**Assignment 3: Plato, Meno-paradox (*Readings*, pp. 97-103).**

*In the Meno, Socrates discusses with Meno the question whether virtue can be taught. This in turn prompts the question of the definition of virtue. After some unsuccessful attempts to define virtue, Meno introduces the famous paradox that has been called after him. This paradox questions the possibility of knowledge. Read the passage that starts at 79e “Socrates: Then answer again from the beginning …” (= Readings, p. 97 right column bottom) and ends at 86b “Meno: I think you are right, Socrates …” (= Readings, p. 103 left column top).[[1]](#footnote-1)*

1. *Plato, Meno 79e-80d: Meno famously compares Socrates to a sting-ray. Is this an appropriate comparison? Why (not)?*

The reason for the comparison between Socrates and a sting-ray is the animal’s ability to stunt those who approach it, leaving them dumbfounded and puzzled. This strategy is somehow similar to Socrates’s approach to dialogue, as being himself puzzled about reality, and admitting his own ignorance, he is able to instil this same sentiment in his conversational partners, shedding their false beliefs and driving them into contradiction and uncertainty, so that true knowledge may be achieved.

1. *Plato, Meno 80d-81a: Meno here introduces the famous Meno-paradox. Formulate this paradox. Do you believe that this is a good paradox? Why (not)?*

The paradox presented by Meno concerns human inquiry, and it affirms that no human inquiry is possible, as it would have to either be about something that is already known or unknown. But men do not inquire into things they already know, because knowledge is the objective of inquiry, and therefore, where knowledge is already present, inquiry is not needed, nor do they inquire into that which they do not know, as the lack of any type of knowledge would also prevent man from identifying the object of his inquiry, rendering it impossible. As a paradox, it is somehow reminiscent of those presented by Gorgias, meaning that it negates all possible routes to knowledge, therefore rendering inquiry (and, therefore, acquiring knowledge about the world) impossible. It is not however a good paradox, as it stems from a dialogue that immediately negates its premises. For it is clear that Meno does not know what virtue is, and yet he possesses the concept of virtue, as he has been able to form an opinion on it (regardless of the validity we are to attribute it), leading him to believe to know the contents of it. It follows, then, that it is not the case that things are either known or unknown, but rather there is a third case, as is the case for Meno and virtue, where a concept is present in the mind (or, as Plato would put it, in the immortal soul) of the individual, and yet he does not necessarily know anything about it. This means that inquiry must be possible, as the object of inquiry is, in some measure, clear to the inquirer, although its contents are not.

1. *Plato, Meno 81a-d: Socrates solves the paradox by famously claiming that knowledge is recollection. Explain how this claim would solve the paradox.*

In the identification of knowledge with recollection, the paradox is escaped, as the eternal *ideas* of things are already present in us, and inquiry is not the learning of previously unknown qualities and truths about objects of the world, but rather the discovery and recollection of knowledge already present in our soul.

1. *Plato, Meno 81e-86b: Socrates now seeks to demonstrate that knowledge is indeed recollection. He does so by making a slave-boy double the surface of a square. How does Socrates proceed? Does he indeed demonstrate that knowledge = recollection.*

Socrates proceeds by subjecting the boy to a line of geometrical inquiry of increasing difficulty, and it is observed that the slave-boy himself is able to provide answers to Socrates’s question, requiring only occasional prompts from the philosopher to stimulate his reasoning process. This is taken as proof of Socrates’s theory of recollection, as it is clear that he himself is not supplying the boy with new knowledge, and we can assume that the boy has little prior conscious knowledge of abstract geometrical principles, and yet he is able to answer each of Socrates’s questions without falter. This must, for Socrates, mean that the knowledge displayed by the boy must exist somewhere within his soul, and through engaging in dialogue, he is able to recollect and remember it.

1. *Does the thesis knowledge = recollection presupposes the existence of Platonic Forms?*

It does not necessarily presuppose it, but it does certainly implicate it. If we do, indeed, posses “sleeping” knowledge, prior to inquiry, that is to be recollected through dialectics, it is clear that this knowledge must have a source. It might be *a priori* concepts present in our intellect, not necessarily bound to the idea of the immortal soul and the realm of Platonic forms, though the rest of Plato’s dialogue obviously supports the latter. Because this type of knowledge, the one we acquire through recollection, is already and always present in our souls, and it does not come from the experiences we have made in our life as humans, it must necessarily come to our souls in the time in which we are not human beings. And there is, for Plato, no other justification for this process the existence of eternal *Forms* or *Ideas.*

1. *Try to think of other ways to solve the paradox, i.e. without the assuming that soul is immortal.*

Meno’s paradox does not in any way require the postulation of an immortal soul and eternal ideas and can be resolved in a number of ways. If we are to proceed from the same observation Socrates makes, namely, that we do have prior knowledge of possible objects of inquiry, or at least some notion of them (as is the case for Meno and virtue), to formulate an escape route from the grip of the paradox we would have to investigate the nature of such knowledge. We could postulate it to be *a priori* knowledge deriving from *a priori* forms, like, for example, the forms we ourselves are immersed in – those of space and time. Since we come to experience and know sensible objects precisely through these forms, it is only reasonable to assume that, as they are homogenous with the working of our reason (which views even abstract reality through the concepts of time and space), we possess innate knowledge of them, and through this knowledge we construct the principle of *causation* (which necessarily follows from and only presupposes these forms), and through it we are able to investigate our observations of sensible phenomena, working our way up a sort of *chain* of causation, until we are faced with an object and idea that is foreign to us, either because we have not encountered it in sensible reality, or because it lies outside the realms of *a priori* forms. This concept we could only name and conceptualise (in relation to *causation*, meaning that we would understand it to be the cause of something else), but not immediately know, as it would either escape the principle of causation, or rely on our application of *a* priori forms in an unprecedented way. The slave-boy, then, would possess geometric knowledge beyond that which he is conscious of, as he would be able to know objects he has previously not seen immediately through these *a priori* forms, and Meno would possess an idea of virtue into which to enquire, as he would understand it as “that which causes a man to be good” (or some other causal definition). It is, however, in this way still questionable whether the knowledge we are able to acquire through these forms is to be considered true, or only mere illusion. In other words, without Platonic Forms, or any other epistemologically benevolent concept linking existence outside of time and space to existence within it, it is impossible to say whether our understanding of reality, based in the concepts of time and space and cause, corresponds to any type of truth or only to illusion.

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)