

Review of Gail Fine, *The Possibility of Inquiry**

Justin Vlasits

University of California, Berkeley

jvlasits@berkeley.edu

The nature of inquiry, its preconditions, and its relation to knowledge were central issues in ancient epistemology, which find almost no analogues in contemporary discussions. Gail Fine, in this challenging, impressive book, brings together many years of her work so that we can appreciate the ancients' sophistication in theorizing about inquiry. It all begins with a paradox in Plato's *Meno*: Meno's questions and Socrates' argument (together called Meno's Paradox) challenge the possibility of inquiry by showing that neither someone knowledgeable nor someone ignorant can engage in it. We assume we inquire every day, but what justifies this assumption? Or better: what *explains* the possibility of inquiry?

The Possibility of Inquiry is really two books in one. The first chapter lays out some distinctions relevant for her project (indeed, for any project trying to come to grips with the nature of inquiry). In chapters 2-5, Fine develops her interpretation of Plato's *Meno*. Then she traces the paradox's reception from Aristotle through the Hellenistic schools and Plutarch, ending with Sextus Empiricus. While Fine's story, from one point of view, surveys only one topic in ancient epistemology, she aptly shows how it touches on definitions, knowledge, reason, signification, appearance, belief, and concepts.

Fine's central claim is that the ancients solved the paradox without appeal to foreknowledge in this life. Although nearly all of the thinkers that she discusses have been thought to invoke prior knowledge, usually of the very object of inquiry, Fine elaborates and defends the anti-foreknowledge view laudably. Furthermore, the distinctions drawn concerning varieties of inquiry, prior cognition, and nativism are a welcome development and will be of use to her opponents as much as her supporters.

The first part moves through the *Meno* in dramatic sequence, beginning with Socrates' examination of Meno. There she argues, controversially, that the following principles,

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although endorsed by Socrates, do not commit him to prior knowledge being necessary for inquiry:

Priority of Knowledge What (PKW): If one doesn't know what x is, one can't know anything about x. (71b3-4)

Dialectical Requirement (DR): The interlocutor ought to be familiar with the things through which an answer is given. (75c8-d7, 79d1-4)

Neither on their own nor together do these principles imply any strong foreknowledge requirement for inquiry, since, Fine says, DR imposes a familiarity (which is less demanding than knowledge) constraint on inquiry,¹ while PKW imposes an independent constraint on knowledge. For example, one could inquire into what something is like and simultaneously learn both what x is and what x is like, satisfying both DR and PKW without foreknowledge.

While this point is well taken, one might worry that Socrates did not appreciate it, since, directly after introducing PKW, he redirects the inquiry from Meno's question (is virtue teachable?) to the relevant definitional question (what is virtue?) (71b-d). Given this shift from a principle concerning knowledge to a methodological prescription, Socrates might reasonably think PKW entails:

Priority of Investigating What (PIW): If one hasn't settled the inquiry into what x is, one can't properly inquire into anything else about x.

Since Socrates thinks one has only settled the inquiry if one knows the answer (it is because he doesn't know at all what virtue is that he wants to pursue the question), Socrates would be committed to a foreknowledge principle: definitional knowledge of x is required for proper inquiry into anything else about x. On this quite different trajectory, Meno's Paradox, far from being the misunderstanding of a layman confusing ignorance and a "cognitive blank", now seems to be a probing challenge to the implausibly strong PIW.

Fine then analyzes the structure of Meno's Paradox, arguing that Meno's question and Socrates' argument, despite some superficial differences, get at the same basic argument:

¹One might worry that Fine's point is stronger than she takes it to be. DR is a norm for *answering* in a dialectical exchange, whereas it is plausibly the *questioner* that is the one inquiring. Throughout the book, Fine runs together learning (μάθησις) and inquiry (ζήτησις/σκέψις), encapsulating this move with the term "zetetic learning" (p. 109). But the connection between them may not be as close as she wants. Learning is paradigmatically brought about by a teacher, one who already knows, while inquiry, even as a social endeavor, is not. This distinction was just as alive for the Greeks as it is for us. Jonathan Barnes, for instance, argues that Heraclitus differentiates himself from the "polymaths" such as Pythagoras and Xenophanes by saying they *learned* (from others) while he *inquired* for himself. *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1982, p. 146)

