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Interactive Memory and Recollection in Plato's *Meno*

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NAGG: Do you remember —

NELL: No.

NAGG: When we crashed on our tandem and lost our
shanks. (*They laugh heartily.*)

NELL: It was in the Ardennes. (*They laugh less heartily.*)

NAGG: On the road to Sedan. (*They laugh still less heartily.*)

(Samuel Beckett, *End Game*)

“This knowledge will not come from teaching but from questioning”

Οὐκοῦν οὐδενὸς διδάξαντος ἀλλ' ἐρωτήσαντος ἐπιστήσεται

(Plato, *Meno* 85d3–4)

We re-examine the geometry lesson in the *Meno*, focusing on the interaction between interlocutors in the practice of recollection. We appeal to an analogy with interactive memory to suggest how Plato could think that inquiry could be successful even when participants have no awareness of what would satisfy their inquiry. This exposes a feature of recollection that needs no metaphysical assumptions, and which emphasises interaction. This feature, which has escaped the notice of philosophers, is more fundamental to the *Meno* than a theory of innate ideas. Such a theory may be superimposed on the view about interactive memory we describe for the *Meno*, but to focus on Plato's epistemological theory without first understanding what he has to say about the social dimensions of memory is putting the cart before the horse.

I. The problem with the example of recollection in Plato's *Meno*

In Plato's *Meno*, just after Socrates has presented his view that “seeking and learning are nothing but recollection” (81d4–5), Meno asks Socrates, “Can you teach me this?”

(81e5). Naturally, Socrates cannot *teach* this to Meno. It would defeat his claim about learning since he explicitly opposes teaching to recollection (82a1), but he offers to “show” it to him (82b2). There follows what is often referred to as a “demonstration” or “proof” of Plato’s “Theory of Recollection”, in which one of Meno’s slaves is questioned about a geometry problem (82b–85c). In this passage, Socrates claims that he is “teaching nothing, but rather asking everything” (82e4–5, cf. 82b6–7, 84d1–2, 85d3–4, 85e3–4).

Anyone who teaches this “geometry lesson” of Plato’s *Meno* soon encounters the following protest. “But Socrates *is* teaching the slave”, students insist. “He isn’t just asking questions, he is feeding the answers to the slave.” The students are right. The task of the geometry lesson is to produce a square double in area to a four-foot square, and Socrates proceeds by asking questions and drawing diagrams. The slave’s contributions are limited mostly to assenting and counting. In the first attempt to double the square, Socrates asks: “The side of this [figure] is two feet; what is the side of its double?” (82e1–2). The slave responds, echoing his questioner, “Clearly, double” (82e2–3). After Socrates shows him that this answer is incorrect, they start again. Socrates asks: “So, the side of the eight-foot square must be greater than that of the two-foot square but less than that of the four-foot square?” (83d4–5). When the slave assents, “It must”, Socrates bids him, “Try to say what magnitude you affirm it to be” (83e1), whereupon the slave answers “three feet long” (83e2). Here Socrates has practically forced the particular answer from the slave since he asks for a specific magnitude that is greater than two but less than four. Socrates and the slave work out that this answer is incorrect. The third and final time around Socrates both draws the crucial line in the diagram and names it “diagonal” (85b4). Although Socrates *always* asks questions, there is a very strong impression that he is not *only* asking questions, and his repeated protestations that he is not teaching anything only serve to call attention to this fact.

At this point a teacher of the *Meno*, faced with a potential student revolt, usually attempts a rear-guard action, complete with appeals to authorities who have tried to do the same thing. For example, it is commonly said that no matter how much feeding Socrates does, the slave doesn’t regurgitate, but always answers with his *own* opinions (cf. 85e7) and that this is explicitly highlighted by Socrates’ request that the slave should always say just what he thinks (83d2). Of course, since the slave always answers (whether correctly or incorrectly) along the very lines suggested by Socrates, we cannot be sure that the opinions are his own; we might even suppose that the slave is not in a good position to *know* whether the opinions are his own or not: his link to those opinions is explicitly rather tenuous (cf. 85c9).

