R-method): some concepts have their source in Forms; they are acquired via recollection when appropriately retrieved.

On Scott’s hybrid account, there are two sources of cognition and two corresponding methods for concept formation. The first source of cognition is the realm of particulars and its content; the relevant method for concept formation here is E-method. These kinds of concepts are formed with great ease. These are mundane, everyday concepts. The second source of cognition is Forms, and the methodology pertaining to our forming concepts of these Forms is what I have termed R-method above. These are not your everyday, mundane concepts, but rather philosophical ones of the first order. Forming them involves long and arduous engagement in philosophical work, and few ever achieve this end. This is because, for Scott, recollection only occurs at the very last stage of an inquiry, when someone recollects knowledge of Forms (i.e. not merely becomes conscious of their existence, but rather recollects their definitions as well).²¹⁹ Needless to say, and given how Plato often paints a picture in his dialogues of definitions of ideas (i.e. Forms) such as ‘piety’, ‘beauty’, ‘courage’, etc. being notoriously difficult to acquire, we can assume that – on Scott’s reading – recollection is as rare as it is difficult. Indeed, on this reading, Plato believed that, for the most part, everyone forms concepts and acquires them empirically via E-method from the realm of particulars. Forms are rarely ever recollected, and hence R-method is an extremely difficult and rare kind of route to cognition. In short, Forms rarely ever play *any role at all* in our day-to-day cognition and concept-formation. Not only the *hoi polloi*, but almost all of us, ever use E-method as a means of cognising and coming to know all that we do.

²¹⁹ As discussed in Chapter 3.

Scott's account is very appealing, and the temptation to accept it as an accurate reading of Plato's account of cognition is strong. This is especially the case when we consider that Plato tells us in the *Republic* that the object of knowledge (*epistēmē*) is 'what is', whereas the object of belief (*doxa*) is 'what is-and-is-not'.²²⁰ From this, it would not seem unreasonable to conclude that given that knowledge and belief correlate to two different realms (particulars and Forms), this must also mean that there are two different methodologies for access to each (i.e. two separate routes for each, E-method and R-method).

However, does the fact that knowledge and belief correlate to two different realms (Forms and particulars) necessarily imply that two separate methodologies are involved for cognising each, or that two entirely separate routes (E-method and R-method) must be taken to arrive at each? Might it not be, perhaps, that *one* methodology – viz., R-method - is sufficient for cognitively accessing *both* realms, so as to grasp the objects of those realms and hold appropriate concepts of them? At any rate, if the Demaratus tablet analogy that Scott provides is apt, wouldn't it make more sense to say that it takes only *one* skill – the ability to read – to provide the appropriate methodology for accessing *both*, the misleading superficial message written in the layer of wax *and* the deeper, genuine message carved in the wood tablet beneath the layer of wax? And if so, might not R-method be likewise sufficient as a methodology for both, concept-formation (pertaining to the realm of particulars) and knowledge-acquisition at the level of Forms? If this were the case, then what we have is indeed one methodology for accessing truth of any kind, where the only difference between the two is a matter of degrees of proximity to reality, and hence a matter of degrees of truth. And that, of course, is exactly how Plato describes it in the *Republic*.²²¹

The only trouble with this line of thought is that Plato *does* indeed tell us elsewhere that appearances – those acquired through the sense – are very often misleading. This would suggest that *some* information, at least, is

²²⁰ *Republic* (476e-479a).

²²¹ See 'Simile of the Cave' in *Republic* Bk VII.

gained via an 'outside-in' route. If this were correct, would it show that Scott is right about there being two methods for concept-formation or access to truth? Not necessarily. In the next section, I distinguish between the various kinds of innatism to show how and why the possibility of acquiring beliefs from the 'outside-in', as it were, does not threaten the claim that all concepts (at the atomic-level), for Plato, are acquired via R-method only.

5.4.1. Innatism vs. Empiricism

It is important to be clear on the different kinds of innatism in order to understand what kind of innatism, if any, Plato embraced. Innatism can be divided, broadly speaking, into two kinds:

- 1) *The Innate Knowledge Thesis*: We have knowledge of some truths in a particular subject area, S, as part of our rational nature.
- 2) *The Innate Concept Thesis*: We have some of the concepts that we employ in a particular subject area, S, as part of our rational nature.²²²

There are some important points that we need to note about innatism. First, innatists generally tend to hold that although the kind of innatist knowledge or innate concepts in question are not gained from sense-experience, nonetheless, experience does play an important role in their acquisition; experience, for instance, may trigger the kind of innate knowledge or innate concepts in question and bring them to the fore of consciousness.

Second, innatists differ on the source of this innate knowledge. Some innatists, like Plato, for example, believe that we have acquired this innate knowledge in a prior existence, while others, like Descartes, believe that God provided us with when we were created. There are still others who believe that we acquired this knowledge neither prior to birth nor at the point of creation, but rather that it is a part of our rational nature and/or that it has been acquired in the process of natural selection and passed on genetically from one generation to the other.

²²² P. Markie, 'Rationalism vs. Empiricism', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/rationalism-empiricism/>>. [Retrieved: 05/01/2016.]

Third, knowledge and concept innatism can be local or global, in the sense that they may refer to a particular subject area, or cover all areas of knowledge. Some thinkers, for instance, may be innatists about moral knowledge – i.e. believe that all knowledge of moral matters is innate. However, they may be empiricists in other areas – for example, they may believe that knowledge of geography, physics and medicine are acquired empirically.

Moreover, concept innatists believe that some or all concepts (depending on whether they are local or global in their innatism) are not so much acquired from experience, but rather that experience may trigger them and bring them to consciousness.

Finally, there is a kind of innatism that is not only of the global variety, but also claims that innate knowledge must incorporate both (1) and (2). According to the British empiricist, John Locke:

- 3) *Innate knowledge/Concept Thesis*: a particular instance of knowledge is innate if the concepts contained in the known proposition are also innate.²²³

Hence, according to Locke, the Innate Knowledge thesis *is entailed by* the Innate Concept Thesis. The above distinctions are particularly pertinent to our evaluation of Scott's hybrid reading of concept-formation in Plato's work. For it allows us to distinguish between the acquisition of beliefs, on the one hand, and the acquisition of singular or basic concepts (concepts like 'equality', 'tallness', 'largeness', 'circle', 'redness', etc.) that go on to become the building blocks of true propositions and beliefs, on the other.

Does Plato believe that all beliefs are acquired via recollection such that he could be labelled a global innatist about *all* beliefs? In his dialogues, Plato often speaks of beliefs being acquired via testimony, for example.²²⁴ He also

²²³ J. Locke (1690), *An Essay on Human Understanding*, Woolhouse (ed.), (London: Penguin Books, 1997), Book I, Chapter IV, Section I p. 91, as paraphrased in P. Markie, *ibid.*

²²⁴ *Phaedrus* (257a-c).

claims that the realm of particulars can be the source of misleading appearances, on the basis of which we may then come to conflicting views about the same object.²²⁵ When it comes to beliefs, then, they *can* indeed be acquired from the outside-in, via testimony or from appearances given to us from the realm of particulars. However, Plato also makes it clear that beliefs about the ‘realities’ that belong to the realm of Forms (the kind of beliefs whose contents are proposition that are often called ‘necessary truths’ or ‘a priori truths’) are recollected from within the soul (for example, necessary truths about geometry in the slave-boy episode in the *Meno*).²²⁶ This brings us to what Plato had said earlier in the *Republic* about there being two intellectual faculties – viz., knowledge (*epistēmē*) and belief (*doxa*) – where the former corresponds to ‘what is’ and the latter to ‘what is and is-not’. In other words, Plato is *not* a global innatist about the sources and objects of belief (*doxa*); for he allows that the objects of belief can be particulars or Forms. Likewise, while he seems to allow that beliefs may be acquired from the outside-in via testimony, or given to us by the realm of particulars in the form of appearances, he also allows that – when they concern eternal truths – these beliefs can be acquired via recollection. Indeed, necessary truths can only be acquired through recollection from within.²²⁷ This is important, because if the realm of particulars can only furnish ‘appearances’, then our ability to tell true beliefs from a false ones must be rooted in recollection – in our possession of truth within us; for what other means do we now have at our disposal to tell truth from falsehood? And this is what Plato means when he makes Socrates claim in the *Phaedrus* that particulars can only provide beliefs based on appearances. These, along with beliefs acquired via testimony, and written accounts, are all merely ‘images’ of reality.²²⁸

²²⁵ See, e.g., *Republic* (602d): the example of the stick that is half-immersed in water and which appears to be bent. See also *Republic* (523e-524d).

²²⁶ On the question of whether Plato thinks we can only have knowledge of Forms, or whether it is also possible to hold beliefs about them, the *Meno* clearly supports the latter view. In the slave-boy episode, Socrates tells Meno that, through questioning, the slave has been able to recollect some truths about geometry in the form of beliefs, which true as they may be, do not yet count as knowledge. This is evidence that Plato thinks – in the *Meno* at least – that we can indeed have true beliefs about the realm of Forms.

²²⁷ See, *Phaedrus* (278a; 276a; 275a).

²²⁸ *Phaedrus* (257a-d.); Cf. (276a-b.)

In addition to being the criterion for truth (i.e. responsible for truth-recognition), memories of Forms in the soul also make rudimentary cognition possible. We wouldn't so much as be able to see that a table is circular or two objects are equal, or that one is taller than the other, if we did not have concepts whose origins can be traced to memories of our encounter with Forms in Hades. An obvious place to offer as evidence of this is the well-known section of the *Phaedo* where Socrates discusses the role of the concept of 'equality' in our ability to recognise that two sticks or stones may be equal.²²⁹ In this same section of the *Phaedo*, we also hear Socrates confirming what he had said in the *Meno*: that what we call learning is, in fact, recollecting.²³⁰ Note that, contrary to Scott's suggestion that R-method is not involved in mundane concept formation, and hence everyday cases of cognition, here Socrates is indicating the opposite: our ability to recognise that two objects are equal is *dependent upon* our possession of prenatal knowledge of Forms. It is on the basis of this that he then thinks that he is warranted to claim that what we call learning is in fact nothing other than recollecting. This is an identical claim to the one he makes in the *Meno* where he tells Meno that all learning is in fact recollecting because the soul has already acquired knowledge of everything before it was born.²³¹

If, despite what we have seen so far, we are still unconvinced that Plato believes that *all* the building blocks of thought and cognition are formed via the subconscious recollection of aspects of Forms, then let us recall what Parmenides, in agreement with Socrates, says in the *Parmenides*:

If someone ... won't allow that there are forms for things and won't mark off a form for each one, he won't have anywhere to turn his thought, since he doesn't allow that for each thing there is a character that is always the same. In this way *he will destroy the power of conversation.*²³²

Parmenides' claim is clear: our ability to converse with each other assumes Forms. Competent language speakers must of course be capable of

²²⁹ *Phaedo* (74a-76b).

