

## Colloquium 7

# Recollection and "The Problem of the Socratic Elenchus"

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### I. The Positive and Negative "Arms of Philosophy"

Ever since Socrates<sup>1</sup> began his mission to cross-examine those with a reputation for wisdom, it has been a matter of dispute just what he was trying to accomplish. This is not because Socrates is reluctant to explain, but rather because the explanation that he offers seems so implausible. He says that he questions others in order to test their claim to knowledge,<sup>2</sup> to persuade them to be as virtuous as possible,<sup>3</sup> to determine whether a particular proposition is true,<sup>4</sup> to inquire into the way things are,<sup>5</sup> and to gain knowledge.<sup>6</sup> In addition, he claims to be fighting for justice (*Ap.* 32a). He should be rewarded for his efforts because, as a result of them, he has been making his fellow Athenians happy: "[The Olympian victor] makes you think that you are happy; I make you so" (*Ap.* 36d9-e1). Not only do some of these goals seem overly ambitious for someone who merely cross-examines others, but in addition, they seem to be unconnected.

1. Throughout this paper, I will use "Socrates" to refer to the character Socrates in Plato's dialogues.

2. See *Ap.* 21c; *Eu.* 4e, 9b; *Ch.* 166c-d; *L.* 189e-190c; *G.* 472c-d.

3. *Ap.* 30b, e, 31b, 36c; *Cr.* 48e; *L.* 181d; *Pr.* 352e; *G.* 493c-d, 494a; *Eud.* 278d.

4. *Eu.* 6d, 7a, 9a; *Ch.* 161c, 162e, 166d, 175d; *L.* 194a-b; *Lys.* 212a-b; *HMi.* 369d; 360e-361a; *Pr.* 384a, G. 458a, 464a, 467b, 473e, 487e, 495a.

5. *L.* 194a; *Ch.* 165b, e, 175b, d, e, 176a; *G.* 457d, 506a.

6. *Eu.* 9a; *G.* 453b.

However, on Socrates' view, these goals are closely related. Ultimately, I suggest, Socrates represents himself as attempting to make himself and others as happy as possible. For, on Socrates' view, virtue is necessary and sufficient for happiness;<sup>7</sup> and moral knowledge<sup>8</sup> is necessary and sufficient for virtue.<sup>9</sup> So, to make himself and his interlocutors happy, he must insure that they have acquired the moral knowledge that is necessary and sufficient for virtue. Socrates believes that he lacks moral expertise, but many of his interlocutors believe that they possess it. If they do, then, by being cross-examined by Socrates, they can teach him what they know, and thus help him to move closer to virtue and happiness (*Eu.* 9a). If they do not possess moral expertise, then, through Socratic cross-examination, they can be disabused of their false self-conception. Only if they are convinced that they lack moral knowledge, can they be persuaded to pursue it. But sometimes even an awareness of their ignorance is not enough. Some of Socrates' interlocutors are not yet convinced of the importance of moral knowledge or of virtue, and in these cases it is necessary for Socrates to exercise a little persuasion. Socrates claims that his method of cross-examination serves this function, too. Once Socrates' interlocutors are inspired to pursue the moral knowledge necessary and sufficient for virtue, they are ready to inquire into the nature of virtue. By pursuing true beliefs and knowledge through cross-examination, Socrates seems to indicate that he believes that cross-examination is also the method of choice for moral inquiry.

Socrates' remarks about the function of cross-examination thus fit together into a neat package: through cross-examination, Socrates claims to move his interlocutor from a false conceit of moral knowledge to the genuine possession of such knowledge. However, in most of the early dialogues, Socrates and his inter-

7. *Ap.* 30b; *Cr.* 47c-e; *Ch.* 156a-157b; *G.* 470e, 472eff.

8. Socrates often speaks of the virtue of wisdom when he has moral knowledge primarily in mind. I will generally use the phrase "moral knowledge", since it is more precise.

9. *Ap.* 29d-30a; *L.* 192c-194d; *Ch.* 174b-176a; *Pr.* 349e-360e. For some discussion of Socrates' commitment to this view, see Irwin 1977, 71-3, 86-91.

locutors conclude by expressing bewilderment and confusion instead of confidence about the positive results of their inquiry. It might seem, then, that there is a tension between Socrates' stated goal of acquiring knowledge and his actual result. Since it is hard to believe that Plato represents Socrates as naïvely attempting to achieve a goal by means of a method that is completely inadequate to the task, we might be tempted to attribute to Socratic cross-examination a less exalted function. According to Grote, Socrates' procedure of questioning others is merely "the negative arm of philosophy."<sup>10</sup> By this, he meant that while Socratic questioning is capable of providing the valuable service of "testing, exercising, [and] refuting" various interlocutors' beliefs, it is incapable of "finding or providing" justified beliefs to put in their place. Instead, according to Grote, "a state of non-belief, or painful consciousness of ignorance" is substituted in the place of a false conceit of knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

What, then, should we make of Socrates' claims to be inquiring? Those sympathetic to Grote's assessment of the function of the Socratic method suggest two sorts of answers. Richard Robinson argues that we should understand Socrates' characterization of the purpose of his cross-examinations as a classic instance of Socratic irony.<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, in a series of recent articles, Hugh Benson concedes that Socrates is "*ultimately* concerned with the acquisition of knowledge of the nature of F-ness [in this case, virtue]"<sup>13</sup> and so, we need not read all of Socrates' claims to be pursuing knowledge as ironic. However, Benson insists that the only function that cross-examination by itself is meant to serve is the exposure of ignorance.<sup>14</sup> By exposing his interlocutors' ignorance, Socrates puts himself in a position to move his interlocutors closer to knowledge; but, Benson argues, "[i]n no case . . . do we have evidence for Socrates' method [for

10. Grote 1867, vol. 1, 242.

11. *Ibid.*, 245-6.

12. Robinson 1953, 8-9, 17.

13. Benson 1990a, 48; my emphasis.

14. Benson 1987, 67-68; 1989, 591-599; 1990a, 47-65; and 1990b, 137-153.

acquiring knowledge] once the false conceit has been eliminated. We do not know how Socrates will proceed to lead the interlocutor to the knowledge of the nature of F-ness, now that the interlocutor is in a condition to be so led . . . ”<sup>15</sup>

There is, however, one more piece of information that we must consider before we agree that the Socratic method of cross-examination is best viewed merely as the negative “arm of philosophy”—namely, Socrates’ actual procedure in the early dialogues. I will suggest that a deflationary analysis of the Socratic method cannot provide an adequate explanation of Socrates’ procedure on all occasions.

## II. The Socratic Method of Inquiry

Consider, for example, the *Euthyphro* and the *Hippias Major*.<sup>16</sup>

Questions about value—about the just and the unjust, the fine

15. Benson 1990a, 63.

16. Gregory Vlastos would dispute my suggestion that the Socratic method of cross-examination is practiced in the *Hippias Major*. Vlastos argues that, in the *Euthydemus*, *Lysis*, and *Hippias Major*, Socrates abandons “adversary argument as [a] method of philosophical investigation” (Vlastos 1983b, 57-58). The method applied in these dialogues is non-adversarial because “the theses which are seriously debated in these dialogues are not contested by the interlocutor; Socrates himself is both their author and critic” (ibid., 57). Vlastos must believe that “adversary argument” is essential to the Socratic method of cross-examination, because from the premise that Socrates has abandoned “adversary argument”, Vlastos draws the conclusion that “. . . Socrates ditches the elenchus” (ibid., 58). Since Vlastos maintains that philosophical theses are “seriously debated” in dialogues in which “adversary argument” has been abandoned, he cannot believe that what is distinctive of “adversary argument” is simply that a proposed philosophical thesis is subjected to severe examination and criticism (“Elenchus and Mathematics”, in Vlastos 1991, 113 n28). Rather, it seems that it is also essential to “adversary argument” that the author and critic of a particular philosophical thesis are distinct individuals: “Though Socrates is intensely self-critical, confiding that he is always more eager to examine himself than others . . . , the procedural form of elenctic argument prevents him from making any of his own doctrines the target of elenctic refutation by himself” (ibid., 113 n 28). That an author and critic of a particular philosophical thesis are distinct individuals, however, is not a sufficient condition for an argument counting as “adversarial”: this condition is sometimes met in the *Euthydemus*, the *Lysis* and the *Hippias Major*, where, according to Vlastos, the “adversarial” elenchus is never applied. If an argument is “adversarial”, Vlastos suggests, each of the interlocutors engaged in the argument must be a competent dialectician capable of putting up a good fight (ibid., 113, 115-116). In the *Euthydemus*, Vlastos comments, Socrates’ interlocutor is a “yes-man”, who “never puts up any sustained

and the base, the good and the bad—are much disputed (*Eu.* 7b-d; *HMa.* 294d). Yet many of Socrates' interlocutors begin their conversations believing that they are experts about such things. Euthyphro claims to be an expert about piety (*Eu.* 4b, 5a), and Hippias claims to be an expert about the fine (*HMa.* 286a); but after a few rounds of questioning, it becomes clear that neither can defend his views adequately. Like the statues of Daedalus, every proposition that Euthyphro puts forward "goes around and refuses to stay put" (*Eu.* 11b). Hippias' beliefs show the same tendency to wander (*HMa.* 288b-c, 291b, 293b). To put the point less metaphorically, when cross-examined, Hippias and Euthyphro vacillate in their commitments between a particular proposition and its negation. They thus fail to count as experts about value.<sup>17</sup>