A different strategy is needed, and one is waiting in the wings. One can propose that a genuine demonstration that learning is recollection “would require an interminably long digression” (Benson, 1990:135). What the *Meno* provides for its readers, on this view, is merely an illustration of recollection rather than a literal example of how things actually go. And the illustration is enough to show, at least, that a person

could work out the solution without having been taught geometry before. Indeed, one could work it out without a teacher, without diagrams, without any particular perceptions — without any external physical aid whatsoever. This appears to be a very effective strategy. Nevertheless, it has an undesirable side-effect. It focuses attention on purely epistemological aspects of recollection (the theory) rather than on the novel pedagogical view (the practice) that is the explicit focus of the passage. Twentieth century commentators, who were eager to discover Plato's theories, tended to view the passage as being about *a priori* knowledge, or about necessary truths, or about innate ideas — but not particularly about teaching and learning. Ironically, while they paid extraordinary attention to the significance of diagrams and visual cues, they paid little or no attention to the significance of an interlocutor.

The whole digression on recollection, however, is presented as a response to Meno's concern that inquiry may not be possible if neither of two interlocutors knows what he is looking for (80d–e). And the big problem here is an apparent structural asymmetry between the geometry lesson and Socrates' dialogue with Meno. As many have pointed out, the geometry lesson is supposed to reflect Socrates' dialogue with Meno. At least three times during the geometry lesson Socrates makes references that establish links to his dialogue with Meno. The first time is at 84a when Socrates says the slave “answered boldly”. This echoes Meno's confidence at the start of the dialogue. When Socrates asks him what virtue is, Meno replies: “it is not difficult to say” (71e1, cf. 70b6). The second time is at 84b6–7, where Socrates uses the sting-ray image that echoes Meno's comparison of Socrates to a sting-ray at 80a4–6. And the third time occurs at 84b11–c1 where Socrates suggests that formerly the slave “thought he could speak well before many people and on many occasions about doubling the square”, which echoes Meno's boast about himself at 80b2–3.

For all that, there is a glaring difference between the two conversations. In the conversation with the slave, Socrates already knows the answer to the geometry problem, while in the conversation with Meno neither interlocutor knows what virtue is. Because of this difference, Weiss (2001:83) concludes that the geometry lesson “makes a mockery of Meno's challenge”. She thinks it is “a farce” (2001:94). Fine (2014:117) thinks that there is no asymmetry, because Socrates never says he has the answer to the geometry problem, “and given his demanding standards for knowledge, it is not clear that he takes himself to have geometrical knowledge even of the answer to the question he asks the slave”. Both of these explanations are implausible. There is a better explanation, one which pays more attention to the structure of ordinary memory and recollection.

II. The analogy with ordinary memory

Scholars have found it fruitful to pursue analogies with memory in the *Meno*. For example, Theodor Ebert suggested that “recollection” is intended in a metaphorical way, and that “what Socrates wants to draw attention to is an analogy between learning

and recollecting” (1973:165). When we consider recollection in its ordinary sense, we can see that it requires: (a) an initial experience or condition of awareness, followed by (b) a forgetting or lapse of awareness of that experience or condition, followed by (c) an awareness of having forgotten, followed by (d) a search for what was forgotten, finally followed by (e) a successful recovery. In having this complex structure, recollection is unlike simple remembering, which may be (more or less) continuous or spontaneous. A person may remember some landmark event “like it was yesterday” (as the saying goes). Or she may stand on a hilltop and, for no apparent reason, remember that she ate scrambled eggs for breakfast. But in order to recollect how a particular sonnet goes, she has to remember that she knew it once, observe that she does not have it in mind now, and then set about recovering (as best she can) what she once knew. As Ebert (1973:168) states:

It is easy to see that this gradual succession in the process of recollecting has its formal counterpart in the passage from error (fictitious knowledge) to true knowledge: both forgetfulness and error can be characterized as an ignorance about ignorance; we are lacking knowledge about a lack of knowledge in both cases. And in both cases the way to knowledge leads through the awareness of one’s ignorance.