²³⁰ *Phaedo* (72e; 76a).

²³¹ *Meno* (81a-82b).

²³² *Parmenides* (135b-c). [My emphasis.]

conceptual thinking- i.e. the manipulation and application of those forms or classes in thought and speech. The crucial question here is this: what is the source of these basic concepts that we use in language and thought, according to Plato? When the senses gives us impressions of a red apple, for example, how are the concepts 'red', 'fruit', 'apple', 'round', etc. formed? Are they formed in an empiricist Lockean manner? Does Plato think that we, from the observation of many examples of apples, red objects, round objects, etc., then *abstract* and *generalise* classes, kinds, and properties such as 'round', 'red', etc.? If so, then Scott is right: Plato is indeed more of a Lockean empiricist about everyday concepts. But as I have argued in this chapter, the metaphysics of change in his ontology simply disallows that particular examples can be stable enough to provide a stable source for concept formation. As Socrates puts it in the *Parmenides*:

What of the many beautiful particulars ... Do they remain the same, or in total contrast to these other realities, never in any way remain the same as themselves or in relation to each other?²³³

An important question that arises now is this: if particulars are too unstable for us to use them as sources for the formation of concepts, then where do our basic concepts come from? If the realm of particulars cannot provide access to Forms *such that* we could then speak intelligibly and coherently and make sense of the impressions given to us in the world around us, then how do we access this illusive realm, and where do we acquire the basic concepts with which we could then make sense of the objects and impressions of sense experience? Plato is clear that the route is via recollection. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates discusses how the soul, in a prenatal state, acquires knowledge of Forms during a direct encounter with them. We are not told here that without prenatal knowledge of forms no philosophical knowledge of Forms, or no definitions of Forms, could ever be acquired, as Scott would have us believe. Rather, we are told here that human cognition and intelligence would simply not be possible:

For a soul which has never seen the truth cannot enter into human form, because a man must understand the impressions he receives by reference to

²³³ *Parmenides* (78e).

*classes: he draws on the plurality of perceptions to combine them by reasoning into a single class. This is recollection of the things our souls once saw during their journey as companions to a god, when they saw beyond the things we now say "exist" and poked their heads into true reality.*²³⁴

Note that Socrates doesn't say that recollection is necessary for knowledge acquisition but rather that "a soul which has never seen the truth cannot enter into human form, *because* a man must understand the impressions he receives [from the senses] by reference to classes". For how can we make sense of the multiplicity and variety of data that the mind is bombarded with through the impressions of sense-experience unless we have the means, from within to make sense of these impressions? How can we classify them into groups and kinds if we do not *already* know what to classify them into? We must, argues Plato, have this schema for classification within us already - otherwise we could make utterly no sense of the data received through the sense. And this is the reason why Plato makes Parmenides agree with Socrates in the *Parmenides* that

If someone ... won't allow that there are forms for things and won't mark off a form for each one, he won't have anywhere to turn his thought, since he doesn't allow that for each thing there is a character that is always the same. In this way *he will destroy the power of conversation.*²³⁵

For neither the understanding of impressions given through sense data and their classification into ideas of kinds and groups, nor the manipulation of those ideas in thought and speech, would be possible without the pre-existence of a conceptual schema for the interpretation and manipulation of the given data. For Plato, intelligence depends on this. That is why no soul can enter human form *unless* it has seen the Forms.

We must, therefore, on the basis of what has just been discussed, resist the temptation of thinking that because Plato allows that beliefs can be acquired from the outside-in, this must imply that he has no need for recollection; or that, because he allows that some beliefs can be acquired from the outside-in,

²³⁴ *Phaedrus* (249b-c).

²³⁵ *Parmenides* (135b-c). [My emphasis.]

that reason alone, by pondering on our stock of beliefs and reflecting upon them, is capable of telling truth apart from falsehood. Reason, for Plato, is the *mode of access* to Forms; it may be the arbiter of truth, but *not* its foundation. That role is reserved for the only reality that Plato acknowledges: Forms.

If Plato was an innatist about basic concepts, then he must have also been an innatist about knowledge. For as Locke had quite rightly pointed out in the third kind of innatism we looked at earlier:

- 3) *Innate knowledge/Concept Thesis*: a particular instance of knowledge is innate if the concepts contained in the known proposition are also innate.²³⁶

That is to say, if basic concepts are the building blocks of all our beliefs (including the false ones) and if only Forms can be the object of knowledge, then without recollection of these basic concepts, neither belief nor knowledge would be possible; for we would not be able to understand the propositions that go on to form the contents of our beliefs unless we, first, made use of memories of Forms. In a dream, for example, I may dream of sitting on a blue round soft chair. The 'blueness', 'roundness', 'softness', etc. are all basic concepts that make the objects in the dream intelligible to me, and without which I cannot understand the dream. Despite the dream not being reality, for Plato, the building blocks (at the atomic level of thought, the ideas or concepts) contained within it, are based on realities or Forms. False beliefs function in the same way. The belief is made out of a string of one or more propositions, which although as a whole may be false because they do not represent anything real, nonetheless, the building blocks – the basic concepts – that form the belief in question are based, according to Plato, on realities. For example, if I believe falsely that there is a sheep in the field, then although the belief is false, the ideas contained within it (e.g. sheep, field, etc.) represent real objects.

We have now reached the point where we can conclude that ERM's hidden assumption must be false. Given the metaphysics of change in Plato's

²³⁶ J. Locke (1690), *An Essay on Human Understanding*, Woolhouse (ed.), (London: Penguin Books, 1997), Book I, Chapter IV, Section I p. 91, as paraphrased in P. Markie, *ibid.*

ontology, and the failure of any other method in our lives here in the realm of particulars for the generation of basic concepts (the building blocks of thought and cognition), Plato needs to carve out an alternative methodology for concept formation. He claims that initial cognition takes place, not in this material realm of particulars, which is characterised by plurality and change, but rather in another realm of reality characterised by stability. It is in this realm that initial cognition and acquisition of concepts takes place. It is for this reason that Socrates then goes on to claim that all learning is in fact remembering; for when the soul is in an embodied state, no initial act of cognition or concept acquisition takes place – in its embodied state, all subsequent encounters that each soul has with particular objects are merely subconscious acts of *recognition*.

Conclusion

In Plato's ontology, and due to the nature of the realm of change and multiplicity, particular objects existing in this realm do so in a temporary, finite and qualitatively limited manner, and by complete dependence on Forms for such an existence – it is an existence by proxy. In addition, the realm's instability disallows cognition and concept formation. For although in Forms we find the suitable objects of knowledge, and from them we can trace the ontological origins of particulars whose existence depends on the latter's participation in the former, their instability fails to provide an adequate suitable route to cognitive and epistemic access. If so, if we cannot have cognitive and epistemic access to Forms and to reality via the realm of particulars, then how can cognition of these particulars take place? Plato provides an alternative route: at a subconscious level, we are capable of recognising particular objects because the mind, bountiful as it is in Plato, holds memories that are key to cognition, intelligence and language. With these memories, the mind is fully furnished with all that is necessary to intelligibly recognise the impressions given to it by the sense – impressions that would otherwise mean nothing to a blank mind or a blank slate. Bizarre and pointlessly indulgent as such an innatist theory may seem to empiricists such as Quine and Ayer, for example, for Plato, it is unavoidable if we are to explain how intelligence, language and cognition take place. For an innatist

of Plato's kind could point to the examples of robots and computers capable of image-recognition to make the case; or they could point to cameras and camcorders to make the case for the claim that blank minds cannot possibly 'see' anything, if this 'seeing' entails understanding the impressions given through the medium of the eyes.²³⁷ What this means is that our ability to tell which impressions given to us by the sense are true or false – our ability to recognise truth – is also something that we have access to by proxy, through memories in the mind. Hence, cognition (whether at the subconscious, everyday level or at the conscious, higher-cognitive philosophical level) is ultimately cognition by proxy (via concepts of Forms). From this it follows that knowledge of particulars, where a judgement about particulars can indeed amount to knowledge, would also be knowledge by proxy (made possible only if we have knowledge of the Form in question). Indeed, in Plato's architecture of mind and reality, without the realm of Forms, neither the realm of flux and its content, nor cognition, intelligence, concept formation or naming and communicating, would have been possible.

From all of this, it is clear that ERM's claim that the theory of recollection plays no role whatsoever in solving the paradox, is mistaken. This is because ERM is premised on the mistaken assumption that Plato – like most of us today – is a kind of empiricist about truth and knowledge.²³⁸ However, if the basic concepts whose possession act as the precondition for all thought and speech are based in the recollection of Forms, memories of which have been etched into the soul, then regardless of whether our statements are true or false, or whether our beliefs are true or false, such linguistic and epistemic phenomena wouldn't be possible in the first place without the ingredients furnished by recollection - nor would our ability to then tell which of those statements or beliefs is true or false. To conclude, for Plato, the basic concepts

²³⁷ It is not my aim here to defend Plato or innatism of this kind. Rather, my intention is simply to make sense of Plato's theory, explain his rationale for it as best as I can, and therefore, demonstrate how the theory aims to explain a genuinely puzzling and important fact about who we are – that we are intelligent beings capable of 'seeing', understanding, and *naming things*: something that no other being that we are aware of is capable of doing.

²³⁸ All versions of ERM will necessarily have be premised on this assumption since it is this particular assumption that underlies the core difference between ERM and TRM. And because this core ERM assumption is mistaken, we must reject *any* version of ERM as an accurate interpretation of Plato.

and a priori truths excavated through recollection are the *preconditions* of thought, speech, cognition, truth-recognition, belief and knowledge – in short, they are the basic ingredients of intelligence and cognisance. Without recollection, none of these would be possible.