But the *Euthyphro* and the *Hippias Major* do not end when Socrates' interlocutors find themselves at a loss to answer

resistance to a Socratic thesis" (Vlastos 1983b, 57). However, the features that Vlastos believes are essential to "adversary argument" do not always characterize the method of cross-examination that one finds in what Vlastos acknowledges to be an early dialogue in which Socratic cross-examination is applied (for Vlastos' dating of the dialogues, see "Socrates 'contra' Socrates in Plato", in Vlastos 1991, 46-47). Take the *Charmides*, for example. There Socrates states explicitly that he can cross-examine his own views as well as to those of others. When Critias objects to Socrates' efforts to refute (ἐλέγχειν) him, Socrates replies that he is attempting to refute Critias for the same reason that he would attempt to refute his own views: namely, to discover the way things are (*Ch.* 166c-d). Consequently, he suggests that it is a matter of complete indifference who is the author of the thesis being examined by him: "Never mind whether it is Critias or Socrates who is being refuted (ὁ ἐλεγχόμενος)" (*Ch.* 166e2). From Vlastos' claims that it is essential to the Socratic method that it be "adversarial" and that "adversary argument" is characterized by the fact that the author and critic of a thesis are distinct individuals, it follows that Socrates cannot examine his own beliefs without changing his method. But, in the *Charmides*, Socrates indicates that when he examines his own views, he proceeds as he does when he examines others. Further, it is not the case that all of Socrates' interlocutors in the early dialogues "give him a fight." Charmides is rather passive in the face of Socrates' criticism (*Ch.* 159b-161a). No doubt the personality and dialectical skill of Socrates' interlocutors affect the character of the conversations portrayed in the dialogues, but the contrast that Vlastos draws between the attributes of Socrates' interlocutors in the early dialogues and the attributes of those in later dialogues is not nearly so sharp as he suggests. In any case, it is doubtful that a change in the character and skill of Socrates' interlocutors by itself would imply a change in the method that Socrates applies when he inquires with them.

17. See Gentzler 1995 for a discussion of Socrates' procedure when he is cross-examining for the purpose of testing his interlocutor's claim to knowledge.

Socrates' questions. Rather, in both cases, Socrates suggests that they continue their conversation by examining a thesis that Socrates proposes (*Eu.* 11e; *HMa.* 293d). If Socrates were trying simply to make certain that Euthyphro and Hippias recognize their own ignorance, then his suggestion that they examine his thesis would be inexplicable. It is now *Socrates'* proposal, rather than his interlocutor's belief, that is the object of examination. Socrates explains to Hippias how his own procedure of cross-examination is like that adopted by his imaginary companion: "Sometimes, as if he took pity on my inexperience and lack of education, he himself makes a suggestion, asking whether it seems that such and such is the fine, or whatever else he happens to be investigating (πυνθανόμενος) and the discussion is about" (*HMa.* 293d1-4).

In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates and Euthyphro attempt to discover the nature of piety. To this end, Socrates suggests that piety is "part of" justice (*Eu.* 11e-12d). Once Euthyphro figures out what Socrates means, he agrees that Socrates' hypothesis is correct. This is not surprising, since this hypothesis isolates features that are common to competing conceptions of piety: it is clear that piety is concerned with proper relations between humans and the gods. However, when Socrates and Euthyphro attempt to render their conception of piety more determinate by spelling out exactly what these proper relations are, they run into difficulties. Every suggestion that Euthyphro makes is based too narrowly on what he views as paradigm examples of proper relationships, and thus conflicts with his and Socrates' background assumptions about the nature of the gods. It seems wrong to say that the gods could be benefitted and made better by human beings, as if the gods were the livestock of human beings (*Eu.* 13a-d). And it is doubtful that human beings and gods could engage in relations of equitable exchange, as if humans and gods were trading partners (*Eu.* 14e-15a). Socrates suggests that they continue their inquiry (*Eu.* 15c); but Euthyphro, frustrated with the effort, hurries away.

Hippias is a much more persistent fellow inquirer. Despite his constant complaints about Socrates' method, he maintains his

good humor in their search for fineness. Socrates' first hypothesis is inspired by an observation that they made earlier when they were examining Hippias' suggestion that gold is the fine (*HMa.* 289e). Upon reflection, it seemed clear that they did not believe that gold always contributes to the fineness of a thing (*HMa.* 290b-c); instead, "gold is fine for things for which it is seemly, but not for things for which it is not" (*HMa.* 293e). Socrates suggests that a good explanation of this fact is the hypothesis that "the seemly (τὸ πρέπον) itself or the nature of the seemly might be the fine" (*HMa.* 293e). Hippias finds the hypothesis immediately congenial, but Socrates reserves judgment. They soon discover that, while things that are seemly always appear fine (to say that something is seemly is simply to say that it appears fine), things can be fine without appearing to be fine: the fine, then, cannot be the same as the seemly (*HMa.* 294a-e).

To track down their "quarry", Socrates reflects on his grounds for calling certain things fine: "My thinking is this: we don't call 'fine' eyes which we think are incapable of sight, but those which are capable of, and useful for, sight" (*HMa.* 295c). Perhaps the explanation for this fact is that the fine is the useful. This hypothesis is supported by a consideration of a wider range of cases: bodies, living creatures, artifacts, modes of transportation, instruments, practices and laws. It would seem that all of these things are said to be fine if and only if they are useful (*HMa.* 295d-e). Moreover, this hypothesis provides the basis for an explanation of the plausibility of a number of judgements that they are tempted to make: Hippias believes that "political ability in the affairs of one's own state is the finest thing, inability the most base", and Socrates believes that "wisdom is the finest thing, ignorance the most base" (*HMa.* 296a).

But Socrates discovers a problem even with this account: things can be "useful" for base ends. This problem suggests to Hippias the obvious amendment that the fine is "usefulness and ability for good" (*HMa.* 296c-d). Socrates agrees that all along "their souls wished to propose" this as a definition of fineness

(*HMa.* 296d). Although the account seems promising, Socrates and Hippias soon run into difficulties when they consider their views about the abstract relationship between the good and the fine. Socrates wants to say that the fine itself is good, and so, that what is fine counts as good simply in virtue of being fine (*HMa.* 297c). But if, as they suggest, the fine is what produces the good, and if the only way of being good is by being produced by the fine in the way that a son is produced by a father,<sup>18</sup> then their hypothesis about the nature of the fine leaves them with no explanation for the apparent goodness of the fine: “a cause can’t be the cause of a cause” (*HMa.* 297a).

Socrates and Hippias find themselves at a loss. In what might seem to be a desperate last ditch effort, Socrates proposes that the fine is whatever gives auditory or visual pleasure (*HMa.* 297e). Although the rationale behind this definition is not immediately obvious, one can see how it might be suggested by the difficulties that their last hypothesis faced. The hypothesis that the fine is what is useful for the good provided a solid explanation of the plausibility of a number of their judgments about fine things, but Socrates rejected this hypothesis because it seemed to rule out the goodness of the fine itself. The hypothesis that the fine is what is productive of pleasure would avoid this conceptual problem about the relationship between the fine and the good, and, on the face of it, seems to provide an equally good explanation of the plausibility of their judgments about fine things: all fine things produce pleasure. It turns out, though, that Socrates and Hippias are reluctant to view as fine certain objects or activities that are productive of pleasure—food, drink, sex, and so on. In order to accommodate these judgments, Socrates restricts the fine to what is productive of visual and auditory pleasure. Unfortunately, this restriction leaves them with a theoretically unsatisfying account of the fine. The only thing that visual and auditory pleasures have in com-

18. An assumption that is forced upon him by his view that value terms are univocal. If Socrates had Aristotle’s notion of focal meaning (see *Metaphysics* IV 2 and VI 1), then he could say that fine things count as good<sub>2</sub> because they produce things that are good<sub>1</sub>: in short, he could say that fine things are instrumentally good. The phrase “focal meaning” is from Owen 1960.



mon is that they are pleasures arising from sense perception; but they have this in common with other sorts of pleasure that Socrates and Hippias are inclined to consider base. For this reason, an appeal to these two types of pleasures cannot explain what single property<sup>19</sup> all and only the things that they believe are fine have in common. (*HMa.* 298e, 299e-303d)

Where, then, did Socrates and Hippias go wrong? In the persona of his imaginary companion, Socrates suggests an explanation for their error:

I can see why you have been ashamed to call these pleasures [those arising from food, drink, and sex] fine, because people don't think they are. But I was asking you what is fine, not what many people think is fine (*HMa.* 299a-b).

According to this explanation, some of the judgments that Socrates and Hippias are inclined to make about what sort of things are fine and base are merely products of an automatic appropriation of thoughtless common opinions. If Socrates and Hippias were to think about matters more carefully, it would become clear that, since there is nothing intrinsically base about pleasures resulting from paintings and music, there can be nothing intrinsically base about pleasures resulting from food, drink, and sex. Nonetheless, it is hard to deny that sometimes food, drink, and sex are to be avoided and that fine things are to be pursued. They must seek another sort of explanation for their judgments that these fine pleasures are sometimes to be avoided if they are unable simply to dismiss these judgments as false. This, of course, must await the discussion in the *Protagoras*, since, by this point in the *Hippias Major*, Hippias has become frustrated with Socrates' "picking and whittling at words" (*HMa.* 304a). Even so, Socrates and Hippias have made a great deal of progress. If they could figure out some way of understanding the possibility that what is fine produces what is good and itself counts as good, and if they could exorcise the intuition behind the common belief that some pleasures are

19. I am using the term "property" to designate both monadic and polyadic universals.

themselves base—e.g., if they could conceive of the distinction between being intrinsically  $X$  and instrumentally  $X$ —they could solve at least the puzzles that they have considered so far.<sup>20</sup>

In the *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Major*, *Charmides*, and *Lysis*, Socrates and his interlocutors inquire into the nature of various properties—piety, fineness, temperance, and friendship. Their strategy is to discover an account of the property in question which explains the plausibility of the judgments that they would be inclined to make about particular instances of this property, and which is compatible with their more general and abstract views about reality. The source of the hypothesis does not matter. In the *Euthyphro*, it seems that Socrates' hypothesis results from reflecting on what is common to competing conceptions of piety. Euthyphro's attempts to render this hypothesis more determinate are based on his views about what sort of interactions count as just. In the *Hippias Major*, each hypothesis about the fine is the product of an attempt to overcome the defects, and preserve the advantages, of the hypothesis that they considered before. In the *Charmides*, after his own account of temperance is shown to be inadequate, Charmides suggests that they examine an account that he had once heard, but does not necessarily endorse (*Ch.* 161b). Socrates asks him who offered this account, but then admits that it really does not matter: ". . . the question we need to consider is not who said it [and thus who believes it], but whether or not the statement is true" (*Ch.* 161c5-6). In the *Lysis*, Socrates and his interlocutor inquire into the nature of friendship by determining who counts as a friend. Socrates proposes that they examine several different accounts of the essential features of friends suggested by various poets (*Lys.* 214a-b, 215c, 216c). Though none of these hypotheses is explicitly endorsed by anyone present, Socrates suggests that they examine the merits of these views by cross-examining one another.<sup>21</sup> In all of these dialogues, Socrates and his interlocutors are unable to discover hypotheses that cohere with their beliefs.

