Meno’s Paradox

*Plato’s Response*
A Typical Beginning

- The *Meno* begins typically:
  - An instance of the ‘What is F-ness question’:
    - What is virtue (*aretê*?) (*Meno* 71d)
  - Socrates professes ignorance. (*Meno* 71b)
  - A demand for univocity (*Meno* 72b)
  - An instance of the *elenchos* (*Meno* 78c-79d)
    - Virtue is the power to acquire good things.
    - Virtue is always just.
    - Possibly, acquisition is unjust.
  - A request to regroup and begin again (*Meno* 79e)
An Atypical Response

- Meno refuses to play along: ‘How will you look for it Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is?’ (*Meno* 80d)
Meno’s Paradox of Inquiry

1. For all \( x \), either you know \( x \) or you do not know \( x \).

2. If you know \( x \), then inquiry into \( x \) is impossible.

3. If you do not know \( x \), then inquiry into \( x \) is impossible.

4. So, for all \( x \), inquiry into \( x \) is impossible.
A Defense

• On behalf of (1):
  • For all $x$, either you know $x$ or you do not know $x$.
    • This seems analytic.

• On behalf of (2):
  • If you know $x$, then inquiry into $x$ is impossible.
    • You cannot inquire into what you already know, since you already know it.

• On behalf of (3):
  • If you do not know $x$, then inquiry into $x$ is impossible.
    • How can you inquire into $x$ when you do not even know what you are looking for?
      Moreover, you wouldn’t recognize $x$ if you stumbled upon it.
A Debator’s Argument?

- The argument seems fallacious: we need only distinguish between two sense of ‘know’:
  - know = know *everything* about
  - know = know *anything* about

- If (2) is true, then (3) is false.
- Or, if (3) is true, then (2) is false.
- Or, if (2) and (3) are true, then (1) is false
Plato’s Response

- The Doctrine of Recollection
- The Theory of Forms
The Doctrine of Recollection

- The soul is immortal. \((\text{Meno } 81\text{c-d})\)
- Learning is in fact mere recollection. \((\text{Meno } 81\text{d})\)
- This is demonstrated by the success of the slave. \((82\text{a-86a})\)
1. If there are some things known which are not learned—or indeed not learnable—via sense perception, then we have *a priori* knowledge.

2. There are indeed some things known which are not learned—or indeed not learnable—via sense perception.

3. Hence, we have *a priori* knowledge.

   - In brief, some of our actual knowledge requires justification which outstrips all possible sensory justification.

   - Hence, either we must plead ignorance in cases for which plainly have knowledge or we must simply accept the fact that we have a facility for *a priori* knowledge.

   - The only question remaining, then, concerns which sorts of objects of knowledge we know *a priori*. 