Chapter 6

Memory in the Meno

In the last two chapters, I argued that an adequate interpretation of whether the theory of recollection constitutes Socrates' response to the paradox requires not only an assessment of the context within which that theory arises and its role in the dialogue, but also its place in Plato's metaphysics and epistemology as a whole. Until this is done, it remains unclear why Socrates should claim that he does not find the eristic argument a good one, and yet makes no attempt to expose its fallacy - unless, of course, he *does* expose its fallacy, albeit implicitly. An evaluation of the role of the paradox and the theory of recollection within the overall context of the dialogue as a whole should help reveal such an implicit claim, should there be one. More specifically - and as I shall go on to argue here - we need to understand the relationship between the Socratic method of cross-examination (*elenchus*) used in that passage and the theory of recollection; and we need to assess whether this can be done in a manner that does not pose problems for enquiry in general. That is to say, we need to examine whether the theory of recollection can give us clues as to how enquiry is possible, but without threatening to make it depend *primarily* on mere hunches or intuitions about what is true. We saw in Chapter 1 that a reductionism that relied on the phenomenological feel of truth was problematic, and that an intuitionist epistemology was an unsuitable interpretation due to Socrates' insistence on reasoning and argumentation as means of arriving at knowledge. Given that Socrates - in so far as he makes it explicit in the *Protagoras* and *Meno* at least - holds the view that virtue is knowledge, then any such reliance on epistemic intuitions or hunches will no doubt spread to his account of moral progress as well. Acting virtuously becomes a matter of acting on hunches or intuitions, with no reliable basis for progress save recognising what might constitute a good/moral action via either a mysterious faculty of intuition, or some such inkling towards what is good (or truth). This now provides

justification for philosophers such as John Mackie, who criticise philosophers like Plato for advocating a mysterious faculty of moral intuition whose task is to detect an equally queer set of (moral) facts – bizarre entities that do not fit with our understanding of ‘facts’ in general.²³⁹ This queerness threatens much more than Plato’s moral theory. For given his claim about the equivalence of virtue with knowledge, and his claim that the theory of recollection accounts for *all* types of enquiry, it follows that the queerness would not be restricted to moral facts alone, but would spread across to all other kinds of facts as well; and in doing so, it would undermine Plato’s epistemology and his defence of the possibility of enquiry in general. Was Plato really that philosophically naive? Perhaps not: for it is possible that - as Annas cogently puts it - it is rather this “hostile portrayal of Forms of moral qualities as bizarre entities picked out by an equally special peculiar faculty of intuition [that] is a coarse and imperceptive interpretation of Plato”²⁴⁰ – and not Plato’s theory itself.

One way of examining whether Plato’s account can escape such threats, I suggest, is to analyse an everyday phenomenon we term ‘remembering’. And by this I do not mean that we should offer such analysis by appeal to full-blown theories of it. My aim here is to simply analyse a pre-theoretical notion of memory and remembering – one that an ancient philosopher such as Plato may have treated as a given, and on the basis of which he then constructed his theory of recollection. I shall argue that this simple, primitive and pre-theoretical notion of memory is better suited for an adequate interpretation of Plato’s theory of recollection; consequently, it allows us to consider the role that Plato intended for it to play, against the backdrop of the dialogue’s overall concern, in a new light.

Accordingly, (6.1) I begin this chapter with an analysis of the notion of ‘memory’ with the aim of revealing the role that the theory of recollection is aimed at playing in the dialogue. In the following section (6.2) I explore the

²³⁹ See, J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 38.

²⁴⁰ J. Annas, ‘Moral Knowledge as Practical Knowledge’, *Social Philosophy & Policy Foundation* (2001), 18: 236-256, p. 238.

relationship between learning and remembering. In (6.3) I focus on re-assessing the eristic argument in light of all that we've looked at so far, and show that it contains a hidden premise that is at the root of the challenge posed by the paradox, and key to understanding Plato's solution to it. Finally, in (6.4) I argue that an analysis of the paradox and its solution reveals the methodological concerns that Plato was airing. I will argue that Plato's chief target is to counter a specific outside-in method for acquiring truth; and that here, in the *Meno*, his task is to show how a certain conception of the mind goes hand-in-hand with this outside-in methodology and thereby gives rise to the paradox.

3.1. 'Memory' in the *Meno*

What is a memory? Our everyday use of the term 'memory' is best explained by analogy. The mind contains, say, data analogous to data files stored on a computer – some information learnt or gained at a previous time, equivalent to data files stored on the computer. Similarly, 'remembering' is the process by which we recall information stored in the mind – a process equivalent to the retrieval of such data from a computer. This very basic and generic understanding of memory is what the *Meno's* text suggests that Plato has in mind: an ordinary process of the retrieval of information already contained within the soul (mind) from birth, in the form of 'correct opinions' – a process of 'recollection', or, as I prefer to call it, simply 'remembering'.²⁴¹

There are two senses of memory. The first is that of information stored in the mind. The second refers to the process of retrieving information stored in the mind. Memory may also sometimes refer to the faculty responsible for storing and retrieving information in the mind. Note that the second sense is not opposed to the first – sometimes the process of recall doesn't work, but

²⁴¹ I am *not* suggesting, nor do I believe, that Plato endorsed a *computational theory* of the mind equivalent to those discussed in the philosophy of mind today. The example of a computer is used here simply for the purpose of drawing an analogy between computers and minds, in terms of recalling memories, and not more. One decisive difference between the *computational theories* of the mind and Plato's is that where the former view the mind as a *tabula rasa* (blank slate), the latter held an opposite view. The mind, according to Plato, is anything but blank at birth; rather, it is bountiful, containing the blueprint of reality and already furnished with the conceptual repertoire necessary for cognition, language and knowledge acquisition and truth recognition.

the information is still there. Moreover, not all memories are recalled and used consciously – some aren't recalled and used consciously, while others are. This shows that memory operates on many levels, and further supports the idea that recollection is not something that happens all at once, but rather, comes in stages.²⁴² Retrieving information stored on the hard-drive of a computer, for example, is no different to remembering, in the sense that one will not always be able to retrieve stored files. But that need not mean that the files aren't there on the hard-drive; it simply means that one cannot access them with the commands that one is using now.

In contrast to memories, the mind also seems to contain mental states whose content is fictitious – imaginings, etc. But fictitious states are different from memories – where memories are taken to represent something real or true, the content of imaginings and other illusory states are generally taken to be unreal or untrue. Following the Descartes of *The Meditations*, it is not counter-intuitive to hold that although these fictitious states are untrue and unreal, their content, at the atomic level, is composed out of representations of real things. For example, if one imagines or dreams of a unicorn, this is simply a collage – or an aggregate – of real things, such as a horse, a rhinoceros's horn, etc. It is not that the atomic building-blocks of the unicorn (i.e. horn, horse, etc.) do not represent anything real, but rather that their being thus put together *as a unicorn* doesn't represent anything real – in other words, it is the unicorn that doesn't represent anything real, and not the bits out of which the fictional image of the unicorn is made.

If we take Plato to hold a distinction between memories and imaginings (or fictitious mental states in general) along these very general, basic and commonplace lines, then the theoretical implications of such a view of memories might provide him with a powerful ontological argument for the basis of his epistemic states – a view whose force is rooted in its simplicity. For a memory, we said, is a representation in the mind of something real - a

²⁴² See, e.g. J. T. Bedu-Addo, 'Sense-Experience and the Argument for Recollection in Plato's *Phaedo*', *Phronesis*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (1991), pp. 27-60. Bedu-Addo argues that recollection is a slow and gradual process that begins in infancy and culminates all the way to knowledge.

real event which had occurred in the past, and to which one was witness; or, a real thing or person one had once encountered or experienced in the past, of which the memory is a faithful (albeit, at times, hazy) representation. And hence, just as a copy – by definition – necessarily implies an original, so a genuine memory (once distinguished from fiction) *also by definition necessarily implies something real*. If Socrates can get Meno to concede that correct answers, correct opinions, etc. are really just memories (i.e. copies) after all, then the first step towards showing that enquiry is possible has already been made – the existence of what is ‘real’ (originals) that could then furnish the criterion for truth, and hence the foundation upon which enquiry could be based. For if Meno grants Socrates just this much: that what we call ‘learning’ is in fact nothing more than ‘remembering’, and correct answers (opinions) are ‘memories’, then he cannot deny – without self-contradiction - that they necessarily entail real things, of which they are memories. And this, of course, is an indirect reference to Forms.²⁴³

The term ‘recollection’ does not quite capture the ordinariness of the notion that Plato is proposing and has in mind; and as a result, it can be misleading. First, it points to an already theory-laden term associated with Plato; consequently, it obscures the primitiveness of the notion of a memory. It is this primitiveness and simplicity of the term ‘remembering’ that allows it to do the crucial work that Plato wants it to. Retaining this primitive meaning, then, is prerequisite for an adequate grasp of the theory itself; for it is this commonplace understanding of memory that reveals the logical necessity of positing real states of affairs (or objects) of which they are faithful (true) representations and copies. Second, ‘recollection’ is a term that is indiscriminate of what is being recalled – all it purports to tell us is that some fact, or information, etc. is being recollected, but says nothing about the general structure of such facts. On the other hand, ‘remembering’ clearly indicates a very specific structure: it tells us that what is being retrieved –

²⁴³ Some commentators believe that the *Meno* is an early transitional dialogue, and that at this stage in his career, Plato had not yet conceived of his theory of Forms. However, memories clearly entail what is ‘real’, and ‘realities’ is just how Plato sometimes calls Forms. See also, J. T. Bedu-Addo, ‘Sense-Experience and Recollection in Plato’s *Meno*’, *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 104, No. 3 (Autumn, 1983), pp. 228-248. Bedu-Addo argues that Plato had already formulated his theory of Forms at the time of writing the *Meno*.

although true, and in the sense still a 'fact' - is the sort of 'fact' that is a *copy*, *image*, or *representation* of real things once experienced or encountered. In this sense, their content must always fall short of the original, since a copy or representation is not identical to its original in every detail – otherwise, it's not, strictly speaking, a copy. It thus captures the conception of memories as being at second-hand remove from the real objects of which they are supposed to be (faithful) representations.²⁴⁴

'Recollection' is ambiguous since it leaves open whether what is being recollected is one and the same as the object of knowledge itself (propositions, facts, information, etc.), or whether what is being recollected is some truthful report *about* those objects. For to say that the proposition 'that *p*' is the object of knowledge and/or belief is one thing, and to say that this proposition purports to tell us something *about* that object of knowledge *F*, is another. The former holds the proposition itself to be the target, whereas the latter treats the proposition as a report about, and hence a true representation of, some such target. In speaking of, say, recollecting a 'fact', it is unclear whether we are referring to a feature of the world, or a propositional attitude which accurately mirrors and/or represents that feature. The original/copy distinction embedded in the conception of 'memory' leaves no room for this ambiguity. Had the *Meno's* arguments been confined to epistemological discussions about the difference between 'correct opinion' and 'knowledge' alone, then we may not have been in a position to accurately detect which view Plato is proposing. But the replacement of 'learning' with 'remembering' clearly indicates two things about what Plato has in mind here: (1) that memories imply original real things of which they are copies, and (2) that this conception of memories (and hence correct opinions buried deep within our souls/minds) are at second-hand remove from those original, real objects of knowledge; and hence, they must necessarily fall

²⁴⁴ See, e.g., the Simile of the Cave in *Republic* Bk. VII.

short of knowledge.²⁴⁵ And this is the reason why at the end of the slave-boy demonstration, Socrates tells Meno that the slave has acquired a true belief (or correct opinion) that does not (yet) count as knowledge. This is not a controversial reading since it provides a seamless transition between the theory of recollection – and its concomitant conception of a ‘memory’ as a ‘copy’ – and Plato’s epistemology, ontology and semantics in his other dialogues.

