Chapter 11

Paradox of inquiry and doctrine of recollection

11.1 Readings and Homework

- Readings: 1. Plato, *Meno* 80a - 86c (pp. 211-216 in RAPG)

- Study questions: Give a short answer to the following questions on the basis of the readings:

    1. Explain the paradox of inquiry that Meno formulates in 80 d. Do you think it is a fair concern about Socrates' method of inquiry?

    2. Explain the doctrine that knowledge is mere recollection. Does it answer the paradox of inquiry?

    3. Explain what experiment Socrates does with the slave boy. What is the experiment supposed to show? Does it achieve its goal?

    4. Draw the figures on which Socrates and the slave boy are working. Put the sheet in my mailbox (Siegel Hall 218) on Tuesday night or Wednesday morning before 8am.

11.2   The paradox of inquiry and the theory of the forms

11.2.1   Reading the *Meno*: overview of the argument

Paradox of inquiry and doctrine of recollection 80d-e

- Socrates numbs people like a **Torpedo Fish**

- **Paradox of inquiry**

  - either one knows something, either he does not

  - if he knows it, no inquiry is necessary (he knows it already!)

  - if he does not know it, no inquiry is possible (he would not be looking for it in the first place)

- **Doctrine of recollection**

  1- Premise, from the priests: the soul is immortal

  2- Consequence 1: the soul knows everything

  3- Consequence 2: the soul can recollect

  Main thesis "searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection"

- **Ethical consequence**: as souls, we have to learn and search, that is, to reconstruct our knowledge, investigating one thing after another.

  Notice the importance of the ethical concern here: the paradox of inquiry is leading to laziness: no need to look for knowledge since inquiry is impossible. This goes against Socrates' fundamental principle that no life is worth living outside of philosophical inquiry about the right and wrong.

"Proof" by example: the slave boy's recollection

- Surface of a square of two feet side: 4

- Question and wrong answer about the length of the side of a square of 8 feet square

- *Step 1*: The young boy believes he knows but really does not know the right answer

  He must recollect "in order"

- Surface of a square of four feet sides:16

- Surface of a square of three feet sides:9

- *Step 2*: The young boy still does not know but now knows he does not know.

  the young boy is numb and perplexed – *However, this is an improvement in comparison to Step 1*:

  - the boy knows more

  - he now wants to investigate what he took for obvious before

- Surface of a square based on the diagonal: 8

- *Conclusion*

  - All men have true opinions in them

  - True opinion can be turned into knowledge

  - This knowledge is either acquired during lifetime, either was already there before birth

  - It has not been acquired, hence it was already there

  - Hence(?) soul is immortal

  - Conclusion: we, souls, should try to recollect – Back to the principle for a philosophical life !

  - Concerns about the argument's being sound, but not about the last conclusion

11.2.2 Analysis of the argument

Attention: The following notes strictly reproduce Prof. Cohen's brilliant course notes on Meno's paradox. These notes are copyrighted. I reproduce them with the authorization of the author. You can find the original notes on Prof. Cohen web site:
  `http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/index.html`
  The link is also on my web site.

A Puzzle about Definitions

Socrates has told us he knows how to *reject* faulty definitions. But how does he know when he has *succeeded* in finding the right definition? Meno raises an objection to the entire definitional search in the form of (what has been called) "Meno's Paradox", or "The Paradox of Inquiry" (*Meno* 80d-e).

An Objection to Inquiry

- The argument reformulated:

  1. If you know what youre looking for, inquiry is unnecessary.
  2. If you don't know what youre looking for, inquiry is impossible.
  3. Therefore, inquiry is either unnecessary or impossible.

- An implicit premise:

  Either you know what you are looking for or you do not know what you are looking for.

  And this is a logical truth. Or is it? Only if "you know what you are looking for" is used unambiguously in both disjuncts.

Evaluating the Argument

There seems to be an equivocation in "you know what you are looking for":

- A. You know the *question* you wish to answer.

- B. You know the *answer* to that question.

Using sense (A), (2) is true, but (1) is false; using sense (B), (1) is true, but (2) is false. But there is no one sense in which both premises are true. And from the pair of true premises, (1B) and (2A), nothing follows, because of the equivocation.

To see the ambiguity, consider the question: Is it possible for you to know what you do not know?

In one sense, the answer is no. You cannot both know and not know the same thing. (Pace Heraclitus.) In another sense, the answer is yes. You can know the questions you do not have the answers to.

The Ambiguity

Suppose Tom wants to go to the party, but he doesn't know what time it begins. Furthermore, he doesn't even know anyone who does know. So he asks Bill, who doesn't know when the party begins, but he does know that Mary knows. So Bill tells Tom that Mary knows when the party begins. Now Tom knows something, too – that Mary knows when the party begins.