This structure of recollection is reflected in the process of learning that Meno’s slave undergoes. The crucial reason for drawing the analogy between learning and recollection lies in our attitude to the awareness that we don’t know. In ordinary recollection, the point of realising that we have forgotten typically acts as an incentive to remember. We don’t particularly like having lost a memory, and we are eager to recover it (“Where did I put my keys?”, “Where did I read, ‘the mountains are in labour only mice are born?’”). By pressing the analogy with recollection, Socrates provides incentive to learn what one does not know. Thus, once the slave recognises his ignorance, Socrates says “he would gladly seek” (84b10). In summing up the myth of recollection Socrates says that *believing* it “turns people into energetic seekers” (81d7–e1), and at the end of the whole recollection passage he returns to this point: “believing we must seek what we don’t know, we shall be better and braver and less idle” (86b7–9).

How does this analogy with ordinary recollection help us to solve the problem about the case where both of two interlocutors are ignorant? Before we can see the answer to this question, we need to expand on the recollection analogy by paying closer attention to a feature of the Greek that is not present in English. Tarrant (2006:47) points out that “Plato’s verb for recalling is simply the passive voice of a verb for reminding”. He notes that it is only for the teaching and learning process (as opposed to the sometimes lonely process of discovery) that the passive verb ἀναμνησκεισθαι is used. This is significant because it suggests that the “teacher” (or “reminder”) is instrumental to the process of recollection, even if he is not teaching anything (in the sense of transmitting). As Tarrant shows, the text of the *Meno* strongly encourages this suggestion. At 82a1–2, it is *teaching* (διδασχῆν), not learning, that is identified with recollection (ἀνάμνησις). At 87b7–8, what is recollectable (ἀναμνηστόν) is identified

with what is *teachable* (διδακτόν), not what is learnable. And at 98a3–4, recollection (ἀνάμνησις) is said to be the process in which “somebody” (τις) binds correct opinions to reason. That “somebody” is usually taken to be “the person who will come to know”, but could just as easily be “the person who will assist by asking questions” (Tarrant 2006:47). In support of the latter reading, recall the second of the epigraphs at the start of this paper. Socrates says that knowledge will result not from teaching (in the sense of transmitting) but from *questioning*. All of this suggests that in the *Meno*, the role of the questioner in recollection is as much the focus of attention as the role of the learner.

It might be suggested that focusing on the role of the questioner only serves to heighten the asymmetry between the geometry lesson (in which the questioner knows what is being sought) and the inquiry about virtue (in which the questioner claims to have no knowledge of what is being sought). But rather than follow the lead of scholars who treat the geometry lesson as an illustration of a process in which the slave could have learned without a teacher, we need to consider situations in which a “teacher” (or questioner) who doesn’t know can make progress with a “learner” (or respondent) who also doesn’t know. And here we can make further productive use of the analogy with ordinary reminiscence and reminding.

III. The importance of an interlocutor

Let us return to the recollection passage and look at it differently, with a focus on the analogy with memory and the importance of an interlocutor. At 82a–b, Socrates declares himself willing to show Meno reasons for persisting in their inquiry into virtue. These reasons must satisfy Meno’s concern about the ignorance of both interlocutors. Socrates uses one of Meno’s slaves to illustrate the possibility of progress. In the illustration, Socrates questions Meno’s slave about how to double a square. But as the inquiry proceeds, he carefully points out to Meno the similarities between the slave’s experience and Meno’s own experience. The analogy invites Meno to consider that just as questioning brought the slave to a state of perplexity and then correct opinion about geometry, it could bring Socrates and Meno to similar states regarding virtue. In showing Meno how the slave comes out of perplexity, Socrates invites him to accept that he too will come out of perplexity through persistence in their shared inquiry into virtue. At the conclusion of his examination, having successfully elicited recognition of the correct answer from the slave, Socrates is careful to remind Meno of the slave’s earlier ignorance (85b–c).