In the *Republic* Bks. V-VII, in discussing the ontological and epistemological differences between true beliefs and knowledge, Plato invokes the idea of image and reality, or copy and original. Similarly, in his discussion of semantics in the *Cratylus*, he claims that a word is copy or ‘likeness’ of a (real) thing,²⁴⁶ and that names are akin to paintings of (real) things;²⁴⁷ and in the *Phaedrus*, he states that the written “discourse of the man who knows... can be fairly called an image.”²⁴⁸ All of these claims presuppose the copy-original distinction, with written and spoken discourse being copies of those real things. This further suggests that should knowledge have an object, it would be the realities themselves, and not the copies (words or propositions that give reports about those realities). Therefore, a definition (proposition) cannot be the object of Socratic knowledge, but rather the Form (reality) itself. The definition is a representation of the Form, and this is why being merely told the definition by someone who has knowledge does not mean that the person on the receiving end has now also acquired knowledge. Knowledge can only be retrieved from within the soul – it is not the sort of thing that can be handed over from one person to the other, like a book or a physical object can; it requires personal excavation from within.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁵ To use an analogous case here, the mental state of looking at the sun is clearer in its detail than that of remembering what one saw, when one was looking at the sun – the second must necessarily be less vivid and less clear since a memory is never as lucid as the original encounter. To make this point, Plato often invokes the analogy of dreaming to distinguish between those who have true beliefs about a multiplicity of particulars, and the philosopher who is aware of the existence of Forms that unify those particulars. The philosopher is ‘awake’ in comparison with the former.

²⁴⁶ *Cratylus* (439a-c).

²⁴⁷ *Cratylus* (430a-e).

²⁴⁸ *Phaedrus* (276a).

²⁴⁹ Beliefs acquired through testimony, should they be true, can guide the receiver towards the acquisition of knowledge. But given that this acquisition amounts to the personal retrieval of truth from within, it is not something that anyone could do on someone else’s

Therefore, to understand the full-force of the theory of recollection – in so far as Plato intended for it to have such a role in the dialogue – one must retain the primitive, simple meaning of his term ‘remembering’ in order to reveal its implications. And from what has been said here, we can at once see that ‘remembering’ is a better translation of what Plato means. For it is *precisely* because ‘remembering’ is such an ordinary and unremarkable phenomenon, that Meno’s acceptance of it in lieu of ‘learning’ then goes on to bind him to its logical consequence: they cannot *but* imply what is real.

6.2. Learning and Remembering

Recollection, for Plato, is a gradual process that begins at infancy. Just as remembering can occur consciously or subconsciously, so too he believed that truths about Forms can occur subconsciously, in our use of everyday concepts that are triggered by sense-experience; or they can occur consciously, as in the philosophers who are actively searching for definitions of Forms and are aware of their existence. To see how this gradual process starts, let us return to the notion of ‘memory’.

Memories are generally triggered in, broadly speaking, two ways:

- a) Seeing/encountering that thing again.
- b) In the absence of (a), someone/something reminding you of it.

At times, we also remember things via a combination of both (a) and (b) – i.e. by encountering object x , and someone/something, attempting to make us remember that this is x . Mistakes can occur when one is not sure if the memory fits with what one is seeing. For example, Jo has a faint memory of Dana having long blonde hair. He sees someone with long blonde hair on the bus and he wonders whether she is Dana. His friend (who had also met Dana in the past) reminds him that Dana is very tall and this person on the bus is petite, so she can’t be Dana. Here, Jo’s memory (opinion) that Dana has long

behalf. On this model, the kind of learning that takes place at school or through reading is not (yet) knowledge. It is the acquisition of true beliefs at best.

blond hair is, of course, true. But his application of that memory (copy, correct opinion of Dana) to this person on the bus is an incorrect application. This is because the memory is limited in the scope of its content: although it tells Jo something about Dana, it just doesn't tell him enough in this situation to correctly identify her.²⁵⁰ Hence a further step is required to assist in the correct identification: retrieving *more* memories (correct opinions) about the object to avoid misidentification. The more memories (correct opinions) one brings to the fore of one's mind, the more accurate they will be at identifying the objects of sense-experience that correlate with those memories (correct opinions). Therefore, we have the means with which we can correctly identify objects of sense-experience through memories (correct opinions) buried deep within the mind (soul), providing that those memories are aroused and brought to the fore of the mind. Thus, we have, in the mind, an inventory of correct opinions about the objects of sense-experience that can assist us in the identification of those objects, and in finding the common denominator that holds that family of objects together (a definition). But – crucially – the starting point in the search for these correct opinions, studying what they have in common, and the act of unifying them to build a definition, is not something that is done by appeal to the objects of sense-experience themselves. Returning to our example: Jo's studying that girl on the bus, and exerting some mental effort to remind himself, might help him remember that Dana was tall – not petite; but it won't help him, in the absence of *any* memory of Dana whatsoever, of knowing whether this girl really is Dana after all. In those cases where Jo has no memory of Dana *at all* (be it a dormant memory or otherwise), should he attempt to construct a

²⁵⁰ Plato thought opinion and knowledge correlate (i.e. apply) to different objects, and that the power they exhibit is also different. To borrow an example from Scaltsas, opinion is like a multiply fractured mirror, reflecting inadequately in a fragmented way what reality is like, so that e.g. instead of seeing the desk with books on it, we see bits of brown, blue and white surfaces. Knowledge has a different access to reality than belief does, such that what is accessed by knowledge is different from what belief can access.

T. Scaltsas, 'The Ontology of Knowledge and Belief in *Republic V*', (2007), *Edinburgh Research Archives*, <<http://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/1964>> [accessed 10.06.2010]. Hence knowledge is a unified intellectual grasp of the reality of an object, while opinion is merely a single fragment or facet of that whole. This fits in with what Socrates tells Meno at the end of the geometrical demonstration. There, he claims that 'opinions' (in the plural) become 'bits' (again plural) of knowledge, suggesting that each opinion is *one* bit of knowledge or *one* fragment of reality.

picture (mental image) in his mind of Dana on the basis of his observations of this person on the bus, then his picture is liable to be inaccurate at best, and false at worse. Likewise, if he has never met Dana before at any point in the past – and, therefore, has no memories of her whatsoever – then observing this person on the bus and studying her every feature in hope that he might be able to build an accurate picture of Dana in his mind, is futile and/or impossible. Unless, that is, someone points out to Jo that this girl is perhaps Dana. But now, in the absence of memories, this person’s testimony is all he has by means of support. And what if this person is mistaken? Wouldn’t Jo’s identifying this girl as Dana – when in actual fact she isn’t – mean that he inherits the testifier’s mistake?

This, then, is Socrates’ complaint about the account of mind that assumes it to be a blank slate; and on the basis of this assumption, turns to the objects of sense-experience for definitions. To clarify, let us attempt to apply the example of Dana to cases of identifying virtue – i.e. cases of identifying virtuous actions, where we have correct opinions (memories) about virtue, but not a definition (and/or knowledge) of it. The more correct opinions one has about what constitutes virtue, the more accurate one’s identification of everyday cases of virtuous actions will be. Should an agent be in two minds with regards to which of their options – say, *a* or *b* – is virtuous, then remembering as much as they can about virtue (retrieving truths about virtue from within them) will assist them in their identification of virtue – i.e. whether *a* or *b* counts as virtuous. But the mind tends – where there are gaps in our memories – to either leave them as gaps, lacking a unified grasp of what virtue is, or it tends to fill these gaps with imaginings and hence gives rise to an inaccurate overall grasp of what constitutes virtue. This is why only knowledge of virtue will secure a correct identification of virtue on every occasion, and mere correct opinions – lacking a cohesive and clear overall understanding of virtue – are liable to be misleading at certain situations (as in the above case of the belief/memory of Dana’s blond hair being true but insufficient for correctly identifying her).

It is important to note that Socrates is not claiming that we have no use for the objects of sense experience at all; for as we saw, one way in which memories are triggered is through encountering objects in sense experience. Likewise, encountering a case of a virtuous action does assist in the retrieval of a correct opinion about virtue; but opinions, as we also saw, do not offer a comprehensive definition of all of virtue's aspects, and without a comprehensive account (definition), Socrates thinks that we may misidentify what counts as a genuine case of virtue, and risk inheriting a false opinion about virtue by erroneously taking that case to be a genuine example of it.

Socrates contends that studying everyday cases of what people *assume* to be genuine examples of virtue will not solve this problem – just as studying the person on the bus in the absence of any memories of her (latent or otherwise) won't result in Jo's ability to now *know* if she really is the Dana folk speak of. What if those who spoke to Jo about Dana (virtue) had themselves never met her (i.e. lack memories of her)? To secure knowledge of virtue (or Dana) we must – so Socrates argues – have *some* means within us through which such knowledge can be acquired. In other words, to identify genuine cases of virtue one must already have the means through which such identification is possible. Socrates assumes that deriving a universal definition of virtue on the basis of particular examples of people's ethical practices and on society's long held beliefs about what might count as good, is an anthropological exercise at best, and a sure recipe for dogma at worse. The belief that any such enterprise could be successful in yielding a universal definition of virtue must, therefore, be premised on the naive assumption that whatever the majority takes to be virtue must correctly be so; but history provides us with ample counter-examples to this assumption.²⁵¹ And so, in the absence of any alternative view of the mind, and an alternative methodology for finding a unifying account of virtue, and given the realisation that appealing to empirical sciences and/or studying people's practices fail to offer a reliable

²⁵¹ Take Nazi ideology in Germany, for instance, where the majority - convinced by the prevalent pseudo-scientific theories about race at that time – had once considered the butchering of millions of people they regarded as racially inferior to be a perfectly acceptable ethical practice – with only a minority of Germans being sceptical about such practices, and the assumptions upon which those practices were based.

and/or unified picture of what virtue might be, this quest is abandoned altogether on the assumption that it is, in principle, an impossible one – scepticism about moral knowledge is thus born. This is what the “eristic argument” in effect claims to be the case. And it is this that Socrates’ theory of recollection is supposed to remedy by offering us an alternative model of the mind, and consequently, an alternative mode of enquiry.

