

## Irreversible enlightenments: a reading of Plato's *Meno*<sup>1</sup>

In moral inquiry we are always concerned with the question: what *type* of enacted narrative would be the embodiment, in the actions and transactions of actual social life, of this particular theory?

(Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (London: Duckworth, 1990), p.80)

242. If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgements. This seems to abolish logic, but does not do so.—It is one thing to describe methods of measurement, and another to obtain and state results of measurement. But what we call “measuring” is partly determined by a certain constancy in results of measurement.

(Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. E. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1951), Part 1)

### I

In Iris Murdoch's second term as a Somerville undergraduate, in April 1939 when she was not quite 20 years old, she wrote a letter to her friend Ann Leech, in which she talked about her own recent decision to join the Communist Party:

I thank God that I have the Party to direct and discipline my previously vague and ineffective idealism. I feel now that I am doing *some* good, and that life has a purpose and that the history of civilisation is not just an interesting series of unconnected muddles, but a comprehensible development towards the highest stage of society, the Soviet world state.<sup>2</sup>

It is easy for us today to shake our heads in patronising sorrow at Murdoch's youthful political naivety, and her wilfully blind optimism about the real nature of the Soviet state and Britain's Communist Party—which in 1939 was officially aligned, like other European Communist parties, with the Stalinist forces whose sinister, treacherous, and brutal attacks on other Republican fighting groups had already been exposed by George Orwell, in his 1938 war memoir *Homage To Catalonia*, as a source of fatal division to the democratic cause in Spain.

It is not so easy for us to distance ourselves from Murdoch's broader historical optimism, her belief in “the history of civilisation” as a “comprehensible development”. If that optimism seems threatened by the darkening skies of 2024, it must have seemed at least equally threatened by the even darker storm-clouds of 1939; ; and yet it persists.

Of course Marxism tells a particular story about what that “comprehensible development” looks like, which at this point in her own development Murdoch seems to have bought into fairly comprehensively. (Later in life Murdoch was, also regrettably though obviously not *equally* regrettably, a big fan of her fellow-Oxonian Margaret Thatcher.) But in both Marxist and non-Marxist forms, the broader idea of *history as progress* has been a pervasive and dominating cultural force in our tradition for centuries now. It has been central in this way at least since what we call

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the Guildford Philosophical Society for their patience in listening, in October 2023, to my very first attempt to present the central ideas of this paper. For helpful conversations since then, thanks to Victor Caston, Nicholas Denyer, and Amy Kaler.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted at Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman, *Metaphysical Animals*, p.54. See *Living On Paper*, pp.10-11.

the Enlightenment, that multi-disciplinary and almost omni-directional impetus towards the reform, clarification, and coordination of all our various particular initiatives of invention and inquiry the beginning of which, in England, might be considered at least roughly coeval with the 1660 foundation, by Robert Boyle, John Evelyn, Christopher Wren, and William Petty, of “The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge”.

Indeed the idea of progress is so pervasive and so deeply ingrained in our imaginary that it is probably impossible for us to be fully self-conscious about how much and how often it shapes our thinking; and (what is, as we’ll see, often so much more to the point) our *un*-thinking, our instinctive reactions. At the crudest and most commonplace level, it is a cliché for us moderns, confronted with various illiberal or anti-scientific views that we take to be wrong or silly or unkind or all three, to describe them as “reactionary”, or “on the wrong side of history”, or their proponents as “dinosaurs”, or to express our amazement “that people can still think that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”. Most of us have heard of Martin Luther King’s famously optimistic claim that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice”.<sup>3</sup> Most of us also know at least the title of Jacob Bronowski’s highly influential 1973 book and TV series *The Ascent of Man*; and there are few memes more familiar in our culture than the cartoons originally designed to go with that series, of a stooped and quadrupedal hominid that transitions frame by frame into an upright-walking *anthropos*, a being whose hands are free to make and invent and manipulate (and hold weapons), and whose eyes *look forward*.

Both in science and in society, both in understanding and in action, both with the epistemic and with the ethical/ political, we would like our inquiries to *make progress*, and we would like that progress to be, first, *cogent* and, secondly, *secure*. *Cogent*, because we want there to be progress such that it leaves us utterly convinced, feeling like the recipients of a lightbulb moment (or even an epiphany, of either the *wow* type or the *aha* type or both); progress such that it sweeps us along, catches us up in its own exhilarating momentum. (As any reader of Carlyle’s *French Revolution* knows, humans rejoice to become part of something bigger than themselves.) And *secure*, because we want this progress to be such that, once gained, there’s no going back; we want not only to be utterly convinced, but also to be *right* to be utterly convinced. In short: like the undergraduate Iris Murdoch, we want enlightenment; and we want it to be irreversible.