1. For any x , one either knows, or does not know, x .
2. If one knows x , one cannot inquire into x . [Because inquiry would be unnecessary]
3. If one does not know x , one cannot inquire into x . [Because if one does not know x , one is in a cognitive blank about x and if one is in a cognitive blank about x , one cannot inquire into x]
4. So, for any x , one cannot inquiry into x . (p. 87 ff)

The rest of the first part focuses on Fine's contention that Plato rejects the inference from someone being ignorant to her being in a cognitive blank. (Although she also suggests Plato rejects one way of understanding 2. (p. 135)) Fine then argues that, since the only conception of knowledge offered in the dialogue is as true belief tied down by an account of the cause (98a), the slave's cognitive state prior to Socrates' questioning is not anything close to knowledge, although he has linguistic competence (82b4) and some explicit true beliefs about geometry (82b10-c1). Her biggest challenge, however, is to show how *recollection* does not commit Plato to innate knowledge, but only prenatal knowledge. While she does an admirable job arguing for this position, her reading of Socrates' claim that the slave "takes up the knowledge himself from himself" (85d3-4, d6-7) as merely saying that the slave will acquire knowledge by working things out for himself (pp. 150 ff) still seemed forced.

In the second part, Fine's discussion moves to the ancient reception of Meno's paradox, framed around a Plutarch fragment where he advocates the Platonic solution over those of the Peripatetics, Epicureans, and Stoics. While Fine's interpretation is close to Plutarch's (except for his interpretation of Aristotle), she easily disarms his arguments against rival positions.

On her account, Aristotle's position is quite similar to Plato's, with the main exception that Aristotle does not posit prenatal knowledge. Like Plato, he thinks a kind of prior cognition ($\gamma\nu\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$) is required for inquiry (*APo* I.1), but this sort of cognition is less than what either would deem knowledge. The Epicureans and Stoics, in different ways, invoke "prolepses" to solve the paradox. In general, these are representations of general features of reality in the form of outline accounts acquired by experience and are "natural" in some important sense. While prolepses are or confer what the Epicureans and Stoics considered knowledge (true belief and apprehension, respectively), Fine thinks, if they meant what Plato did by "knowledge", then they too would have agreed that inquiry can proceed in the absense of knowledge. The most valuable, although to my mind underdeveloped, portion of these chapters was her elaboration of three kinds of inquiry with prolepses:

1. Sorting out prolepses from their close cousins (such as false beliefs).
2. Applying prolepses to particulars.
3. Converting one's prolepses into full-fledged definitions.

How do all these types of inquiry hang together? Did the Epicureans or Stoics think, like Aristotle (*APo* II.1-2), that proper scientific practice would order them in a particular way?

In a way, it is her discussion of Sextus that ultimately breaks out of the mold set by the other philosophers. For the Pyrrhonian skeptic, the possibility of inquiry assumes an unparalleled importance, for their philosophy alone is defined by a commitment to inquiry (*PH* I.1). However, their radical suspension of judgment has been thought, since antiquity, to preclude it. Fine here examines two underdiscussed anti-Pyrrhonian arguments in Sextus and his responses. In the first, it is argued that, whether or not the skeptic *apprehends* the object of inquiry, the skeptic cannot inquire. Sextus, distinguishing between apprehension as "mere thought" and something more demanding like "thought and positing the existence of what is thought" or "apprehensive impression", argues that only the former kind of apprehension is necessary for inquiry, but not precluded by his skeptical stance. Rather, it is the dogmatists, since they take themselves to be in a position of knowledge, who cannot inquire. Fine takes this to be an unfair attack since Stoics and Epicureans "don't think they have all the answers." (p. 344) In the second, possibly Epicurean, attack, a similar point is made not about apprehension, but concepts.

Fine's book has much to offer a reader interested in ancient epistemology and will surely be a touchstone for future debate on Meno's Paradox and its reception.