An objector might reasonably wonder why Socrates needs a theory of recollection at all. If ‘reason’ does the crucial work of discerning correct opinions (about virtue or whatever) from false ones, then surely a rational definition of virtue can be obtained by studying everyday cases of it. For example, causing someone’s death in one context may count as murder, while in another, where one is causing the death of a soldier belonging to an invading army, it may count as self-defence. We do not appear to need anything other than a process of rigorous reasoning to differentiate between genuine cases of good and bad – we just need to work out the difference in contingencies. But problems resulting from the ambiguity of what counts as ‘murder’ or ‘self-defence’ aside,²⁵² this methodology won’t be capable of meeting the naturalist’s challenge. In the case of empirical facts, we can refer to natural properties through which we can correctly distinguish one particular object from another. In the case of moral actions, however, no such naturalist properties of good would be forthcoming. And if they can’t be detected naturalistically, then they must be of a queer sort. But this now is absurd: there are no (queer) moral properties or facts that we know of, and hence no (queer yet objective) moral knowledge either, since this knowledge would have to be so “utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else”.²⁵³ To avoid this conundrum, Plato needs an alternative.²⁵⁴

²⁵² Is a pre-emptive strike, for instance, ‘self-defence’ or ‘murder’? What would those contingencies have to be to avoid the slippery slope from one to the other? Socrates thinks that basing our definition of virtue entirely on studying cases of pre-emptive strikes, for instances, cannot settle the matter. Rather, we first need a definition of virtue before we can ascertain which cases are genuine examples of it and which are not.

²⁵³ J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 38.

²⁵⁴ Plato might, of course, be mistaken in his analysis, and many philosophers think that he is. But my intention here is simply to provide his rationale for the theory of recollection – and not to defend it.

Plato's alternative, as I argued in the last chapter, is to assign to Forms the role of both: being the realities that act as the criterion for truth, and being the cause of memories in the mind, thereby providing access to truth. But recollection, for Plato, is not something that happens all at once. Indeed, the paradox of recollection that we looked at in Chapter 1 had arisen because of a misconception about how Plato thinks recollection takes place. Plato believed that acquiring knowledge is a long and arduous process. Likewise, recollection is a long and gradual process. According to Bedu-Addo, recollection can be divided into two main stages:

- R₁ Concerns the formation of concepts and begins right from infancy.
- R₂ When Forms themselves are recollected much later in life via philosophical dialectic.²⁵⁵

Bedu-Addo's distinction is illuminating. It confirms the view that everyday concepts are subconsciously recollected much like memories can also be retrieved subconsciously. Moreover, learning is something that happens very gradually, and which involves the retrieval of as much truth from within the mind as we can, the culmination of which is the philosophical knowledge of the philosophers who are aware of the existence of Forms and actively seek knowledge of them.

On this picture, teaching involves not so much the *handing over* of information, as with our common-sense views of knowledge acquisition and teaching. Rather, given that the mind is not a blank, but rather the source of truth, the process of teaching and learning go in the opposite direction, as it were: from inside-out. To teach is to elicit truth from within the pupil; to learn is to retrieve the truth from within oneself. In the *Theaetetus*, for example, Socrates assumes the role of a midwife who urges his interlocutor to voice his opinions; he then subjects those opinions to a process of rigorous reasoning with the aim of helping his interlocutor ascertain whether the new born child is a genuine one, or whether his interlocutor suffers from a

²⁵⁵ J. T. Bedu-Addo, 'Sense-Experience and the Argument for Recollection in Plato's *Phaedo*', op. cit., p. 40.

phantom pregnancy. If genuine, then a correct opinion which was buried within his interlocutor's soul has successfully been recollected, and furthermore, identified as being thus. Socratic elenchus makes use of reason to help us recognise whether those opinions are indeed true. If, on the other hand, it does not pass the process of rational falsification, then it is discarded as an incorrect opinion and hence not a genuine child of the soul. The first stage of enquiry is to provide a check on our beliefs and make us recognise where they are false. With this recognition comes the identification of a lack: we are now aware of our ignorance. From this we can progress to the second stage, where we invest our energies into compensating for this lack – i.e. searching for true beliefs (attempting to retrieve them from within us). This process continues, assessing each and every opinion – discarding it if it appears to be false – until we do stumble upon what appears to be a true one. Once this is done, enquiry moves to the next stage: the belief assumed to be true is now tested in new contexts, over and over again, to discern whether it survives the test of falsification in all those contexts, on every occasion. Certainty about the truth of the belief in something that we build up to gradually over time and by subjecting that belief to rational scrutiny on various occasions and in different contexts – it must survive those tests, settle and mature thus to count as knowledge and to gain stability. What's more, this process assists us in retrieving more correct opinions about the subject under investigation – it allows us “after remembering just *one* thing – most people call it learning – to go on and figure out everything else”.²⁵⁶

Should Socrates think that ‘learning’ is, in fact, ‘remembering’, then could we reasonably assume that he considers ‘teaching’ to be merely ‘reminding’? The *Theaetetus* provides us with textual evidence for this assumption where it portrays Socrates as a midwife. Socrates is using his elenctic method to elicit beliefs from his interlocutor, Theaetetus.²⁵⁷ The elenctic method, as previously discussed, involves a rigorous process of reasoning. The teacher, therefore, partakes in the reasoning process with their student with the aim of helping the student examine whether their beliefs are true or false.

²⁵⁶ *Meno* (81d).

²⁵⁷ Plato, *Theaetetus* (149a-151d), R. A. H. Waterfield (trans.), (London: Penguin Books, 1987).

Socrates takes on this ‘examiner’ role in the *Protagoras* where he often refers to himself as a medical doctor checking the health of Protagoras’ assumptions about knowledge, virtue and teaching.²⁵⁸ In doing so, Socrates assists his interlocutors ridding themselves of their false assumptions by helping them recognise that they are false. This can be done through a complex deployment of reason – Socrates, for examples, assists his interlocutors to see the contradictions among their beliefs or fallacies in their arguments, where there are any; he provides them with analogies and examples to further clarify his arguments. What is fundamental to the Socratic method of elenchus is that it is a joint *rational* activity. The aim is to arrive at truth buried deep with our souls (minds); and should any truth be arrived at, then it isn’t done by Socrates installing truth in the mind of his interlocutors; for Socrates thinks that true opinions are *already* there in the mind awaiting to be triggered by questioning and reasoning. This underlying assumption about truth existing in the mind already is the basis for his elenctic method of eliciting truth. The upshot of this is that the elenctic method does not recognise teaching as a practice that involves *handing over* true opinions, but rather assisting others to search for them on their own.²⁵⁹ The elenchus thus considers teaching to be ‘reminding’, and helps others ‘remember’ from within themselves, by themselves, and for the benefit of their own souls (minds) as enquirer’s into truth.

6.3. What’s Wrong With The Eristic Argument?

Discovering the role of Meno’s paradox of enquiry requires an examination of what Socrates believed to be its fatal flaw. This in turn, would also clarify

²⁵⁸ See, e.g., the *Protagoras* (344d and 352a-c).

²⁵⁹ See, e.g., in the *Meno* (93b) where Socrates formulates the question of what it is that makes people act virtuously, and then proceeds to ask whether it “is something that can’t be handed over from one person to another”; and again, in the *Protagoras* (319a) where he claims: “I always thought this is something people couldn’t be taught”; also in (325c-e) where he criticises the methods of teaching that force student to learn by reading and memorising, and claims that these methods lead to students imitating what they’ve learnt, but without understanding it. In the *Republic* (518b-d) he offers a positive response: “we must reject the conception of education professed by those who say that they can put into the mind knowledge that was not there before – rather as if they can put sight into blind eyes ... But our argument indicates that the capacity for knowledge is innate in each man’s mind ... Then this turning around of the mind itself [towards reality] might be made a subject of a professional skill ... It would not be concerned to implant sight, but to ensure that someone who already had it was not turned in the wrong direction or looking the wrong way.”

what constitutes his response to it. In this section, I will examine the eristic argument and argue that although the argument is valid, it contains a hidden premise which Socrates takes to be false; and furthermore, that the theory of recollection (along with the idea of the mind containing correct opinions) is Socrates' response to it. I will argue that although the theory of mind that posits innate correct opinions within it constitutes Socrates' response to the paradox – and on this score, he need not say more by way of a response to the paradox - it leaves us wondering what the difference between these correct opinions and knowledge might be; and that is one reason why Plato provides this distinction towards the end of the dialogue.

I argued earlier that our ordinary notion of memory reveals the force of Socrates' argument against Meno's paradox because it necessarily posits realities of which the truths within the soul are reminiscent. I also gave an example of a person on a bus attempting to identify someone else, Dana, and argued that, absent memories of Dana, the person cannot identify Dana and be certain that they have. But a mind without memories will be a mind that *cannot* recognise anyone or anything – the concept of *recognition* assumes an initial act of cognition. If, as we saw in Chapters 5 and 6, for Plato, basic concepts are necessary for understanding the impressions given to us via the senses, then what he meant is that without R_1 no cognition *at all* can take place. For unless we have the means within us (images or specifications) then we will not be able to intelligibly recognise anything. If I do not already know who Albert Einstein is, how will I be able to recognise him should I cross him in the street? For how will we know when we happen upon something or someone unless we *already* have the means within us with which to recognise them – that is to say, unless an initial act of cognition has taken place at a prior stage to the encounter? And if deny that we already have the means within us to recognise and identify the objects under consideration, then how could we set out to look for them in the first place? In other words, without the impressions that Forms have caused upon the soul in a prenatal state, and which we possess in the form of dormant memories, how can concepts gain a point of entry at a post-natal stage? Plato concedes that they cannot. And it is for this reason that Socrates claims that

all learning is in fact remembering. Initial cognition cannot take place in this realm, hence all that *we* would call 'cognition' is, for Plato, in actual fact, an act of *re*-cognition. A closer look at the Meno's paradox reveals that it is precisely *this* problem of initial cognition and subsequent recognition that the eristic argument is putting forward. It is worth looking at Meno's questions and Socrates' reformulation of them again. First, Meno poses his triad of questions:

(A) But how can you try to find out about something, Socrates, if you 'haven't got the faintest idea' what it is? (B) I mean, how can you put before your mind a thing *that you have no knowledge of*, in order to try to find out about it? (C) And even supposing you did come across it, how would you know *that was it*, if you didn't know what it was to begin with?²⁶⁰

(A) merely states that a mind with no conception, image, guide or specification cannot possibly "find" something. The next two questions then specify the two senses in which this impossibility comes about. (B) targets what goes on in one's mind before one starts to look for something. Surely, one must have something in mind before one sets out to find it. (C) then targets the actual "finding", "seeing", "recognising" or "discovering" of what one was looking for: even if one were to have the object within one's visual field, for example, given the lack of a conception of it, one would fail to make sense of the visual experience of it, and would therefore fail to identify and recognise it – they would fail to "see" it. In other words, the problem stems because the mind has no means to either look for things (B), or actually see things (in the sense of recognising things). And this is how Socrates reformulates it, merely adding (D):

(A) [T]he one that says that it's impossible to try to find out about anything – either what you know or what you don't know. (D) 'You can't try to find out about something you know about, because you know about it, in which case there's no point trying to find out about it; and you can't find out about something you don't know, either, because then you don't even know what it is you're trying to find out about (B and C).²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ *Meno*, op. cit., (80d).