So far so good. Socrates has established correspondences with presumption of knowledge, perplexity, persistence and discovery. He has brought the slave out of ignorance in a way that invites Meno’s belief in the analogy with recollection, and in the value of persistence in shared inquiry. But the analogy meets with the criticism that in one case Socrates already knows the answer sought in the inquiry (let us call this “epistemically sighted” inquiry), but in the other he too is ignorant (let us call

this “epistemically blind” inquiry). This dissimilarity might undermine the appeal of Socrates’ argument. We can imagine that Socrates’ questions are guided by his awareness of the answer in the case of the geometry lesson, but not in the case of virtue. Despite this salient difference, there are similarities between the two cases that should be taken into account. These concern the role of social interaction in discovery. It is possible to appeal to acceptable contexts of both epistemically sighted *and* epistemically blind inquiry, and in the course of so doing to expose a deeper relation between the two, a deeper relation that has its ground in memory and recollection. Let us begin with the epistemically sighted context: Socrates’ examination of the slave.

Socrates’ examination of the slave provides an example of *cognitive dependence* in learning. On his own the slave is unable to find the answer. But with the help of a questioner who is aware of it, he can be led to discover it himself. Sometime thereafter (presumably) he would be able to solve the problem independently. In taking the slave beyond answers, he could previously produce to grasp others that he could not, Socrates leads the slave across what Lev Vygotsky (1978:86) called the “zone of proximal development”. Like Socrates, Vygotsky disparaged the view that teaching is merely the transmission of information to a passive recipient. He saw teaching as a social interaction between a learner already possessing *some* ability and more capable teacher. He argued that as a result of this kind of interaction a learner is able to move from current, actual levels of competence towards higher potential levels. The learner is cognitively dependent upon the more capable teacher (but not *vice versa*), and so *requires* a certain kind of interaction to progress. But in this interaction there are two agents (one more capable than the other), rather than an agent and a patient. In this way, Vygotsky thought teaching to be “discursive” (1978:84), always properly involving asking and answering, listening and responding. Jerome Bruner (1983:60) later described the work of the teacher in this model by analogy with the scaffolding of things under construction. In the *Meno*, Socrates “scaffolds” the slave’s learning, providing a measure of support that can be removed once the slave has acquired independent ability to do geometry. Ironically, while Socrates claims that he is not teaching the slave, today we would reward him for doing just what it is to teach well.

As for the inquiry Socrates shares with Meno, neither Socrates nor Meno knows exactly what the answer is, nor can either independently produce a reliable answer. There are again two agents, but neither is knowledgeable. One may be more capable than the other, but this cannot (if the inquiry is really *epistemically blind*) be a result of knowledge about the object, but rather merely familiarity with the process of seeking and finding. The interlocutors hope, despite their lack of knowledge, that by continuing to work together they find the answer. Their persistence in the inquiry would indicate a belief in *cognitive interdependence*.

The context of cognitive interdependence suggested by Plato in the *Meno* maps neatly onto a contemporary conception of memory — Daniel Wegner’s idea of

“transactive memory” (Wegner, 1985). Rajaram (2010:650) provides a simplified description of “transactive memory” as follows:

This concept has been successfully elaborated and tested in social psychological research, and it is also one that the lay public often intuitively understands when thinking about socially distributed memories. In a transactive memory system, different group members hold nonoverlapping sets of information, as is usually the case for couples who have cohabitated long enough. Such couples develop nonoverlapping expertise about what to remember while being aware of what their partner knows.

We can see an example of transactive memory in the first epigraph at the start of this paper. In Beckett's *End Game*, Nagg's question “do you remember” is at first met by the answer “no”, but with a little nagging, Nell begins to recall, and *her* memory (of the Ardennes) seems to provoke Nagg's memory (of the Sedan). If the dialogue had continued, Nagg and Nell might have recovered, interdependently, many memories which they had lost, and which they were not aware that they had lost. Both Nagg and Nell are in a state of knowing with regard to shared experience, but they are ignorant of many items that lie in their memory. What is more, they may misremember some things, and by working together they can correct each other's memories and bring them into line with what really happened. Thus, by working interdependently, they help to improve each other's memories.

Wegner is concerned with transactive memory systems for their value in collaboration. Thus, he emphasises “*non-overlapping* sets of information”. Plato, on the other hand, is interested in *overlapping* information, which can be recalled by interactive question and answer. Thus, we will distinguish Plato's interest from Wegner's by referring to “interactive memory”. It should be clear, however, that the systems are similar enough for the interactive remembering of shared experience to be both possible and plausible.

