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)

A Typical Progression

- * 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.
- * Evidently, something must give.

A Typical Proposal, an Atypical Response

* A request to regroup and begin again (Meno 79e)

 Meno refuses to play along: 'How will you look for it Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is?' (Meno 80d)

 Here we have a Platonic moment, a moment in which we seem to shift from the Socratic character of the early dialogues to the broader metaphysical and epistemological considerations of the Platonic dialogues.

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 trivially true, true as a point of logic.
- ✤ 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.
- * So, (4): For all x, inquiry into x is impossible.

A Debater'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.

 \bullet Or, if (3) is true, then (2) is false.

* Or, if (2) and (3) are true, then (1) is false.

Plato's Surprising Response

The Doctrine of Recollection

* The soul is immortal. (Meno 81c-d)

The Theory of Forms

* Learning is in fact mere recollection. (Meno 81d)

This is demonstrated by the success of the slave.
(82a-86a)

A Worry behind the Worry?

Two ways of thinking about Meno's Paradox:

* It's a worry about inquiry in general.

* It's a worry about *Platonic inquiry*.

 It's a worry about how we might answer the 'What is F-ness?' question successfully.

* It's a question about philosophical analysis.

One Preliminary Matter

We need a third important distinction, alongside:

- * a priori/a posteriori distinction
- necessary/contingent distinction
- Recall our co-extensivity hypothesis:
 - * Although drawn from different domains, these distinctions are co-extensive:
 - * p is known *a priori* iff p is necessary
 - * p is known a posteriori iff p is contingent
- * We must now add: the analytic/synthetic distinction

Analytic/Synthetic

* The Character of this Distinction

* This is a syntactic-semantic distinction.

The Distinction

A sentence is analytically true/false *iff* it is true/false purely by virtue of its logical form or by virtue of the meanings of its words and independently of matters of fact.

* A sentence is synthetic *iff* it is not analytic.

A Broader Co-extensivity Hypothesis

Although drawn from different domains, these distinctions are co-extensive:

* p is known a priori iff p is necessary iff p is analytic

p is known a posteriori iff p is contingent iff p is synthetic

A Worry about Platonic Analysis

* How, in fact, are we supposed to make progress answering such questions as:

- * What is justice?
- * What is courage?
- What is virtue?
- ✤ We want our answers to be:
 - non-lexicographical
 - essence-specifying
 - more than extensionally adequate
 - epistemically serviceable

The Paradox of Analysis (1)

- Suppose Socrates were to ask (improbably): 'What is being a sister?'
- * The obvious answer: 'Being a sister is the same as being a female sibling.'
- * Now: If the analysis is correct, then: the concept of S = the concept FS
- Yet no-one should think these are the same concept. After all, someone might know what a sister is without knowing what a sibling is.
- * Looked at another way, if $S =_{df} FS$ is correct, then:
 - * (i) $S =_{df} FS$ must mean the same thing as $S =_{df} S$.
 - Yet no-one would think that S =_{df} S is a correct analysis of being a sister: that's obviously trivial.

The Paradox of Analysis (2)

- * A slightly different example: 'What is masticating?'
- * The obvious answer: 'Masticating is the same as chewing.'
- \bullet Now: If the analysis is correct, then: the concept of M = the concept C.
- Yet no-one should think these are the same concept. After all, someone might know what chewing is without knowing what masticating is.
- * Looked at another way, if $M =_{df} C$ is correct, then:
 - * (i) $M =_{df} C$ must mean the same thing as $M =_{df} M$.
 - Yet no-one would think that M =_{df} M is a correct analysis of masticating: that's obviously trivial and uninformative.

The Paradox of Analysis (3)

- * Now a real case: 'What is virtue?'
- * A proposed answer: 'Virtue is the same as ϕ .'
- * Now: If the analysis is correct, then: the concept of V = the concept ϕ .
- Yet no-one should think these are the same concept. After all, someone might know what virtue is without knowing that it is φ.
 - * Indeed, Socratic ignorance seems to require some such commitment.
- * Looked at another way, if $V =_{df} \phi$ is correct, then:
 - * (i) $V =_{df} \phi$ must mean the same thing as $V =_{df} V$.
 - Yet no-one would think that V =_{df} V is a correct analysis of virtue: that's obviously trivial and uninformative.

The Paradox of Analysis (4)

* Some questions:

- Are we perhaps after all really learning nothing more than the meanings of words, e.g. that 'masticate' means the same as 'chew'?
 - If so, then we have violated the non-lexicography condition.
- * Are we perhaps merely discovering analyticities?
 - * If so, then we seem to be discovering something trivial.