²⁶¹ *Ibid*, (80e).

(D) merely completes the argument with the part that Meno had left out. Meno left it out because, in the context of their discussion, it was irrelevant. Meno's frustration didn't stem from Socrates making him out to be too knowledgeable, and hence discouraging him from inquiring further. Quite the contrary: it was Meno's lack of knowledge of what virtue is, and his repeated failures to find a definition, that got him to become defensive. In this context, the only part of the argument which he finds relevant to their situation is the part that deals with the impossibility of inquiry due to lack of knowledge (B and C) - not due to one's possession of it, as in (D).

It is the blank mind, then, that is the cause of the difficulty, and merely claiming that inquiry can start with beliefs won't solve the problem because empty minds cannot even make sense of the impressions given to them via sense-experience, as we saw Socrates had stating in the *Phaedrus* earlier, let alone acquiring true beliefs. Hence, contrary to what ERM had assumed, the paradox target *all* stages and objects of cognition indiscriminately – not merely the stage of how one moves from beliefs to knowledge.

However, Meno's paradox is often interpreted by advocates of TRM and ERM alike as suffering from an equivocation fallacy of the term 'know'. This is because, at first blush, a superficial challenge appears:

- 5) For anything, F , either one knows F or one does not know F .
- 6) If one knows F , then one cannot enquire about F .
- 7) If one does not know F , then one cannot enquire about F .
- 8) Therefore, for all F , one cannot enquire about F .

The analysis claims that there are different ways in which we can come to know (implicitly, explicitly or by having a true belief vs. having knowledge). All this is true. But the real question is this: where does this implicit grasp come from, and what does this implicit grasp amount to? In other words, what is the ultimate source of these true beliefs that we may possess? If we reply: 'prenatal knowledge' or 'recollection' then we have unwittingly spelt out the real problem: the hidden premise according to which the mind is a

tabula rasa (or blank slate) of empiricist epistemology. Our answers, then, betray what the eristic argument secretly assumes; and it is this hidden assumption that Plato takes to be at the root of the problem. This is the deeper challenge contained in the argument: its real import.

Indeed, we find Socrates making no objection whatsoever to the conception of knowledge used in the paradox – whether implicitly or explicitly. This is because it is not the argument's conception of 'knowledge' that Socrates takes issue with. Rather, what he takes issue with is this: the account of the mind as a *tabula rasa* which the eristic argument presupposes; along with its concomitant *process* of concept and knowledge acquisition (understood as 'installing' x in a blank mind); and from which it then follows that enquiry must be impossible. In other words, he takes issue with the *preconditions of knowledge*.

Should he be right, then a successful response to the paradox does not entail attacking its validity; for it *is* valid. Nor does it entail revealing the equivocal fallacy it allegedly commits; for there is no such fallacy. Rather, it entails revealing its hidden premise, and furthermore showing it – and hence the conclusion that follows from it - to be false. Should the reading that I have offered here be right, then what Socrates needs to do is *not* to contend that the argument makes an equivocal use of 'knowledge'; but rather, he needs to show us that the account of the mind presupposed by the eristic argument is false. So, how does he go on to respond to the paradox; and what can that response tell us about what he takes to be its fatal flaw?

Indeed, that is just what Socrates goes on to do: replace the *tabula rasa* account of the mind with his own alternative which assumes that the mind is anything but a blank when enquiry begins: it contains truths about things we once knew before birth – in other words, the theory of recollection. We hear no mention of the paradox containing an equivocation of the term 'knowledge', nor does he take issue with this elsewhere in the dialogue – he merely introduces an intermediary state of 'correct opinion', distinguishes this from 'knowledge' towards the end of the dialogue, and tells us that a

mind with no knowledge about x, nonetheless contains true conceptions about x. What this confirms is that his denial of this argument is not based on his thinking that it is invalid because 'knowledge' is used equivocally. Rather, it confirms the earlier assumption that the argument contains a hidden premise to the effect that we are born with blank minds, and hence that gaining knowledge can only be by means of installing information from the *outside-in*, as it were; and that this premise is false, and hence that the conclusion – enquiry is impossible – is also false. The theory of recollection is intended to show that the opposite is true: the mind is by no means a blank, and hence that knowledge acquisition (and enquiry in general) can only begin with recalling information from the inside-out, and hence that Socrates' conclusion – enquiry is possible – is indeed true.

This, then, is the reason why we find no analysis whatsoever of the eristic argument along the lines that it contains a fallacy of equivocation, either straight after the paradox, or in the remainder of the dialogue. He does not point out this fallacy of equivocation *because the argument contains no such fallacy*; and if it contains no such fallacy, then, of course, he has no need to say it does. What we do find instead, straight after the paradox, is the claim that the *tabula rasa* view of the mind is false (the theory of recollection amounts to this claim), and a demonstration of how an enquirer does indeed have the correct answers within them without anyone having implanted such answers in their mind (the slave boy passage provides evidence for this claim). If Socrates thinks that this hidden premise amounts to a *tabula rasa* view of the mind, then all he has to do is show how and why it is false, and hence that the conclusion which follows from it is also false. And that is precisely what the theory of recollection and slave boy passage do. To see the crucial work that the hidden premise does, let us re-consider the argument in the first horn of the paradox:

- a) If x is not-known, and,
- b) (*Hidden Premise*) The mind is blank about x,
- c) Enquiry will have no aim (i.e. no conception of x with which to look for x),

d) Therefore, enquiry is impossible.

And,

e) If x is not-known, and,

f) (*Hidden Premise*) The mind is blank about x ,

g) The mind will not be able to recognise x (i.e. will lack a conception of x with which to recognise x),

h) Therefore, enquiry is impossible.

On the other hand, a closer look at second horn of the paradox yields the following:

i) If x is known,

j) (*Hidden Premise*) The mind already contains a conception of x ,

k) It is pointless or impossible to re-acquire the conception of x since it is already there,

l) Therefore, enquiry is impossible/pointless.

Note that the idea of a memory of something forgotten escapes the kind of difficulty in the second horn above. The soul contains memories of the encounter, but the agent is not aware of this encounter at the start during the R_1 stage of recollection. This allows for another stage of recollection at R_2 , thereby avoiding the difficulty above.

With this we can see that Socrates believes that the paradox gains its force from a specific account of the mind, which takes it not to contain any prior conception of the objects of cognition and/or inquiry. What he is telling Meno is this: 'You're only in trouble if you think this view of the mind is adequate, in which case you have to bite the bullet and accept that enquiry (and knowledge) is impossible. If, however, you reject this view of the mind (because it's false anyhow) and accept my alternative, the paradox can't touch you'. Meno claims that this is not enough: he wants Socrates to *show* him that his alternative is indeed better. Socrates takes up the challenge: 'I can *even* provide you with evidence that my account of the mind is better by using the example of your slave here to prove it – I will show you that

correct answers come from the inside-out, and not from the outside-in'. He gets confirmation from Meno that no one has taught his slave geometry and that the slave has no knowledge whatsoever of it (or indeed has *any* beliefs about it whatsoever since no one has taught him geometry²⁶²). Socrates then goes on to ask the slave questions, and after a few initial false answers, the slave finally gets it right – Socrates all the while asking him questions, but not giving him any answers. Once the demonstration is finished, Socrates returns to the theory of recollection to boast his victory at having successfully demonstrated its truth:

What do you think, Meno? Did he say anything in his answers that wasn't *his own* opinion? – No... But these opinions were certainly there, *inside* him? – Yes. So in other words, *inside* someone with no knowledge (of whatever it might be) there are correct opinions about the things he doesn't know? – So it seems.²⁶³

And a little later, in a sign that Meno has now completely succumbed to the idea that the theory of recollection, as the demonstration with his slave shows, successfully solves the paradox, and is a better model of the mind to the one the eristic argument had presupposed, he goes on to say:

SOCRATES: So if the truth about how things really are has been in the soul forever, then the soul must be ever-living – and that means that if there's something you happen not to know right now, or rather, not to have remembered yet, you mustn't be afraid to try and find out about it – that is, to remember it.

MENO: Socrates ... in a funny kind of way ... I like what you're saying.²⁶⁴

In particular, note how Meno has entirely accepted the replacement of 'learning' as something which occurs from the outside-in, and 'remembering'

²⁶² Plato's choice of example for demonstrating the truth of the theory of recollection here is telling, for it directly contradicts ERM's claims. Unlike the inquiry into virtue between Meno and Socrates, who may be said to have come to the discussion with *some* beliefs about virtue, the slave-boy has never been taught or learnt geometry prior to Socrates quizzing him. Plato cannot, therefore, mean that in the absence of knowledge, we all come to the discussion table with beliefs about the object of inquiry which we may have gained empirically from the outside-in. For, clearly, the boy has no such beliefs about geometry. The only beliefs he does have are those dormant within his soul in the form of memories whose content are a priori truths, and which he goes on to excavate and recollect from within himself, from the inside-out, with Socrates' help.

²⁶³ *Meno* (85a) [my emphasis].

²⁶⁴ *Meno* (86b).

as the recalling truths from the inside-out - that 'learning', properly understood, is in fact just 'remembering'. If Meno were not content at this stage that the theory of recollection and slave demonstration answer the paradox successfully, then Plato would have made him quick to point this out. But neither does Plato make him say so, nor does Plato think there is any such need to make him say so.