But why should we think that Socrates and Meno can achieve a resolution to their inquiry? Doesn't the interactive memory analogy only work for circumstances where people have actually had the same experiences? We think a weaker condition better fits the analogy of recollection in the *Meno*. This condition is supplied by a “casual remark” of Socrates' at the end of his exposition about recollection. He speaks of there being a “kinship of the whole of nature” (81c9–d1), which makes it possible for a person who has recollected one thing to go on to discover all the rest.

Many commentators suspect a Pythagorean provenance for Socrates' remark. The evidence usually produced for this view is Porphyry's assertion that Pythagoras believed “one should consider all living things to be related” (*Life of Pythagoras* 19.13–14). We make no assumptions about the reasons why Pythagoras might have believed this. We merely point out that belief in the relatedness of all living things was widespread in antiquity (Tarrant, 2006:45). We think it fits the casual nature of Socrates' remark to understand it widely, as implying no more than what could be uncontroversially accepted. Of course, Socrates must mean (and does say) more than just that all *living* things are related. The objects of the learner's inquiries include more

than that. But there is still a completely uncontroversial way of taking his remark, since it follows from two statements expressed uncontroversially elsewhere in Plato: (1) “by nature, like is kin to like” (Hippias at *Protagoras* 337d1) and (2) “everything is like everything else in some way” (Protagoras at *Protagoras* 331d3).

If Socrates’ remark about the kinship of all things is an uncontroversial extension of the widely held view that all living things are related, we can easily see why he might want to press an analogy between interactive memory and his conversation with Meno. Just as Nagg and Nell shared the same experience of crashing the tandem, Socrates and Meno share the same *conditions of experience* by virtue of their natural kinship. They are capable of recalling virtue because human beings are the sort of beings for whom virtue can have meaning. The kinship of all things does not just connect the searcher with the object of his search, it connects the interlocutors engaged in the search to each other. In this way, the entire pursuit of philosophy is like an interactive attempt to recall a lost memory. In associating philosophy with the cognitive interdependence apparent in human memory, Plato’s *Meno* depicts philosophy as a particularly *social* activity. Far from telling us that we can have “learning without teaching” (Weiss, 2006), he tells us that having a conversation partner really makes a difference to the success of our inquiries.

IV. Conclusions

If the geometry lesson passage of the *Meno* is intended to show us how recollection, and in particular interactive memory, can provide an analogy that supports persistent inquiry into virtue, we can draw some interesting conclusions. While it is clear that the two cases of shared inquiry (Socrates-and-slave; Socrates- and-Meno) compared in Socrates’ analogy are different, they are alike as cases in which we rely on others to help us in discovery. In assessing Socrates’ analogy, we need to ask whether one case sufficiently betokens the other, despite their differences. Does the social interaction Vygotsky identifies in successful teaching and learning have enough in common with that in which we enlist others to help us remember? Both instances of shared inquiry respond to one phenomenon of the human mind. It appears that we are regularly capable of a wider set of cognitive states than we can practically bring to awareness by ourselves. We often enough find that some part of cognition has been latent in our minds until its elicitation from us by interaction with another person. This is the case when another person directs us to information we already retain in order to prompt the construction of a new argument *and* when we seek to share cues, hoping to elicit a shared memory. It is the case in the kind of teaching and learning Vygotsky depicts and in interactive memory. It is the case in each of the earlier dialogues in which Socrates’ elicits beliefs held without awareness by his interlocutors. Socrates’ analogy with recollection is useful because both of the cases it compares are responses to this aspect of the mind. Socrates’ task is to convince Meno that there are reasons for persisting in a shared inquiry despite the admitted ignorance of the participants.

That task might be satisfied by demonstrating that the mind is such that we are regularly able to move from perplexity to discovery through persisting in inquiry in the company of others.

There is perhaps one final lesson in the analogy between learning and recollection. Recall that Socrates said he could not *teach* Meno that seeking and learning are nothing but recollection. What then could it mean to “show” it to him? How would that showing be different to teaching? It could only be different if there were something for Meno to figure out. The geometry lesson cannot be a *fait accompli*. This suggests that Plato engages his readers in thinking about recollection in a way similar to how Socrates engages Meno: by offering them reminders without telling them what to think.

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