

# 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 (*areté*)? ) (*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. (*Meno* 81c-d)
- ❖ Learning is in fact mere recollection. (*Meno* 81d)
  - ❖ This is demonstrated by the success of the slave.  
(82a-86a)

# A Discursive Reconstruction

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