20. They would have settled on the *Protagoras*' hedonistic account of the good (353c-354e), and the *Symposium*'s instrumental account of the fine (205e-206a, 206e).

21. Socrates often indicates that he prefers to inquire with those who have had

They have made some progress: at the very least, they have ruled out various strategies, and, in the case of the *Hippias Major*, have come very close to solutions that Socrates will endorse explicitly in later dialogues.

We simply cannot make sense of Socrates' procedure in these dialogues if we insist that Socrates uses cross-examination only for the purpose of testing his interlocutor's claim to knowledge. This view of Socratic cross-examination cannot explain the fact that Socrates examines theses that he himself proposes and that neither he nor his interlocutor explicitly endorses. In contrast, the supposition that Socrates is inquiring on these occasions provides a good explanation for his procedure. When one is attempting to gain true belief and knowledge, it is important to consider the cases that can be made for hypotheses that one has never before considered, much less believed to be true.

### III. "The Problem of the Socratic Elenchus": Three Formulations

Of course, this more positive view of the function of Socratic cross-examination has had its advocates.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, I think that it is not an exaggeration to say that Gregory Vlastos' provocative defense of a positive view in his 1983 article "The Socratic Elenchus" is largely responsible for the revived and flourishing interest in the nature and purpose of Socratic cross-examination.<sup>23</sup> In many ways, this article has set the terms of the subsequent debate.

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experience and education (*HMi.* 369d-e; *Ch.* 162d-e; *Pr.* 320b; *G.* 486e-488a), and he is unmoved by appeals to common opinion (*Cr.* 46d-47d; *L.* 184d-e, 197a; *HMa.* 288a, 299a-b; *G.* 473e). This is not because the more experienced and educated have a special access to self-evident truths which more ordinary folk lack. It is because a lack of experience prevents one from appreciating the value or worthlessness of various things, and a lack of education prevents one from noticing important distinctions between various sorts of things. As a result of such deprivation, one is likely also to have many false beliefs about particular cases. For example, since most people overlook the distinction between being fearless and brave, they are inclined to believe falsely that the Crommyonian pig and ignorant diver are brave (*L.* 193a-c, 196e-197b; *Pr.* 350a-c).

22. See, e.g., Gulley, 1968, 33, 45-46, 52, 62-63; Vlastos 1957, 12; and Irwin 1977, 37-42.

23. Vlastos 1983a.

While Vlastos had maintained in earlier work that Socratic cross-examination is used for inquiry,<sup>24</sup> in "The Socratic Elenchus" he reports that he only recently discovered some substantial evidence for this view. The "crucial text" is *Gorgias* 479e.<sup>25</sup> Here, after completing a round of cross-examination, Socrates asks Polus, "Has it not been proved (*ἀποδέδεικται*) that what was asserted [by myself] is true?" While this text provided Vlastos with the textual evidence that he desired for a positive conception of Socratic cross-examination, it also raised a problem. For, on Vlastos' view, it appears that Socratic cross-examination has the power to reveal only the logical relations that hold amongst various propositions, and not their truth-values:

This brings us smack up against what I had called . . . "the problem of the Socratic elenchus": how is it that Socrates claims to have proved a thesis false when, in point of logic, all he has proved in any given argument is that the thesis is inconsistent with the conjunction of agreed-upon premises for which no reason has been given in that argument.<sup>26</sup>

The "problem of the Socratic elenchus", as Vlastos first formulated it, was how a single round of Socratic cross-examination could provide his interlocutor with a proof of a particular thesis. Eight years later, however, Vlastos reformulated the problem (or

24. Curiously, Vlastos represents this view as an innovation in "Socratic Elenchus." In "Socratic Elenchus" and in his "Introduction" to Vlastos 1991, he refers to Gulley and Irwin as earlier proponents of the positive view of Socratic cross-examination, but fails to mention that he also held this view in earlier writing (Vlastos 1983a, 44 n. 47, and 1991, 14 n. 56). Instead, Vlastos claims that, in his earlier writing, he "had maintained that . . . [the] object [of Socratic cross-examinations] was simply to reveal to his interlocutors muddles and inconsistencies within themselves, jarring their adherence to some confident dogma by bringing to their awareness its collision with other, no less confident, presumptions of theirs" (Vlastos 1983a, 45). But this is bad intellectual autobiography. Consider, for example, the following passage from his 1957 "The Paradox of Socrates": "Socrates the *teacher* now appears as the man who has not just certain conclusions to impart to others, but a *method of investigation*—the method by which he reached these results in the first place, and which is even more important than the results, for it is the means of testing, revising, and going beyond them" (Vlastos 1957, 12; emphasis in original).

25. Vlastos 1983a, 46.

26. *Ibid.*, 48-9.

"puzzle") as "how it is that Socrates expects to reach truth by an argumentative method which by its very nature could only test consistency."<sup>27</sup> It is important to see that these two formulations are not equivalent: Socrates may believe that his method of inquiry leads in the long run to a more accurate picture of reality, without believing that any given round of cross-examination provides a *proof* of a particular thesis. But, according to Vlastos, the only decisive piece of evidence for the view that Socratic cross-examination serves as a method of inquiry is a passage that implies that a single round of Socratic cross-examination provides his interlocutor with a proof. For Vlastos, then, one can solve the problem of how Socratic cross-examination could be used for the purposes of inquiry only by solving the problem of how single rounds of cross-examination could provide proofs.

Despite Vlastos' ingenious efforts to show otherwise,<sup>28</sup> Socratic cross-examinations generally do not provide proofs.<sup>29</sup> In the *Gorgias*, Socrates is not engaged in the sort of inquiry we find in the *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Major*, *Charmides*, and *Lysis*: he is not trying to *determine* whether a given thesis is true; he is attempting to *persuade* his interlocutor that a particular thesis is true.<sup>30</sup> To achieve *this* goal, Socrates believes that it is important to start from premises that both he and his interlocutor accept as true.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, when Socrates is inquiring, he leaves open the possibility that some of his starting points are false. Thus to show that a particular hypothesis conflicts with the starting points of inquiry does not *prove* that the hypothesis is false.<sup>32</sup>

27. Vlastos 1991, 15.

28. Vlastos 1983a, 52-55.

29. For cogent criticisms of Vlastos' solution to "the problem of the Socratic elenchus", as he first formulated it, see Brickhouse and Smith 1984, 190-5.

30. Elsewhere, I have referred to cross-examinations of this sort as "protreptic cross-examinations". See Gentzler n.d. for a discussion of the nature of this sort of cross-examination.

31. Excepting, of course, the hypothesis which Socrates attempts to disprove through an indirect argument.

32. Since Socrates believes that no true belief is ever refuted (*G.* 473b; *Eud.*

I have suggested above that, besides the passage that Vlastos cites, there is a great deal of evidence that Socrates is often inquiring when he engages in cross-examination. Only if we assume that the sole effective methods of inquiry are methods of proof, can we conclude that the Socratic method of cross-examination *cannot* serve as a method of inquiry. Although Vlastos' first formulation of the "problem of the Socratic elenchus" fails to pick out a genuine problem for Socrates' method of inquiry, his second formulation of the "problem of the Socratic elenchus"—"how it is that Socrates expects to reach truth by an argumentative method which by its very nature could only test consistency"—remains to be addressed.

As should be clear, I believe that it is inaccurate to say that, when Socrates engages in cross-examination for the purposes of inquiry, he is only "testing consistency". While Socrates is certainly concerned about the consistency of his interlocutor's beliefs concerning a particular issue, mere consistency of beliefs is not evidence of truth. One can easily achieve such consistency by having very few, but false, opinions. Socrates seems to believe that, if one has moral knowledge, then one should have the theoretical principles that explain why, for example, the people that one judges to be virtuous are virtuous. Moreover, one should have thought about the abstract relationship that exists between various properties, and between properties and their instances, and so on. Otherwise, one might fail to notice that one's views about the fine (say) do not fit in with any defensible view about properties and causality. And finally, one should have gained experience of a wide variety of moral situations. Otherwise, one may have no real idea what one will believe is fine, when faced, for example, with a danger on the battlefield or in the nursery. In short, one's beliefs about a particular subject matter must be coherent, where coherence requires both consistency and comprehensiveness.<sup>33</sup>

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287e), he must believe that a true refutation provides a sound argument against a particular thesis. It is thus inaccurate for Vlastos to suggest that every round of Socratic cross-examination ends with a "refutation" of his interlocutor's thesis (Vlastos 1983a, 39). The rare occasions on which Socrates does make this claim are discussed in Gentzler 1995, n. 40.