The distinction between 'correct opinion' and 'knowledge' which he introduces later on in the dialogue serves a closely connected, but different purpose altogether. It is a further illustration of how people can begin the process of *becoming* virtuous in the absence of having knowledge of virtue itself.²⁶⁵ How that illustration then connects to the theory of recollection is not relevant here. It suffices to say that Socrates is aware that the introduction of the epistemic state of correct opinion, true belief or true conception of an object, *F*, alone – i.e. *without* the adjunct thesis of the mind that takes these true conceptions of *F* to be innate within it from birth - would *not* escape the threat posed by the eristic argument; for if he had merely stated that in the absence of knowledge, there are such things as correct opinions or conceptions of *F* that we can begin enquiry with (without the theory of recollection), then Meno would have been quick to point out that a mere replacement of 'know' with 'correct conception' in the first and second horns

²⁶⁵ The claim that 'correct opinions' furnish an adequate guide to becoming good, albeit lack the stability of knowledge, and hence cannot guarantee that people will *always* act virtuously (since opinions tend to fluctuate due to their being easily doubted), is something which comes about as a result of Meno's despair. When Socrates claims that "being good" is not something which can be taught, Meno replies: "It looks that way – if we've thought it through correctly; which makes me wonder, Socrates, if there aren't even any good men at all! Or, how on earth *do* people become good, if and when they do?" (96d). The *Road to Larissa*, etc. is then aimed at remedying Meno's despair (that there might not be any good men at all, and that virtue – in the absence of being teachable – is impossible to acquire). Therefore, it occurs *not* as a direct response to the paradox, but rather to address another – closely related – concern: how do people become good if it's not teachable? Plato recognises that it might not be easy to connect what's happening in the slave passage with what happens in our every day enquiries into virtue and acting virtuously. Therefore, he portrays Meno as despairing due to not having made this connection either, and proceeds to show how the theory of recollection applies to cases of virtue as well: as is the case of the slave, we too have 'correct opinions' about what counts as virtue such that we can be guided in our everyday enquiries into what counts as a virtuous action in a given situation. But the instability of correct opinions is what accounts for our not always acting in accordance to their guidance: moral failure occurs in the absence of knowledge, and where correct opinions – instead of guiding us – are abandoned due to their being easily dubitable in the face of difficult situations that appear to indicate to us something contrary to what those opinions tell us.

of the paradox would immediately give rise to a new paradox – the paradox of correct conception:

- 1) For anything, F , either one has a correct conception of F or one does not.
- 2) If one has a correct conception of F , then one cannot enquire about F because that would be pointless.
- 3) If one does not have a correct conception of F , then one cannot enquire about F because one would not be able to recognise it in the course of enquiry.
- 4) Therefore, for all F , whether one has or hasn't a correct conception of F , one cannot enquire about F .

This alone confirms that it is the theory of recollection that is doing the crucial work of responding to the paradox, and not Plato's epistemic distinction.²⁶⁶

To conclude, the theory of recollection (the mind's already containing truth in the form of memories of Forms, from birth) and the slave demonstration, constitute both Socrates response to the eristic argument, and his analysis of what's wrong with that argument. The theory of recollection does, of course, have something in common with Plato's later epistemic distinction: correct opinion. However, that they have this in common need not mean that

²⁶⁶ Plato could have placed anything 'innate' in the mind by way of providing an alternative source of truth and an alternative basis for objective knowledge. This could've been Kantian in flavour, endorsing some sort of *a priori* concepts; or, something like Descartes' or Spinoza's *clear and distinct ideas*; or simply innate knowledge – in short, anything innate, universal and a source of truth. Anything that is innate and allows for the possibility of objective knowledge would've done the job of blocking the eristic threat. This shows that it isn't 'correct opinion' doing the crucial work here of solving the paradox, but rather the conception of the mind which permits of an innate source of truth, thereby making way for the possibility of objective knowledge. What makes Plato's account of knowledge both interesting, and different to other innatist views, is that although the process of knowledge acquisition relies on retrieving truths from within us, these truths are only preliminaries and do not yet count as knowledge. Gaining knowledge requires the correct 'use' and application of these innate ideas to particular objects outside the mind. Transforming them into knowledge requires practice and skill on the one hand, and constant engagement with particular sense-perceptual examples of these universal concepts that exist outside the mind, on the other – it's a two-way, not one-way, process. In several passages in the *Cratylus*, *Sophist*, *Republic* and *Phaedrus* Plato states that 'correct use' and 'correct application' are pivotal for knowledge, understanding and mastery of any field.

Socrates does not think that the theory of recollection (and slave demonstration) alone, are sufficient to convince Meno that enquiry is indeed possible.²⁶⁷

5.4. *The Paradox In Context*

It is often assumed that Meno launches his paradox in response to Socrates' avowal of ignorance in the *Meno* at 80c-d,²⁶⁸ but his insistence that enquiry must be pursued energetically all the same. This is, in part, correct; but there is more to Meno's timing than this assumption grants. Meno's response could not have been triggered merely by Socrates' declaration of ignorance here, since the latter has already made a similar declaration at the very beginning of the dialogue at 70c-71c, and yet Meno did not object to it via the paradox. Moreover, not only does Socrates claim at the very beginning of the dialogue that he hasn't "got the faintest idea what being good is", but also that he has "never met anyone who knows, either".²⁶⁹ Hence, Socrates' avowal to ignorance cannot be the only reason for Meno's decision to launch the paradox as an attack on Socrates, as it has been often assumed, since the opportunity for such an attack was provided right at the start of their conversation, and yet Meno did not seize it then. So, what led Meno to his choice of argument at 80d-c; and what can the context of this argument tell us about the overall concern of the dialogue?

To explain, let us return to Socrates and Meno's discussion at the beginning of the dialogue. Meno's initial question was whether virtue is teachable – this is the opening question of the dialogue. Socrates objects that we cannot know this – whether virtue is of the *kind* 'teachable' – unless we first know what virtue is, itself by itself. The dialogue ends with Socrates claiming that we cannot know for certain whether virtue is something which can, or cannot, be

²⁶⁷ For a reading of the *Theaetetus* that takes Socrates there not to be putting forward a positive thesis that defines knowledge, but rather a negative thesis which argues about what knowledge *cannot be*, see T. Chappell. 'Plato on Knowledge in the *Theaetetus*', (2009), in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2009 Edition), E. Zalta (ed.), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/plato-theaetetus/>> [accessed: 15.06.2011]. Chappell quite rightly identifies that one of Socrates' chief targets of attack in that dialogue is the empiricist account of the mind and its associated account of knowledge as sense-perceptual.

²⁶⁸ See, e.g., T. Irwin, *Plato's Ethics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 130.

²⁶⁹ *Meno* (71b-c).

taught since we are yet to provide an answer to the question 'What is Virtue?' But why does their enquiry into a universal definition of virtue fail? Quite simply because Meno, after several attempts to offer definitions of it using a very specific method of enquiry which Socrates objects to at every turn, gives up. It is at this stage – where he cannot think of any other method of enquiry that could satisfy Socrates' demands – that he resorts to the eristic argument. In effect, Meno is claiming that if Socrates is not content to accept that the method of enquiry that he has provided so far is capable of yielding the sort of results that he demands, and accept that it is the only way one can go about enquiring into things, then one might as well say that knowledge, and enquiry, are altogether impossible – in other words, one might as well give up, like Meno does himself. For if Meno's methodology does not satisfy Socrates' demands, then we are faced with two possibilities: either (a) Socrates' demands (for universal definitions) are fundamentally untenable and hence unreasonable, and/or (b) enquiry – whether along the lines Socrates has defined it or otherwise – is itself impossible.

And this above point is precisely what Plato portrays in the 'Method of Hypothesis'. Straight after the slave passage, where Meno has succumbed to Socrates' claims about learning being in fact just remembering, and that we must therefore pursue enquiry energetically and not be discouraged by the eristic assumptions or argument, Socrates proposes that they resume their original enquiry and find a single definition of virtue. And as discussed already, Meno – despite agreeing now that such an enquiry is indeed possible – refuses to continue. He demands that they enquire into whether virtue is teachable instead. Socrates had already told him that no satisfactory conclusion can be reached on that matter, for unless we know what Virtue is itself by itself, we cannot know whether it is of the kind that is teachable or not. Socrates here proposes that they follow the geometer's method of enquiry – the Method of Hypothesis. On this method, one proceeds as follows:

If it's [virtue] a kind of knowledge, then it can be taught; and if it isn't, then it can't.²⁷⁰

He first examines the hypothesis that virtue is a kind of knowledge. He argues that the characteristics of the soul (mind) rely on their being used with good sense in order for them to count as virtues – fearlessness, for example, when combined with good sense, is called bravery, and when combined with bad sense, is called foolishness. Likewise, all materials and possessions outside the mind necessitate their being used wisely to count as beneficial. Hence for anything to count as good (i.e. to have salutary and beneficial effects) it must rely – either entirely or significantly – on wisdom. Wisdom is a kind of knowledge. If virtue is a kind of knowledge, then it can be taught. Upon closer analysis of this first half of the investigation, we notice that the arguments used here to draw this conclusion are entirely deductive. That is to say, *from truths recollected from within the soul*.

The second part of the analysis, however, takes on the same method of hypothesis but relies on an inductive, empirical method. Socrates now argues that from observations, we can see that the sons of many good and righteous men in Athens have turned out, despite their expensive education, not to be virtuous. From this we can conclude that virtue is not something which can be taught, and if it is something which, in principle, cannot be taught, it follows that it can't be knowledge. There are two important aspects of the Method of Hypothesis here that need to be stated in order to see how it maps onto what he also claims in the *Republic* about true beliefs based on appearances (i.e. acquired empirically) hovering between what 'is' and what 'is-not'. In the first half, as mentioned, the conclusion is used through deductive methodology alone (i.e. using reason to excavate truths from within). Meno is entirely satisfied with the conclusion and claims that "he is now convinced that must be the answer". At this juncture, Socrates professes his doubt about the conclusion and gives us a clue about an important feature of 'correct opinions' that distinguish them from 'knowledge':

²⁷⁰ *Meno* (87c).