The Paradox of Analysis (5)

* Some further worries about the 'What is F-ness?'question:

- Given our co-extensivity hypothesis, if the answers are analytic, then they are necessary and *a* priori—but also trivial.
- * Or, given the same hypothesis, if they are not analytic, and so not trivial, they are synthetic, but then they are contingent and not known only *a posteriori*.
 - If they are known only *a posteriori*, then scientific investigation and not philosophical analysis is the way forward.
 - * If they are contingent, then they are not necessary and so not essential.
 - * In that case, they violate the essence-specification condition.

All Together

- * We are seeking true, necessary, non-trivial, essence-specifying answers to the 'What is F-ness?' question.
- If the answers we seek are non-trivial, then they are nonanalytic, and so synthetic.
- If they are synthetic, then they are contingent, and so nonessence-specifying.
- So, our analytical quest is doomed: try as we may, we cannot arrive at non-lexicographical, essence-specifying definitions of core philosophical notions.

Plato's Response

The Doctrine of Recollection (Meno 81d).

This comes in three phases:

* 81a-e relates priest/priestess story

* 82a-85d slave boy passage I

* 85d-86c slave boy passage II

The Priests and Priestesses

- ✤ The soul is immortal (81b-d).
 - ✤ It has been born often.
 - * It has seen all things here and in the underworld.
 - 'There is nothing which it has not learned.' (81c)
 - 'The soul has learned everything.' (81d)
- The Doctrine of Recollection (81d-82b)
 - * 'How do you mean that we do not learn, but that what we call learning is recollection?' (81e)
 - 'We must, therefore, not believe that debaters's argument, for it would make us idle.' (81d)

The Slave Boy (I.1)

* This is intended to 'show' Meno that learning is recollection, not to 'teach' him that this is so.

- * Socrates ascertains that the slave speaks Greek (82b).
- He guides (?) him through a series of questions, culminating in his revealing that he knows something he thought he had not.
 - * Still, Socrates insists that he is not teaching the boy anything. (82e)
 - * Instead, the slave 'recollects things in order, as one must recollect.' (82d)
 - He makes some missteps, which he corrects, and so is 'in a better position with regard to what he does not know.' (84b)
 - He had never been taught geometry, but rather had his opinion stirred up within him, as in a dream, having, as it turns out 'true opinions within himself' (85c)
- He found the knowledge within himself, where 'finding knowledge within oneself is recollection.' (85d).

Slave Boy (I.2): Two Missteps



The Slave Body (I.3): Getting it Right



'Clever men call this the diagonal.' (85b)

The Slave Boy (II.1): Recollection

- All learning is recollection:
 - 1. If the slave boy (i) can move from failure to success, without (ii) having been taught, then the knowledge must have been within him all along.
 - 2. He can move from failure to success (in fact, he *did* move from failure to success).
 - 3. He was not taught.
 - 4. So, the knowledge must have been within him all along.
 - 5. If the knowledge was within him all along, his 'learning' is really recollection.
 - 6. So, what people call learning is really recollection. (85d)

Some Observations

- The sort of knowledge under the mental microscope is not accidental.
 - Contrast the fact that the slave speaks Greek with the sort of knowledge he recollects.
 - Presumably, the doctrine of recollection ranges over a priori knowledge.
 - 'He will perform the same way about all geometry, and about all other knowledge.' (85e)

The Slave Boy (II.2): Immortality

* Given the truth of the doctrine of recollection, we can infer the immortality of the soul.

- 1. If the slave recollects, then the 'truth about reality' must be in his soul.
- 2. This 'truth about' reality is either: (i) acquired in this lifetime; (ii) acquired before the soul is reborn (in which case, the pre-natal existence of the soul is vouchsafed); or (iii) it comes with the original equipment.
- 3. He did not acquire it in this lifetime. (85e).
- 4. It does not/could not have come with the original equipment. (Assumed)
- 5. So, the slave acquired this knowledge whilst in a a disincarnate state.
- 6. If (5), then the soul is immortal.
- 7. So, the soul is immortal.

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

The Paradox of Analysis Revisited

* We are seeking true, necessary, non-trivial, essence-specifying answers to the 'What is F-ness?' question.

✤ If the answers we seek are non-trivial, then they are nonanalytic, and so synthetic.

 If they are synthetic, then they are contingent, and so nonessence-specifying.

 So, our analytical quest is doomed: try as we may, we cannot arrive at non-lexicographical, essence-specifying definitions of core philosophical notions.

The Paradox of Analysis Revisited

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 If the answers we seek are non-trivial, then they are nonanalytic, and so synthetic.

 If they are synthetic, then they are contingent, and so nonessence-specifying.

 So, our analytical quest is doomed: try as we may, we cannot arrive at non-lexicographical, essence-specifying definitions of core philosophical notions.

Moving Forward

 So, our analytical quest is *not* doomed: we may yet, by trying, arrive at non-lexicographical, essencespecifying definitions of core philosophical notions.

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