So Tom knows what Mary knows (he knows that she knows when the party begins). Now consider the following argument:

1. Tom knows what Mary knows.

2. What Mary knows is that the party begins at 9 pm.

3. What Mary knows = that the party begins at 9 pm.

4. Therefore, Tom knows that the party begins at 9 pm.

What is wrong with this argument? It commits the fallacy of equivocation.

In (1), "what Mary knows" means what question she can answer. But in (2) and (3), "what Mary knows" means the information she can provide in answer to that question.

How Inquiry is Possible

So this is how inquiry is possible. You know what question you want to answer (and to which you do not yet know the answer); you follow some appropriate procedure for answering questions of that type; and finally you come to know what you did not previously know, viz., the answer to that question.

The argument for Meno's Paradox is therefore flawed: it commits the fallacy of equivocation. But beyond it lies a deeper problem. And that is why Plato does not dismiss it out of hand. That is why in response to it he proposes his famous Theory of Recollection.

The Theory of Recollection

- Concedes that, in some sense, inquiry is impossible. What appears to be learning something new is really recollecting something already known.

- This is implausible for many kinds of inquiry. E.g., empirical inquiry:

  1. Who is at the door?

  2. How many leaves are on that tree?

  3. Is the liquid in this beaker an acid?

- In these cases, there is a recognized method, a standard procedure, for arriving at the correct answer. So one can, indeed, come to know something one did not previously know.

- But what about answers to non-empirical questions? Here, there may not be a recognized method or a standard procedure for getting answers. And Socrates' questions ("What is justice", etc.) are questions of this type.

- Plato's theory is that we already have within our souls the answers to such questions. Thus, arriving at the answers is a matter of retrieving them from within. We recognize them as correct when we confront them. (The "Aha!" *erlebnis.*)

Plato's demonstration of the theory

Plato attempts to prove the doctrine of Recollection by means of his interview with the slave-boy.

1. Note that it is non-empirical knowledge that is at issue: knowledge of a geometrical theorem. (A square whose area is twice that of a given square is the square on the diagonal of the given square.)

2. How successful is Plato's proof of the doctrine of recollection?

The "Proof" of Recollection

- Call the geometrical theorem in question P. Plato assumes:

  1. At t1 it appears that the boy does not know that P.

  2. At t2 the boy knows that P.

  3. The boy does not acquire the knowledge that P during the interval between t1 and t2.

- Plato thinks that (2) is obviously correct, since at t2 the boy can give a proof that P. And he thinks that (3) is correct since Socrates does not do any "teaching" - he only asks questions.

- But (2) and (3) entail that the appearance in (1) is mistaken - at t1 the boy did know that P, since he knows at t2 and did not acquire the knowledge in the interval between t1 and t2.

- Crucial assumptions by Plato:

  1. Socrates did not do any teaching.

  2. The only way to acquire new knowledge is to be taught it.

- Both assumptions are dubious:

  1. Socrates asks leading questions. He gets the boy to notice the diagonal by explicitly bringing it up himself.

  2. The disjunction - either the boy was taught that P or he already knew that P - may not be exhaustive. There may be a third alternative: reasoning. That is, deducing the (not previously noticed) consequences of what you previously knew.

Interpretations of "Recollection"

Plato certainly thinks he has proved that something is innate, that something can be known a priori. But what? There seem to be three possibilities, in order of decreasing strength:

1. **Propositions**: such as the geometrical theorem P. They are literally in the soul, unnoticed, and waiting to be retrieved. According to this reading of recollection, propositions that can be known a priori are literally innate.

2. **Concepts**: such as equality, difference, odd, even, etc. We are born with these - we do not acquire them from experience. We make use of these when we confront and organize our raw experiences. According to this reading of recollection, there are a priori concepts that we have prior to experience.

3. **Abilities**: such as that of reasoning. We are born with the innate ability to derive the logical consequences of our beliefs. We may form our beliefs empirically, but we do not gain our ability to reason empirically. According to this reading of recollection, there is no innate knowledge and there are no a priori concepts. All but the most hard-boiled empiricist can accept [this].

Plato talks as if he has established (1), but the most he establishes in the Meno is (3). But perhaps that is all he is intending to establish (cf. Vlastos' article, "Anamnêsis (Recollection) in the Meno").

How the Doctrine of Recollection is supposed to solve the problem of recognizing instances

You can recognize an instance of X when you don't know what X is, in the following sense: you already know implicitly (intuitively) what X is, at least well enough to recognize instances of it. What you lack is an explicit (articulated, formulated) account of what X is.

This seems to support (2), rather than (1). For it supposes that you have (implicitly) the concept of X even though you cannot produce the proposition that expresses the definition of X.

In the Phaedo, Plato offers a different argument that also appears to be aiming at (2). This is the argument from imperfection, which purports to show that the imperfection of the physical world proves that we must have a priori concepts that cannot be derived from experience. Rather, the very possibility of our having experience at all requires that we already have these concepts.

So even if "recollection" is only inference misdescribed, there is still room for Plato to argue that inference requires the use of concepts that cannot themselves be acquired empirically.