I'm afraid it's no good if it only *seemed* to be right a moment ago; it's also got to seem right now, and *continue to keep on seeming* right – otherwise it's worthless.²⁷¹

Note how this connects to a later claim about correct opinions being a good guide to truth, but that their worth is overshadowed by knowledge due to the latter's stability – true opinions fluctuate because they are based on appearances; they seem right one moment, but not another. In the second half of the analysis, the same thing happens. Although Meno accepts that since no one seems to be teaching or learning virtue, and that he must abandon his earlier conviction that it is knowledge and hence teachable, he does so with more reluctance and less certainty. He now confesses that:

It looks that way – *if we've thought it through correctly*.²⁷²

The initial confidence has again been shaken as a result of Socrates' method which presents two contrary correct opinions to Meno – in one sense, it *is* teachable; and yet in another it *is-not*. This is Socrates deliberately creating *aporia* to push Meno's mind to ask 'Just what *is* Virtue?' More specifically – and this is important – the general form of the argument mirrors the exact claim that Plato makes in the *Republic* about appearances based on perceptions (acquired empirically) and judgements based on reason (recollected from within the soul). The two seem to often give us contradictory verdicts about one object. In the *Republic*, in the example of the stick that is half-immersed in water, and which appears therefore to be bent, reason tells us that the stick *is* straight, but perceptions tells us it *isn't* (it is bent). Similarly, the first part of the hypothesis, deductive arguments (analogous to the case of reason in the stick example), tell us that virtue is knowledge and hence teachable; but appearances based on empirical observations tell us that no one is teaching it and learning it, and hence it isn't teachable, and so it cannot be knowledge. Reason says it *is* knowledge, and therefore, can be taught; but perceptions say it *is-not* something which can be taught, and if it isn't, then it cannot be knowledge. The matter cannot be settled, as Socrates had previously argued, until such contraries are

²⁷¹ *Meno* (89c) [My emphasis].

²⁷² *Meno* (96d).

presented to the mind with the specific aim of creating *aporia*, and then propelling the mind – through the use of reason - to the identification of units: ‘What is Virtue Itself?’ For until such knowledge is recollected and gained, as he’d repeatedly told Meno, and as his last words in the dialogue restate, we will never move away from hypothetical answers that *seem* one moment to be true, but *seem* false the next. Appearances will continue to deceive us unless knowledge is acquired, and hence appearances are overridden. Correct opinions – whether about virtue or anything else – are at the mercy of appearances; they have no stability, and are thus subject to environmental luck. An agent’s following the lead of a correct opinion depends entirely on whether the circumstances give rise to appearances that accord with that opinion. Where appearances don’t, the opinion is immediately doubted, rejected as false (even though it is true), and consequently the agent fails to follow it.

That Plato dedicated much of his career and dialogues to rejecting this particular methodology which Meno uses at first for defining morality on the assumption that it leads to relativism, is uncontroversial. And what Plato has Socrates complaining about – in the *Meno* and elsewhere - is that people often confuse a definition with examples of it, which would make morality an empirical type of enquiry moving from particular cases to a generalisation about its laws. But the enquiry must do the very opposite: it has to begin with a rational search for a definition (in short, recollection) and *then* be applied to particular empirical cases, to ascertain whether those cases are genuine examples of it. For otherwise, moral philosophy would be a branch of empirical sciences; and thus conceived, it would fall apart as soon as what appeared to be a counter-example of it is identified.

What the theory of recollection is aimed at doing, then, is to provide the beginnings of a foundation with which Plato can ground his alternative: the sort of foundation that justifies our practices - be they epistemological, moral, philosophical or otherwise. Consider how, for instance, in the absence of being able to resort to a broadly naturalistic or empirical methodology, the theory of recollection seeks to provide us with something similar to

all those priests and priestesses who have taken the trouble to be able to explain *the basis of their religious practice*.²⁷³

Now if we can reasonably assume that enquiry here is an epistemological practice, and philosophy in general is an intellectual practice, then the clue in this story is that it is supposed to point us towards some such 'basis' for these practices - something that can explain how and why enquiry is neither impossible nor futile - and hence *justify* those practices. But why would Socrates need to justify his practice unless the threat posed by the paradox was aimed at the foundations of Socratic philosophy? This points to the idea that the paradox threatens the foundations of truth and the theory of recollection, with its proposal that truth is innate within us, aims to remedy this. And with this, we can make sense of the connection between the story of the priests and priestesses on one hand, and Plato's aim for introducing it at that precise point in the dialogue, and in response to the paradox, on the other. In playing down the role of the theory of recollection in the dialogue, however, we risk misunderstanding Plato's reasons for introducing the paradox, and consequently risk missing altogether the ontological and epistemological projects whose beginnings he is introducing here - the thesis that universal truths are acquired from the *inside-out*, and not vice versa.

In conclusion, the Meno begins by a rejection of a broadly empirical method of enquiry in answer to the question 'What is F-ness?', and a rejection of the claim that the study of empirical cases can provide an adequate basis for the universal truths that Socrates is after. Meno's paradox of enquiry signals the need for an alternative basis that can justify the Socratic method of elenchus and provide a foundation for these universal truths. With the theory of recollection and its concomitant epistemic distinction between correct opinion and knowledge, Plato has the *beginnings* of an argument for just this sort of foundation.

²⁷³ *Meno*, op. cit., (81a).

Conclusion

The theory of recollection in the *Meno* poses a puzzle. Is it intended as a solution to the famous paradox of inquiry, or is it supposed to serve some other purpose? If it is Plato's response to the paradox, why did he choose such a metaphysically extravagant theory based on a religious myth when far simpler and more common-sense responses were open to him? If it isn't meant to be a response to the paradox, then why make Socrates say that the paradox does not constitute a good argument on account of the claim that learning is remembering?

The *Epistemological Reading* (ERM) denies the *Traditional Reading* (TRM) that the theory of recollection constitutes Plato's response to Meno's dilemma. Although both readings are in agreement about the dilemma's fundamental flaw – that is, that it contains an equivocation of the term 'know' in each horn of the dilemma – they disagree on what they take to be Plato's solution to it. Advocates of TRM have argued that the distinction between prenatal and postnatal (or implicit and explicit) knowledge reveals the equivocation and solves the dilemma; and the obvious candidate in the *Meno* for playing this role is Plato's theory of recollection since it clearly distinguishes between the knowledge the soul had acquired before it was incarnated in the body, and the knowledge that it then goes on to acquire in its current incarnate state. ERM, on the other hand, takes the distinction between the epistemic states of 'true belief' and 'knowledge' to address the equivocal fallacy and dissolve the dilemma.

In this thesis, I critically assessed two influential versions of ERM: the *Standard Reading* (STR) and the *Hybrid Reading* (HYR). Despite their similarities, STR and HYR differ in some crucial respects. First, where STR holds that Meno's questions, and Socrates' reformulation of the challenges contained within those questions, are identical, HYR doesn't. Moreover,

HYR argues that these two different reformulations give rise to two distinct problems: the 'surface problem' and the 'problem of discovery'. STR, on the hand, made no distinction between the challenge arising from Meno's questions and that contained within Socrates' reformulation of those questions. This allows HYR to offer a hybrid reading that attempts to capture the best of both, the epistemological reading of Meno's paradox (ERM) and the traditional reading of Meno's paradox (TRM). I argued that both versions of ERM fail to deal with the problem of interpretation. That is to say, in denying that the theory of recollection is Plato's intended solution to the paradox, they fail to put forward an alternative reading that could explain its role in the dialogue, in a manner that squares with the dialogue's text.

More importantly, a detailed examination of the metaphysics of change in Plato's ontology reveals that *all* versions of ERM would ultimately fail to meet this challenge. This is because ERM simply assumes that Plato is not a concept innatist, and as such, that he does not need the theory of recollection to explain how inquiry can move from belief to knowledge. In other words, ERM is premised on the assumption that Plato was an empiricist of sorts. However, a study of some of the metaphysical theories prevalent during the time that Plato was writing his dialogues reveal that the theory of the Forms and the theory of recollection had a very specific aim. Both theories were designed to combat the kind of scepticism that Plato believed those theories gave rise to. He does not do so by denying that the material world is not a suitable object of knowledge, but rather concedes the sceptic's point: the material world is in constant flux, and therefore, it cannot be a suitable object of knowledge or a stable foundation for truth. Therefore, truth and knowledge must come from within, and the natural world characterised by constant flux cannot be their proper object. In short, Plato was anything *but* an empiricist.

The theory of recollection and the theory of Forms are two aspects of one response: that of building an alternative foundation for truth than the world of flux (Forms), and mapping the structure of the mind in such a way so as to make access to this foundation possible (Recollection). As such, the theory of

recollection offers an account of initial cognition where the soul is in a prenatal state; all subsequent learning, it then claims, is simply the *re*-cognition. Because the basic concepts with which this theory deals are the very building blocks of thought and speech, it makes no sense to say that it does not play any role in belief acquisition or knowledge acquisition. Indeed, it furnishes the very preconditions for these by explaining the rudimentary stages of initial cognition and subsequent stages of *re*-cognition and truth-recognition. With this theory, Plato has the *beginnings* of an argument against the kind of relativism and scepticism prevalent at his time.

Recently, some commentators have attempted to offer a more subdued reading of Plato's theory of recollection in the *Meno* in an attempt to bring his thinking closer to our contemporary one. However well-intentioned these readings are, they, in fact, do Plato's theory a disservice. Indeed, recent debates in the fields of Linguistics and Cognitive Sciences have come head-to-head between Nativist, who argue that some important components of cognition must be innate, and Empiricists who argue that cognitive abilities are the result of learning from experience.²⁷⁴ Ideas that Plato had put forward nearly two and a half millennia ago are now the foundations for important and respectable views in computational modelling, for example. It is, therefore, a great achievement of Plato's to have understood the challenges that our common-sense views about the mind, concept formation, learning and knowledge acquisition give rise to, and to have devised a metaphysical system whose task is to defend against the kind of scepticism arising from these common-sense views by providing an alternative to them.

The *Meno's* paradox, then, is not a puzzle whose solution rests upon merely pointing to an epistemological distinction between true belief and knowledge, as advocates of ERM have suggested. Rather, it is a puzzle about cognition. More precisely, it is a puzzle that targets the rudimentary cognitive stages of *initial cognition* and *truth-recognition* - one whose solution

²⁷⁴ See, e.g., S. Laurence and E. Margolis, 'The Poverty of Stimulus Argument', *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (Jun., 2001), 217-276.

entails offering an account of the mind that would make these elementary cognitive processes possible. And although the major motivation for the theory of recollection in the *Meno* is to provide an answer to scepticism about knowledge, it ought to be understood, first, as a theory of cognition – i.e. as a theory about the very building blocks of thought. Plato's theory of recollection in the *Meno*, I submit, is an attempt by the philosopher to map the structure of the mind; and as such, to provide an account of cognition and truth-recognition, thus paving the way for the possibility of objectivity in thought, speech and knowledge acquisition.

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