33. The goal of Socratic inquiry is similar to what John Rawls has called a

Although Socrates seems to believe that, by rendering his belief-set coherent through cross-examination, he can acquire knowledge of a mind-independent moral reality,<sup>34</sup> we might think that, unless certain propositions are self-evidently true, such a method of “inquiry” could just as easily move one further from, as bring one closer to, such knowledge.<sup>35</sup> Yet there is no evidence in the early dialogues that Socrates views any proposition as epistemically foundational.<sup>36</sup> Further, it might seem that, since there are serious moral disputes, different people would render their belief-sets coherent in different ways. If this is right, then, although a method by which one achieves a coherent belief-set might help one to rule out particularly bad moral theories, it may not allow one to settle on *the* objectively true moral theory.<sup>37</sup> In the early dialogues, Socrates never offers us any explicit defense of his assumption that his method of inquiry is truth-conducive: how it can be so is a genuine “problem of the Socratic elenchus”. Plato was not unaware of the problem, and in the *Meno*, he proposes a solution to it.

#### IV. Plato’s Response to the “Problem of the Socratic Elenchus”

The *Meno* begins with a typical Socratic cross-examination. Socrates’ interlocutor, Meno, is quite confident that he can provide an account of virtue, and proceeds to give one (*M.* 71e-72a). Socrates responds with questions about Meno’s views concerning the univocity of terms (*M.* 72d-77b); about human motiva-

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“reflective equilibrium” of moral beliefs, but Socrates would add that a truly *reflective* equilibrium—what we might call “ideal reflective equilibrium”—is one that cannot be upset by further reflection or further experience because it will cohere maximally with such reflection and experience (Rawls 1971, 20-21, 48-53).

34. See, e.g., *HMa.* 287c-d, 294c-d.

35. For this objection, see Gewirth 1978, 12.

36. For an extended defense of this claim, see Gentzler 1991, ch. 2.

37. For this objection, see Hare 1981, 12. Rawls agrees that “[e]ven should everyone attain wide reflective equilibrium, many contrary moral conceptions may still be held” (Rawls 1975, 9). It is perhaps for this reason that Rawls believes that, by achieving reflective equilibrium, one is not discovering any objective moral truths; one is simply discovering the “substantive moral conceptions that people hold or would hold, under suitably described conditions” (*ibid.*, 7).

tion (*M.* 77b-78b); about particular good things (*M.* 78c-d); and about the relationship between variously named virtues (*M.* 78d-79e). When it is revealed that Meno's account conflicts with his other beliefs, he modifies the account to keep his belief-set consistent. But eventually, like Socrates' other interlocutors, Meno is at a loss (*M.* 80a-b). As in the *Euthyphro* and *Hippias Major*, so in the *Meno*, Socrates insists that they proceed with their inquiry, despite their present difficulties (*M.* 80d).<sup>38</sup> Before they can do this, however, Meno raises various questions about the possibility of successful inquiry in the absence of knowledge (*M.* 80d):

In what way will you inquire into it [the nature of virtue], Socrates, when you don't know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you don't know? And even if you happen upon it, how will you know that this is the thing that you didn't know? (*M.* 80d5-8)

As Meno conceives it, their inquiry into the nature of virtue is like a treasure-hunt where no clues are offered: lacking knowledge about *X* is equivalent to having no information on the basis of which one could conduct an inquiry into *X* and recognize *X* if one were to happen upon it. On Meno's view, there is no middle ground between having some knowledge of *X* and being completely ignorant concerning *X*, and complete ignorance is the state Meno believes that he is in with respect to virtue.

Before Socrates attempts to answer Meno's questions, he deepens the problem. Some people, he remarks, have claimed that inquiry is impossible whether one lacks knowledge or not:

I grasp what you wish to say, Meno. Do you see how eristic this argument is that you're bringing up, that it's not possible for a person to inquire into either what he knows or what he does not know? He cannot inquire into what he knows—since he knows it, an inquiry is not necessary for

38. Cf. Benson, who says that the *Meno* is the first dialogue in which Socrates and his interlocutor attempt to go beyond the stage of eliminating his interlocutor's false conceit of knowledge (Benson 1990b, 147).



such a person—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to inquire into. (M. 80e)<sup>39</sup>

In the early dialogues, Socrates would have rejected Meno's suggestion that one cannot inquire into *X* in the absence of knowledge of *X*. For, although Socrates denies that he possesses moral knowledge<sup>40</sup> and although the ignorance of his interlocutors is almost inevitably revealed at some point in the dialogues, Socrates and his interlocutors attempt to inquire into the nature of temperance, justice, piety, and the like, on the basis of whatever beliefs they have prior to the inquiry. But, on the face of it, this seems to be an unpromising basis for inquiry. Unless certain judgments count as knowledge, why should one accept a hypothesis that explains or follows from them, or reject a hypothesis that conflicts with them? So, although, in the early dialogues, Socrates would reject Meno's suggestion that one cannot inquire into *X* when one lacks knowledge of *X*, it is not clear that he has any good reason to do so.

In the *Meno*, Socrates responds to Meno's challenge with the Theory of Recollection, which he describes in the following passage:

In as much as the soul is immortal, has often been born, and has seen all things both here and in Hades, there is nothing that it has not learned. So it is not surprising that it is possible for it to remember both virtue and other things, the things that it knew before. For, in as much as all nature is akin, and the soul has learned all things, nothing prevents it from discovering everything else once it has recollected only one thing—[a process] which human beings call "learning"—if

39. Following Fine 1992, 205, I understand Socrates' reformulation of Meno's Paradox of Inquiry in the following way:

- 1) For any *X*, either one knows, or does not know, *X*.
- 2) If one has knows *X*, one cannot inquire into *X*.
- 3) If one does not know *X*, one cannot inquire into *X*.
- 4) Therefore, one cannot inquire into *X*.

40. See, e.g., *Ap.* 21b; *Eu.* 5a-c, 15c-16a; *L.* 186b-e, 200e; *HMa.* 286c-e, 304d-e. I take these disavowals of knowledge to be sincere and unequivocal.

one is brave and does not tire of the search. For to inquire and to learn are, as a whole, recollection. (*M.* 81c5-d5)

Unfortunately, this brief account seems to raise more questions than it answers. What exactly do we recollect? Here Socrates suggests that we recollect "all things". Yet it seems doubtful that the content of all of our true beliefs (including, for example, my belief that I am now writing this sentence) could possibly be a product of recollection. Further, prior to inquiry, the beliefs that the Theory of Recollection posits as being within our souls are beliefs of which we are not yet aware. Whether or not these beliefs count as knowledge, it is not obvious how we can inquire *on the basis of* unconscious beliefs.<sup>41</sup>

This last puzzle about the methodological value of unconscious beliefs might suggest to us that the Theory of Recollection is designed to show us not that the basis of our inquiry by means of Socratic cross-examination is sound, but rather that, no matter how hopeless the conscious basis of our inquiry is, if we ask enough questions, we will eventually "trigger" certain memories which will be self-evidently true.<sup>42</sup> On this interpretation,

41. Socrates' exact response to the Paradox of Inquiry (see n. 39, above) has been disputed. Nicholas White maintains that Plato accepts Premise (3) of the Paradox of Inquiry: "Plato has clearly granted the part of the argument that says that we cannot inquire about what we do not know" (White 1976, 42). On White's view, Plato solves the Paradox of Inquiry by showing how Premise (2) is false, "[how] it is after all possible to inquire, in an unusual sense, about what one already knows. For what we usually think of as inquiry, he says, is actually recollection of what *we already know* but need to recollect" (*ibid.*, 47; my emphasis). Thus recollection is a process of rendering unconscious knowledge conscious. While it may be impossible to inquire into what one already knows "consciously" (for inquiry implies some lack of conscious knowledge), it is not impossible to inquire into, i.e., to recollect, what one knows "unconsciously". Alternatively, Gail Fine has argued that Plato solves the Paradox of Inquiry by showing how Premise (3) is false: "Contrary to (3), one can inquire even if one lacks all knowledge of the subject, for the slave has just done so. The slave can inquire, although he entirely lacks knowledge, because he has both true beliefs, and also the capacity for rational reflection and revision of his beliefs, and these are adequate for inquiry" (Fine 1992, 209). For my purposes here, it is not necessary to decide between these two readings of Socrates' solution to the Paradox of Inquiry. For, whether these beliefs count as unconscious knowledge or as unconscious mere true beliefs, it is difficult to see how unconscious beliefs could provide the basis for inquiry by means of Socratic cross-examination.

42. This seems to be Norman Gulley's explanation of the role the Theory of

then, the Theory of Recollection solves “the problem of the Socratic elenchus” by showing how, despite initial appearances, we do have a source of beliefs that could serve as the epistemic foundations for other beliefs. But if this were the role that the Theory of Recollection plays, then the Socratic method of inquiry, the method by which we attempt to achieve a coherent belief-set, should play an important role only *after* certain beliefs have been recollected to consciousness. Once these beliefs are recollected, we can attempt to determine which beliefs are inconsistent with them and which explain, or follow logically from, them. But, according to this line of thought, *before* these beliefs are recollected, any process by which we can “trigger” them to consciousness will be as good as any other, and checking the coherence of one’s conscious beliefs is not obviously the best way to achieve this goal.

Meno asks Socrates for some evidence that the Theory of Recollection is true, and in response, Socrates performs an experiment on Meno’s slave (*M.* 81e-82b). We should gain more information about the exact role the Theory of Recollection plays in Socrates’ defense of the possibility of successful inquiry if we examine this experiment in some detail.

### V. The Demonstration with the Slave

Socrates asks Meno’s slave, who has had no formal training in geometry, several questions about determining the area of squares. He first asks him what is the area of a square based on a side of two units. In order to help, Socrates asks him to consider a rectangle with sides of one unit and two units (*M.* 82c). The slave determines the area of this figure quite easily, and returning to the question about the square, answers confidently, “Four” (*M.* 82d). Socrates then asks the slave what is the length

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Recollection plays in supporting the Socratic method of inquiry (Gulley 1968, 73). Gulley maintains that Plato was concerned that Socrates’ method of cross-examination could not “justifiably claim to yield certainty so long as it relies only on the criteria of logical consistency and agreement between the speakers” (*ibid.*). According to Gulley, the Theory of Recollection provides a solution to this problem because it “demonstrates that in mathematics Socrates’ method of cross-examination will lead a person to recognise that certain propositions are undeniably true . . .” (*ibid.*).

of the side of a square with double the area of this original square. The slave responds, seemingly on the basis of a general principle such as “double the area, double the length of the side,” that such a square will have sides that are four units in length (*M.* 82d). Socrates then shows him how this answer conflicts with his principle for determining the area of rectangles. A square whose sides are four units has an area of sixteen square units; yet sixteen square units is four times, rather than twice, the area of four square units (*M.* 83b). The slave then suggests at Socrates’ prompting that a square with an area of eight square units must be based on sides with lengths more than two units, but less than four units. So he naturally concludes that it is based on sides of three units (*M.* 83d-e). But again, as Socrates points out, this answer conflicts with the slave’s own beliefs. For, when the slave applies his formula for determining the area of a square, he discovers that such a square has an area of nine square units rather than eight (*M.* 83e).

At this point the slave is at a complete loss; he does not see how any of the answers that he might suggest can work. Socrates then asks him to consider a square composed of four squares whose areas are each four square units (*M.* 84d-e). They have been seeking, Socrates explains, the length of the side of a square whose area is half of the area of this composite square (*M.* 84e). Socrates then draws a diagonal in one of the smaller squares (from corners that are on the perimeter of the composite square), and asks the slave whether this line cuts the square into two equal parts (*M.* 85a). The slave agrees that it does. Socrates then draws diagonals in the three other squares of the composite square. The result of this process is the construction of another square whose sides are the diagonals of each of the four squares of the composite square (*M.* 85a). Socrates asks the slave what is the area of this newly constructed square. The slave is still quite confused, but Socrates points out to him that the diagonals of each of the small squares cut these squares in half and that the newly constructed square contains four halves of a four unit square. Since the four unit square has an area of sixteen square units, the newly constructed square must have an area of eight

square units. Of course, this is the square that they were looking for. The slave then sees that a figure double the area of a given square is based on the diagonal of this square (*M.* 85b). Socrates declares himself triumphant: the slave has recollected: successful inquiry by means of Socratic cross-examination is thus shown to be possible.<sup>43</sup>

But what has the slave recollected during the course of this demonstration? Socrates refers to the Theory of Recollection on four occasions during the demonstration: (1) before he asks the slave any questions (*M.* 82b5-6), (2) after the slave gives his first false answer to one of Socrates' questions (*M.* 82e12-13), (3) after the slave gives his second false answer to the same question (*M.*

43. Recently Vlastos has argued that the method of inquiry that Socrates applies in the demonstration with the slave is not the Socratic method of inquiry that we find in the early dialogues. Midway through this demonstration, according to Vlastos, Socrates ceases to use his old method of cross-examination and applies a new "geometrical" method which, unlike his old method, can "bring him to the truth he seeks":

He [Socrates] could have gone on till doomsday trying out different integers or ratios of integers to be shown their falsehood by the same process, and none of this would have brought him an inch closer to the true answer. . . . This answer no elenctic badgering could have elicited from the boy. To bring him to it Socrates *must shed the adversative role* to which persistence in elenctic argument would have kept him. Shed it he does. Extending the diagram, he plants into it the line that opens sesame, and *then* the boy "recollects" that the side of a square whose area is twice that of a given square is the diagonal of the given square.

What is so obviously new here is the resort to geometry (Vlastos 1991, 119).

Vlastos mentions two things that might seem to differentiate the method used in the second part of the demonstration with the slave from what he takes to be the elenchus used in the first part: (1) Socrates sheds his adversative role, and (2) he resorts to geometry. I have already addressed Vlastos' view that "adversary argument" is essential to the Socratic method of inquiry (see n. 16, above). We should now consider why Vlastos might believe that an appeal to geometry is incompatible with a use of the Socratic method of inquiry.

Vlastos suggests that geometry as an axiomatic system, and hints that Plato held the same view when he wrote the *Meno* (Vlastos 1991, 121). Axioms, on Vlastos' view, serve as epistemic foundations for other beliefs (*ibid.*, 112 n. 26). So it would seem that geometry presupposes a foundationalist model of epistemic justification. In contrast, Vlastos observes, "[f]or such indubitably certain termini to inquiry there is no place at all in the Socratic elenchus" (*ibid.*). I agree with Vlastos that Socrates never seeks epistemic foundations when inquiring in the early dialogues. But even if Plato's appeal to geometry in the *Meno* does

84a3-b1), and (4) after the slave discovers the correct answer to the question (*M.* 85d6-7).

The first reference to the Theory of Recollection is not very helpful. Before the questioning begins, Socrates warns Meno: "Pay attention then whether you think he is recollecting or learning from me" (*M.* 82b5-6). Socrates cannot be suggesting that everything that the slave does after this point involves recollection. For among the answers that the slave gives to Socrates' questions are two that are false. Since the Theory of Recollection is supposed to give Meno hope, it is most likely used to explain what the slave does well rather than what he does poorly.<sup>44</sup>

Socrates' next reference to recollection occurs after the slave gives a false answer to one of his questions. At this point, Socrates again urges Meno to pay attention: "Watch him recollecting things in order, as one must recollect" (*M.* 82e12-13). It seems that after having given his general warning to look for recollection taking place at some point during this demonstration, Socrates is now giving more specific instructions that recollection is about to take place very soon. This suggests that, at this point in the demonstration, no recollection has yet taken place. If recollection has not yet taken place, then the slave's mathematical concepts have not been recollected during the

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involve a search for epistemic foundations, it does not follow that his method of inquiry has changed. In any case, I think that it is doubtful that *Plato* found the foundationalist presuppositions of current geometrical practice very attractive. There is evidence in the *Republic* that Plato had strong reservations about precisely this aspect of many geometers' procedure: ". . . geometry and those who follow it, we see as dreaming about reality, unable to have a waking view of it so long as they make use of hypotheses and leave them undisturbed and cannot give an account of them" (*R.* 533b6-c2). To give an account of a hypothesis is to show what beliefs support, or are supported by, it. Certain geometers, Socrates is suggesting in the *Republic*, lack knowledge of their hypotheses because they lack inferential justification for them. In contrast, dialecticians, whom Plato holds up as models of epistemic virtue, are able to give an account of all of their views and survive elenctic examinations of them (*R.* 534b-c). Since there is no evidence that Plato's estimation of the foundationalist presuppositions of current geometrical practice in the *Meno* is different from that which he articulates in the *Republic*, I see no reason to believe that a "resort to geometry" in the *Meno* involves a quest for epistemic foundations.

44. Scott 1987, 352.

course of the demonstration. For the slave has had these concepts from the very beginning.<sup>45</sup> Further, if recollection has not yet taken place, then the true or false answers that the slave has given to Socrates' questions before this point in the demonstration also have not been recollected during the course of this demonstration.<sup>46</sup>

However, after Socrates urges Meno to pay attention to the slave for the second time, the slave seems to do the same sort of thing that he did before. He comes up with a second false answer to Socrates' question, which he then rejects when Socrates shows him that it conflicts with his views about determining areas of squares. For the reasons that I mention above, the false answer cannot be a product of recollection. Further the principle that the slave has for determining the area of a square cannot have been recollected during the course of this demonstration; for he appeals to this principle from the very beginning. It seems likely then that no recollection has taken place by this point in the demonstration.

Just after the slave has given his second false answer to Socrates' question, has rejected it in favor of his principle for determining the areas of squares, and has found himself completely at a loss, Socrates says to Meno: "You realize which point he has reached in his recollection" (*M.* 84a3-4). As I have just remarked, it seems that no actual recollection has taken place by this point in the demonstration; so, "the point that he has reached in his recollection" cannot be the point at which he has successfully recollected something. Rather, as Socrates explains, the point that the slave has reached is that he is now ready to recollect (*M.* 84a4-b1).<sup>47</sup> Now that he has discovered

45. Cf. Moravcsik 1970, 59, 69. As will become clear later, I do not mean to claim that the possession of these mathematical concepts is not to be explained by appeal to the Theory of Recollection. My claim is simply that the mathematical concepts that the slave is using during the course of this demonstration have not been recollected to consciousness during the course of this demonstration.

46. But, again, I am not claiming that the true mathematical beliefs that the slave brings to the demonstration were never gained through recollection. At this point, my claim is only that these beliefs were not recollected during the course of this demonstration.

47. For a defense of this view, see Nehamas 1985, 21.

that he does not know, he may be willing to search more deeply in his soul for answers to Socrates' questions.

After the slave has been shown his ignorance, Socrates constructs more squares for him, and asks him further questions about them. The slave eventually answers correctly the same question that he had earlier answered incorrectly. Socrates then asks Meno how they should explain the slave's progress:

—What do you think, Meno? Has he in his answers, expressed any belief that was not his own?

—No, they were all his own.

—And yet, as we said a short time ago, he did not know.

—That is true.

—So these beliefs were in him (Ἐνήσαν δέ γε αὐτῷ αὐται αἱ δόξαι), were they not?

—Yes.

—In one who lacks knowledge on certain subjects, whatever subjects he does not know (περὶ ὧν ἂν μὴ εἰδῆ), there are in him true beliefs (ἐνεῖσιν ἀληθεῖς δόξαι) about the subjects about which he lacks knowledge. . . . These beliefs have now just been stirred up like a dream, but if he were repeatedly asked questions about these same things (τὰ αὐτὰ ταῦτα)<sup>48</sup> in various ways, you know in the end his knowledge about these things would be as accurate as anyone's. . . . And he will know it without having been taught but only questioned, and recover knowledge within himself?

—Yes.

—And is not recovering knowledge within oneself recollection?

—Certainly. (*M.* 85b-e)

According to Socrates' analysis of the results of the demonstration, the slave has not yet achieved geometrical knowledge. In order to achieve such knowledge, he must await further questioning. However, Socrates' demonstration with the slave is

48. G. M. A. Grube translates "τὰ αὐτὰ ταῦτα" as "the same questions" (Grube 1981, 75). However, it is difficult to see how answering the same questions again and again would transform true beliefs into knowledge. In contrast, answers to different questions about the same things could serve to justify the answers to the original question.



supposed to provide Meno with some reason to believe that the Theory of Recollection is true (*M.* 82a). Socrates must therefore believe that some event that occurs during the course of the demonstration is best explained by reference to the Theory of Recollection. Since the slave does not acquire knowledge during the course of this demonstration, the Theory of Recollection cannot serve the *sole* function of explaining our ability to acquire knowledge.

If we look at the passage that I quote above we can see that Socrates believes that the Theory of Recollection explains the slave's ability to come up with a correct answer to the question that the slave had originally answered incorrectly. For Socrates reasons that this correct answer reflects the slave's own belief, a belief of which the slave was not aware when he gave the false answer to Socrates' question. Socrates suggests further that the true belief that the answer reflects was in the slave at the time at which he gave the false answer and that this true belief was eventually "stirred-up" by Socrates' questions.<sup>49</sup> Bringing an unconscious true belief to consciousness is naturally spoken of as "recollection".<sup>50</sup>

49. I am suggesting that Socrates is claiming that there are literally true beliefs within the slave's soul of which he is not conscious prior to recollection. However, these beliefs might be explicit, in the sense that there is an actual mental representation of a particular state of affairs stored within one's soul. (I am assuming that it makes sense to speak of an explicit, but unconscious belief: "A paradigm case of this would be one in which a previously tokened representation is now stored quiescently in long-term memory" [Lycan 1988, 56]). Alternatively, these true beliefs within the slave's soul may be merely implicit, in the sense that they are mere propensities to give mental assent to true propositions.

50. Nehamas argues that recollection is limited to the final stages of learning—the actual acquisition of *epistēmē*—on the basis of Socrates' remark that recollection is recovering knowledge from within (*M.* 85d). While this remark does show that Plato believes that recollection is involved in the acquisition of at least some knowledge, I am suggesting that it does not show that recollection is involved *only* in the acquisition of knowledge. Since Socrates uses the demonstration with the slave as a demonstration of the truth of the Theory of Recollection, it seems likely that something that takes place in the demonstration with the slave involves recollection, and the main thing that happens in this demonstration is the "stirring up" of formerly unconscious true beliefs. Nehamas considers such an objection to his view:

Of course, one can agree that the demonstration with the slave shows that one can inquire successfully by means of Socratic cross-examination without agreeing that one must appeal to the Theory of Recollection in order to explain this success. Why isn't Socrates happy with a less extravagant theory about the source of the slave's correct answer? Plato is not fully explicit, but it is not difficult to see why the Theory of Recollection is appealing. It appears that we do not gain access to numbers, sets, or geometrical figures through sensory perception. Nonetheless, our beliefs about these things are not pure fiction. The phenomenology of mathematical experience seems to have the following two features: (1) when we do mathematics, we seem to be constrained by objective facts; and (2) thought appears to be the only basis for our access to these facts.<sup>51</sup> But how is this possible? Philosophers of mathematics still debate this question. Plato proposed the Theory of Recollection. According to this theory, we have within us unconscious true beliefs about mathematics which we recollect during the course of Socratic cross-examination. Whatever the ultimate source of these beliefs,<sup>52</sup> they are rediscovered (rather than invented)

Suppose now that we restrict recollection in this way [i.e., to the recovery of *epistêmê*]. Since we are explicitly told that the slave does not yet have any *epistêmê* does it not follow that he has not engaged in recollection in the dialogue? And if this is so, what is the point of his long examination? (Nehamas 1985, 22).

In response to these questions, Nehamas suggests that what happens in the demonstration with the slave is "deeply representative of the process" of recollection. However, on Nehamas' view, what happens in the slave is not *merely* representative of recollection. As he explains, what happens in the demonstration "... represents [recollection], because it is part of it . . . . What brings about the *aitias logismos* and transforms *doxai* into *epistêmê* is not a new operation, additional to the eliciting of true *doxai* but rather the eliciting of enough true *doxai* about the subject to make having them *constitute* the *aitias logismos*" (ibid.). On Nehamas' own view, the "eliciting of true beliefs" is *part* of recollection. Thus, contrary to Nehamas' suggestion, the Theory of Recollection is used not only to explain the acquisition of *epistêmê*, but also to explain the acquisition of certain true beliefs.

51. Isaacson 1994, 118. Isaacson argues that these two features of our mathematical experience support a view that he calls "Concept Platonism". Of course, not everyone agrees that these are aspects of our mathematical experience. Penelope Maddy, for example, argues that perception plays more than a "triggering" role in the acquisition of mathematical knowledge (Maddy 1990, 50-75).

52. In the *Meno*, Socrates remains undecided about the source of the uncon-

through dialectical reasoning (rather than through sensory perception). Because the Theory of Recollection provides an explanation for these two aspects of our mathematical experience, I suggest, Socrates finds it particularly attractive as an explanation for the slave's successful inquiry.<sup>53</sup>

The demonstration with the slave shows that Socrates believes that his method of cross-examination plays an important role in inquiry even *prior* to recollection; indeed, it would appear that the slave recollects the correct answer only because he had been cross-examined so thoroughly by Socrates. But when one is inquiring by means of Socratic cross-examination, one's starting points matter. The slave's successful acquisition of a conscious true belief is a function of his submission to Socratic cross-examination *in combination with* certain facts about his unconscious *and* conscious mental states prior to the demonstration and the manner in which he revises his beliefs when conflicts among his beliefs become evident. When Socrates demonstrates the first inconsistency in the slave's beliefs, the slave rejects the false principle that led him to give the false suggestion that a square with double the area of a square based on two units is based on four units (*M.* 82d). He rejects these false beliefs in favor of the true principle that one determines the area of a rectangle by

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scious beliefs. He suggests that each of our souls has been in Hades and has been incarnated many times here, and initially, he indicates that this previous experience is responsible for the fact that we can now inquire successfully: "Because the soul is immortal, has been born often and has seen (*ἐώρακνῖα*) all things, there is nothing that it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both about virtue and other things" (*M.* 81c5-d1). But later, Socrates suggests that, in fact, there are two possible explanations for the slave's possession of true beliefs that were not acquired during the course of his present incarnation: either the slave had acquired these beliefs on some occasion in the past or he always had them (*M.* 85d). If he had acquired them on some occasion in the past, it was when he was not a human being (*M.* 86a). Yet Socrates is careful not to rule out the possibility that the "truth about the things that are is *always* in our [immortal] soul" (*M.* 86b1-2; my emphasis). If this is the case, then the slave never acquired recollected beliefs on any particular occasion, either through acquaintance with the objects of these beliefs or otherwise.

53. Of course, there are many other possible explanations of these apparent aspects of our mathematical experience. Undoubtedly, Plato was drawn to the Theory of Recollection, in particular, because it cohered well with his views about the nature of the soul.

multiplying the length of two of its adjacent sides. His second false answer is also rejected in favor of this true principle (*M.* 83e). In this case, it is clear that the slave is more committed to his true beliefs than he is to his false beliefs.

By performing his demonstration on Meno's slave, Socrates intends to show not only that mathematical inquiry by means of Socratic cross-examination is possible, but also that successful moral inquiry by means of Socratic cross-examination is probable. For, when he has completed his demonstration with the slave, he suggests that he has gathered evidence that is sufficient to show that *Meno* will be able to inquire with at least some limited success into the nature of virtue (*M.* 86b-c).<sup>54</sup> If the odds in favor of the slave's success in this one instance of mathematical inquiry were very low, or if the difference between mathematics and ethics was such that the likelihood of successful inquiry in the one area provided little ground for confidence in the other, then Meno should not feel at all reassured by Socrates' demonstration with the slave that he, Meno, will be able to inquire successfully into the nature of virtue. In order to show Meno that successful moral inquiry by means of Socratic cross-examination is likely, Socrates must give Meno some reason to believe that he is in at least as good shape with respect to ethics as his slave is in with respect to geometry and also that Meno's strategies for belief-set revision are similar to his slave's.

I want to suggest that Socrates thinks that he has provided Meno with reason to be optimistic about his chances for successful moral inquiry, because he believes that the demonstration with the slave provides good evidence for the truth of the Theory of Recollection, and that the Theory of Recollection, if true, provides the basis for an explanation of the reliability of

54. Socrates indicates that, if he were to question the slave further, the slave's true beliefs could, in principle, be transformed into knowledge (*M.* 85c-d). Since an assessment of this claim would require an examination of the conception of knowledge that is implicit in the early dialogues, an examination that I cannot attempt here, I will restrict myself to assessing Plato's weaker claim that his method of inquiry can at least get one as far as true belief. For a brief sketch of my views about the conception of knowledge implicit in the early dialogues, see Gentzler 1995.

the Socratic method of moral inquiry. In order to see that the Theory of Recollection is designed to play this role, we must recall that Socrates' initial response to Meno's worries about the likelihood of successful inquiry is a brief account of the Theory of Recollection. Socrates believes that the demonstration with the slave provides some evidence for the truth of this theory, because he believes that the best explanation for the slave's success is provided by a theory that posits the existence of unconscious true beliefs about mathematics within the slave's soul. But how does this help Meno? After all, Meno is not concerned about his ability to discover *mathematical* truths; he seeks to discover the nature of virtue. One might think that, in order to have evidence for a theory that posits the existence of unconscious true *moral* beliefs, we would need a different sort of demonstration—one concerned with ethics rather than mathematics. In order to have such a demonstration, the objection continues, we would need an example of a successful application of the Socratic method of inquiry in the realm of ethics. Yet no example of such a demonstration is to be found in the *Meno* or in earlier dialogues. In fact, on the basis of such considerations, one might conclude that, far from it being the case that the Theory of Recollection provides the basis for a defense of Socrates' trust in the reliability of cross-examination as a tool for acquiring true moral beliefs, Socrates' view that there are unconscious true moral beliefs within our souls could be justified only by a demonstration in which it is *presupposed* that cross-examination is being used reliably to discover objectively true moral beliefs.

Happily, Plato can respond to such worries. In his initial description of the Theory of Recollection in the *Meno*, Socrates suggests that the scope of recollection is very broad. He states that in previous incarnations the soul has "seen all things" and that there is "nothing that it has not learned" (*M.* 81c6-7). But we have seen that, when Socrates reflects on the implications of his demonstration with the slave, he never suggests that all of the slave's true beliefs are a product of recollection: he appeals explicitly to the Theory of Recollection to explain only the cor-

rect answer that the slave gives to a geometrical problem. We need not hold Socrates to the extravagant claim that all of our true beliefs are the product of recollection, but the *Meno* provides us with few additional clues about the scope of recollection.

Fortunately, in the *Phaedo*, Plato offers an account of recollection that fills in certain gaps in the *Meno* discussion.<sup>55</sup> There Socrates explicitly identifies the objects of recollection with moral and mathematical properties:<sup>56</sup>

... our present argument [for the Theory of Recollection] concerns the fine itself, and the good itself, and just and holy, no less than the equal; in fact, as I say, it concerns everything on which we set this seal, "what it is (ἀντὸ ὃ ἔσται)", in the questions we ask and in the answers we give. (*Ph.* 75c10-d3)

In the *Meno*, the Theory of Recollection is introduced to explain the probability of successful inquiry into the nature of virtue. We learn from the demonstration with the slave that the Theory of Recollection is intended also to explain the probability of successful inquiry in mathematics. It does not seem to be a mere coincidence that, in the *Meno*, recollection is used to explain the probability of successful inquiry into those very properties that are explicitly identified as the object of recollection in the *Phaedo*.

Many have held that our moral experience has the two features that I suggested are distinctive of our mathematical experience: when we engage in ethical inquiry, it appears that (1) we are somehow constrained by objective facts, and that (2) these facts are not discovered through sense perception.<sup>57</sup> Plato never

55. Although it is possible that Plato has some other view in mind in the *Meno* than he has in mind in the *Phaedo*, there seems to be no special reason to suppose this. Of course, it is also possible that Plato had not yet made up his mind about the details of his theory when he wrote the *Meno*. Nevertheless, since we do not have a special reason to suppose that the *Meno* must be different from this dialogue on this score, we can assume that something like what he says in the *Phaedo* was, if only vaguely, what he had in mind in the *Meno* as well.

56. I am assuming that Plato's Forms are properties (see n. 19, above); I mean to leave open the question whether they are also paradigm instances of themselves.

57. Even those who are unfriendly to moral objectivism concede that the

expresses any doubt about the objectivity of moral and mathematical properties, and he suggests, in the *Phaedo*, that moral and mathematical properties are inaccessible to sense perception. He divides all properties into two sorts—the visible and the invisible (*Ph.* 79a6-7). “The invisibles” are said to be grasped only by the reasoning of the intellect (τῷ τῆς διανοίας λογισμῷ) (*Ph.* 79a3). They are what “we give an account of in asking and answering questions” (*Ph.* 78d1-2)—i.e., the nature of “the equal itself, the fine itself, what each thing is itself, that which is” (*Ph.* 78d3-4). Since the Theory of Recollection can be used to explain these two apparent features of our mathematical experience, it might also be used to explain the same apparent features of our moral experience. Presumably, Plato has Socrates choose the subject of mathematics rather than ethics to provide some evidence for the Theory of Recollection because he believes that fewer disputes arise in mathematics. We are confident about our ability to determine whether progress in mathematical inquiry is made. Plato could then argue that ethics and mathematics are sufficiently similar that, once we have provided some evidence for a theory that posits the existence of unconscious mathematical beliefs within our souls, we do not need an independent demonstration of successful moral inquiry in order to have some evidence for a theory that posits the existence of unconscious moral beliefs.

We may feel that we are now in a position to explain Socrates’ trust in his method of inquiry. As we saw above, in the early and transitional dialogues, Socrates attempts through cross-examination to elicit from his interlocutors accounts of the nature of the virtue in question. The demonstration with the

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appearance of objectivity is a feature of our moral experience. See, e.g., Mackie 1977, 30-35. For a more sympathetic treatment of this aspect of our moral experience, see Brink 1989, 23-36. What I have called “the second aspect of our moral experience” is more open to debate. Hume thought it was sufficient to challenge his reader to reflect on their lack of empirical grounds for calling an action a vice to show that moral judgments did not rest on sensory perception (Hume [1739-40] 1978, 468-469). Some ethicists have argued that no knowledge depends solely on perception, and moral knowledge, like all other knowledge, depends on “attention, perception, and reflection” (Platts 1980b, 72). See also McDowell 1985, 110-129.

slave is designed to provide evidence for the truth of the Theory of Recollection, and the Theory of Recollection explains how we have the ability to provide accounts of virtue. We all have "within us true beliefs about the things that we do not now know" (*M.* 85c6-7). Meno can feel confident that he will be able to recollect true beliefs about the nature of virtue because the scope of recollection includes beliefs about moral properties, such as virtue, in addition to beliefs about mathematical properties.

#### VI. The "Problem of the Socratic Elenchus", once again

Unfortunately, matters are not so simple. It still is not clear why Socratic cross-examination, in particular, is important to this "triggering process". Indeed, recollection is not obviously a likely effect of Socratic cross-examination. Socrates' interlocutors often have conscious, but false, beliefs about the nature of the moral virtues. It is reasonable to suppose that, if one has a conscious belief that would serve, when articulated, as an answer to a particular question, one will respond with this answer, rather than attempt to stir-up a relevant answer from the depths of unconsciousness: beliefs that are already conscious are easier to 'access' than unconscious beliefs. It is for this reason that Socrates believed that it is necessary to call these conscious beliefs into question before successful recollection can take place. In the *Meno*, exposure of ignorance is explicitly mentioned as a necessary step in inquiry (*M.* 84a-c). If one becomes aware that one's conscious beliefs will not serve one's purposes, one will be willing to delve more deeply into one's soul for an answer to Socrates' question.

Socrates claims to be able to expose ignorance through cross-examination by eliciting from his interlocutor inconsistent answers to various questions that he asks. But, according to Socrates, there are different ways to be ignorant. One could fail to know that *P* (1) because one's belief that *P* is false,<sup>58</sup> and/or (2) because one lacks proper justification for believing that *P*.

58. Socrates commits himself to the view that knowledge implies truth at *Eu.* 5b and *G.* 454d.



One could lack proper justification for believing that *P* either (2a) because one lacks sufficient reason to believe that *P*,<sup>59</sup> or (2b) because, given one's other actual beliefs or beliefs that one can easily form,<sup>60</sup> one has positive reason to believe the negation of *P*.<sup>61</sup> Ignorance due to a *lack* of positive justification for one's belief does not obviously stand in the way of successful inquiry. But ignorance of *P* due to a positive reason to believe the negation of *P* could. Somewhere in the belief-set of someone with this sort of ignorance is at least one error (or easily obtainable error). This error may prevent one from recognizing certain evidence and may even lead one further astray. Fortunately, this kind of ignorance is particularly susceptible to exposure through Socratic questioning. Socrates elicits from his interlocutors an account of some F-ness; he then asks his interlocutor a question about particular cases, whether they are F or not-F. Presumably, at least some of his interlocutor's beliefs about instances of F-ness will support the interlocutor's initial account of F-ness; otherwise it would be a mystery why he was tempted to accept his account of F-ness in the first place. But if Socrates' interlocutor has positive reason to reject his account of F-ness, then somewhere in his belief-set is some belief that entails the negation of his account of F-ness. Through his questioning, Socrates can, in principle, expose this belief.

A failure to know that *P* due to the possession of positive reason to believe the negation of *P* is not the only kind of ignorance that can stand in the way of successful inquiry: another sort is the failure to know that *P* because it is not the case that *P*. But it is not altogether clear that Socrates can always expose this kind of ignorance, even in principle. If his interlocutor's belief-producing mechanisms give rise to systematically distorted

59. See, e.g., *Eu.* 4a-5d and *L.* 190a-c.

60. I have in mind the beliefs that one has a disposition to form when someone (like Socrates) asks you to consider a particular case and asks whether you believe it is F or not-F. You may never have considered such a case before, and so may not have had any beliefs about whether it is F or not-F. But any judgment you have a disposition to form about a particular case would count for or against one's present justification for an account of a particular property.

61. See, e.g., *HMi.* 372d-e, 376c.

beliefs—i.e., to beliefs that are consistent and mutually supporting, but largely or wholly false—Socrates' method for exposing ignorance will be unsuccessful. If Socrates is to defend the reliability of his method of inquiry, he must first defend the reliability of his method for exposing the sorts of ignorance that would stand in the way of successful inquiry; and, to do this, he must give us some reason to believe that our belief-producing mechanisms do not inevitably give rise to systematically distorted beliefs.

The only thing that would prevent the systematic distortion of beliefs is a mechanism that produces beliefs that are inconsistent with a belief-set composed of largely false, but mutually supporting, beliefs. For each systematically distorted belief-set there are an infinite number of propositions, true and false, that may conflict with it. So we might have a mechanism that detects what false beliefs we have and produces some belief, true or false, that conflicts with them. But this is rather *ad hoc* and highly improbable. What is more likely is that we have a mechanism that produces beliefs that would conflict with any possible systematically distorted belief-set—i.e., a mechanism that produces true beliefs of sufficient variety and number that at least one of them will conflict with any false belief that might stand in the way of further inquiry. Since the exposure of ignorance must occur prior to the successful recollection to consciousness of true beliefs about the virtues, this mechanism for the production of true beliefs must be effective prior to this sort of recollection. In the early and transitional dialogues, Socrates seems particularly concerned to expose his interlocutor's ignorance of an account of some F-ness. He does this by showing that his interlocutor's account of F-ness conflicts with at least one of his conscious beliefs about F things.<sup>62</sup> If this strategy is to be generally successful, then we must have a mechanism for the production of conscious true beliefs about F things that would conflict with any false account of the virtue itself *prior* to the successful recollection to consciousness of the true account of the virtue itself. Unfortunately, there are an infinite number of false

62. E.g., whether F-ness is instantiated in a given case, or whether another property G-ness that always accompanies F-ness is instantiated in a given case that conforms to his account of F-ness, and so forth.

accounts of the virtues that are consistent with any finite number of true beliefs about the instances of virtues. Since we cannot have an infinite number of conscious true beliefs about instances of virtues in our souls, we must always have a potential to form conscious true beliefs about the instances of virtues that would conflict with any false account of the virtue itself—a potential that may seem to be actualized when Socrates asks his interlocutor to consider various hypothetical cases.

The assumption that we have a propensity to form true beliefs about instances of virtues would also explain why we are likely to accept the recollected true beliefs about the virtues themselves, at least in the long run. For suppose, to the contrary, that, when I decide to apply the Socratic method of inquiry, I have many conscious false beliefs about instances of virtue, which are due to a constant propensity to confuse virtuous with efficient people. Even if we assume that, when I attempt to answer the question “What is virtue?”, I recollect the true account to consciousness, it is not at all obvious that I will not immediately reject it. Unless recollected beliefs are self-evidently true, when I recollect an account of virtue that is in conflict with many of my conscious false beliefs about virtuous and efficient people, I will reject it in favor of the conscious false beliefs about virtuous and efficient people that I have a propensity to form.

Before I proceed, it will be useful to summarize my argument thus far. Socrates believes that, by the time that he has completed the demonstration with the slave, he has given Meno a reason to be confident about his ability to inquire successfully into the nature of virtue. If the demonstration with the slave provides evidence for the truth of a *general* theory about the reliability of certain human belief-producing mechanisms (a theory that would apply to Meno as well as to the slave), then Socrates is justified in making this claim. This general theory is the Theory of Recollection. It posits the existence of unconscious true beliefs about the nature of moral and mathematical properties within our soul, beliefs that we are able to bring to consciousness. But, as we have seen, *before* these unconscious true beliefs will be brought to consciousness, we must already be

fairly good detectors of instances of these properties. So, if the Theory of Recollection is to provide the basis for a general defense of inquiry, it must *also* provide the basis for an explanation of our propensity to form conscious true beliefs about instantiations of these properties prior to our recollection to consciousness of our true beliefs about the properties themselves.

Now Plato may simply have taken it for granted that most of us are, for the most part, pretty good at picking out instances of moral and mathematical properties; and he may not have believed that the Theory of Recollection was needed to explain this capacity. Despite his awareness of the existence of moral disputes about certain cases, Socrates never questions, and his method of inquiry appears to presuppose, that, in general, we are fairly good detectors of instances of moral properties. However, this ability is really quite mysterious. For, as we see in the early and transitional dialogues, not a single interlocutor can specify either the real essence of any virtue or the criteria that he uses to pick out its instances. Correspondingly, the slave's ability to discover the length of the side of a square twice the area of a given square would suggest that he is applying some general geometrical definitions or principles to these particular cases. Yet Socrates takes great pains to establish that the slave has not benefitted from any geometrical training. It would be an extra bonus for Plato's Theory of Recollection if it could also be used to explain these abilities.

The ability of the slave to solve a particular geometrical problem and the ability of Socrates' interlocutors to recognize instances of moral virtues are remarkable in the same way as is our ability to recognize and form grammatical sentences. From an early age we appear to apply subtle and abstract rules of grammar. But no one has taught us any such rules, nor does it appear that we can derive them by simple induction from limited linguistic data. Further, we appear to apply these rules long before we are able to articulate them; and they are articulated, if at all, only with the greatest difficulty and training.<sup>63</sup> There are

63. See Rawls for a discussion of the similarities between moral and linguistic reasoning (Rawls 1971, 47-50). Of course, the analogy between ethics and linguistics is closer on Rawls' view that moral theory is simply an investigation of

many explanations of this linguistic phenomenon; but according to one influential theory, we have an “innate representation of a universal grammar” within our minds, which unconsciously constrains our use of language.<sup>64</sup> According to Plato’s Theory of Recollection, we have unconscious beliefs about the nature of moral and mathematical properties. Plato proposes the Theory of Recollection in order to eliminate any doubts that we might have about our ability to inquire successfully through cross-examination. The Theory of Recollection cannot by itself remove these doubts unless it also explains how we have the propensity to form conscious true beliefs about instances of moral and mathematical properties. Is it incredible to suppose that, for Plato, these innate beliefs constrain our conceptualization of the world as an “innate representation of a universal grammar” may constrain our use of language?<sup>65</sup>

If this suggestion is right, then we can see how the Theory of Recollection provides a general solution to the “problem of the Socratic elenchus”. We can inquire successfully into ethics and mathematics, because we have within us unconscious true beliefs about the nature of moral and mathematical properties. The existence of these unconscious true beliefs about these properties explains two distinct abilities that we have—(1) our ability to form conscious true beliefs about the nature of the properties themselves and (2) our ability to form conscious true beliefs about their instances. We can form conscious true beliefs about the nature of moral and mathematical properties, because we can recollect these beliefs. We can form conscious true beliefs about the instances of moral and mathematical properties,

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“an aspect of human psychology, the structure of our moral sensibility” (Rawls 1975, 7) than it is on Plato’s view that, through moral inquiry, we discover the nature of mind-independent facts.

64. See Chomsky 1972, 1988.

65. This suggestion seems to be supported by Plato’s discussion of the transmigration of the souls in the *Phaedrus*. There Socrates suggests that previous knowledge of the Forms is necessary even to explain the quite general human ability to give conceptual order to a “plurality of perceptions”: “For only the soul that has beheld truth may enter into a human form. For it is necessary that humans understand what is said ‘according to Form’ (κατ’ εἶδος), passing from a plurality of perceptions to a unity gathered together by reasoning (εἰς ἓν λογισμῷ συναϊρούμενον)” (*Phdr.* 249b5-c1).

because (if the suggestion that I made above is correct), *even prior to recollection*, these unconscious true beliefs about the nature of mathematical and moral properties constrain the way in which we conceptualize the world. That is not to say that we never make mistakes. Just as positing the existence of an unconscious representation of a universal grammar does not rule out the possibility that we will misidentify grammatical and ungrammatical sentences, so the positing of unconscious true beliefs about the nature of moral and mathematical properties does not rule out the possibility that we will misidentify their instances. Placed in a linguistically or morally impoverished environment, we will generalize from our reflection on a narrow range of cases and may thus acquire a number of false beliefs about grammar or ethics. In the case of ethics, at least, our instructors may have an interest in misdirecting our attention or in implanting false beliefs in our minds. However, in the *Meno*, Socrates suggests that we can overcome such limitations simply by having our attention drawn to a wide variety of cases. Through cross-examination, Socrates forces his interlocutors to confront what they are inclined to believe about various moral cases. Since we are fairly good detectors of instances of moral properties, then, when Socrates asks us questions about actual or possible instances of these properties, we will have a tendency to form a conscious true belief that will conflict with the false account of the property that we have so far accepted. We might initially reject this true belief about an instance of a moral property in favor of our false account of the property itself, but with a clever questioner like Socrates around, it is only a matter of time before we form another true belief about an instance of the property that conflicts with our false account of the property itself. Even without Socrates around to serve as our gadfly, if we are diligent and imaginative explorers of our intuitions about possible moral cases or if we have gained additional moral experience, we should be able to come up with a case that provides what we will accept as a counter-example to any false account of the moral property that we have so far accepted. Having rejected our false account, and having gained some insight into the

nature of the property through a consideration of its instances, we will “recollect” a true account of the property. Again, if we are fairly good detectors of instances of moral properties, we will tend not to reject a true account of the property because it will maximally cohere with our other beliefs. Instead, we will tend to reject those false beliefs with which it conflicts. As long as we have a fairly reliable mechanism for producing true beliefs about instances of moral properties, there is no need for Plato to claim that recollected beliefs are self-evidently true. We will favor true beliefs over false beliefs, at least in the long run, not because these beliefs come marked “true” or “false”, but because, if my account of the Theory of Recollection is correct, then, as a matter of fact, our efforts to achieve a coherent belief-set will favor in the long run true beliefs over false ones. The thesis that recollected beliefs are self-evidently true could not *replace* the thesis that we are good detectors of instances of moral properties, because we need the latter thesis to explain how it is probable that Socrates can expose ignorance through cross-examination *before* any recollection takes place.

In addition to providing the basis for a general solution to the “problem of the Socratic elenchus”, the Theory of Recollection provides an explanation for a remarkable ability, however fallible it might be, that we appear to possess—an ability to divide reality at its intelligible joints (*Phdr.* 265e-266a), i.e., an ability to classify objects κατ’ εἶδος, according to their moral and mathematical properties.<sup>66</sup>

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