## II

The word “reversible” is an -ible/-able/-uble word, a gerundive of potential as I will call them. (My own label for the category; perhaps surprisingly, academic linguists don’t seem to have coined a label for it already.) Like any such word, it prompts the question “What kind of *can*?”<sup>4</sup>—and so here, the question “What kind(s) of reversibility for enlightenments to do you have in mind?”

Clearly some kinds are more philosophically interesting than others. One day we’ll all be dead; Know-Nothing political movements<sup>5</sup> do sometimes win even fair and free elections; any poor soul, no matter how enlightened, can be killed or tortured or lose her memory, or be otherwise subjected to violence or coercion in ways that will certainly oblige her to shut up about her enlightenment. But these unsettlingly real possibilities do not furnish us with any *philosophically interesting* form of

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<sup>3</sup> Dr Martin Luther King Jr., “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution.” Speech given at the National Cathedral, March 31, 1968. King was quoting the 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionist Theodore Parker. See [The idea that the moral universe inherently bends towards justice is inspiring. It's also wrong. \(nbcnews.com\)](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/television/race/the-idea-that-the-moral-universe-inherently-bends-towards-justice-is-inspiring-it-s-also-wrong-nbcnews.com); [Theodore Parker And The 'Moral Universe': NPR](https://www.npr.org/2018/03/31/606111111/theodore-parker-and-the-moral-universe)

<sup>4</sup> Cp. *Epiphanies* 2.3.

<sup>5</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p.1.

reversal of enlightenment. What is interesting, at least to me, is the “can” involved when we consider changes in beliefs, and in particular reversals of what we like to see as enlightened beliefs, by rational (or something close to rational) persuasion. When I raise the question of irreversible enlightenments, what interests me is whether there are any intellectual breakthroughs or epiphanies that are so rationally cogent and secure that it is impossible for us to go back from them without entirely losing our own rationality, our own intellectual bearings, our own sense of who we are and what we are doing in our inquiries and our living.

Take, for instance, a possibility that Cora Diamond has drawn to our attention recently: the possibility that when we come to understand some propositions, we will come to see that they are not related in a bipolar way to the true/ false distinction. Rather, as I have expounded her proposal elsewhere (*Ethics* 2000), we come to see “that a proposition might be such that it has no intelligible negation: attempts to deny that proposition just ‘peter out into nothingness’” (Anscombe’s words, quoted at Diamond p.85). Diamond further suggests, following David Wiggins, that it might be like this with some ethical propositions:

...by drawing upon the full riches of our intersubjectivity and our shared understanding, such a wealth of considerations can now be produced, all bearing in some way or other upon the question of slavery, that, at some point in rehearsing these considerations, it will become apparent that there is *nothing else to think* but that slavery is unjust and insupportable. Of course some may think something else—just as some may think  $7 + 5 = 11$ . But this is not to say that there is anything else to think. At some point in running through these considerations, the cognitivist claims, it will appear that the price of thinking anything at variance with the insupportability of slavery is to have opted out altogether from the point of view that shall be common between one person and another.  
(David Wiggins, “Moral cognitivism, moral relativism, and motivating moral beliefs”, *PAS* 1989, pp.61-85, at p.70)

Such a proposal raises deep and puzzling questions about what reversibility and irreversibility might come to in ethics. Different questions are raised by posing the same question in another area, namely science. Recall the scientists in MacIntyre’s famous thought-experiment, at the beginning of *After Virtue*, about what a society might look like after the breakdown of modern science. Suppose these professors are not merely Stalinistically bullied or intimidated out of their practice of modern science, but at least apparently *argued* out of it. If so, can that be (in some sense) a *rational* process?

More broadly: if people have once seen the force of arguments for modern evolutionary theory, or liberalism in religion, or an open society where for example transgender and gay people are accepted or chattel slavery is treated as morally out of the question: if such people revert respectively to seven-day creationism, to so-called biblical fundamentalism, to repressive transphobic and homophobic bigotry, or to slave-ownership, can *that* be (in some sense) a rational process? Or if someone has once experienced and grasped the new ethical insight that an epiphany brings them, is there a rational path that will take them backward from that progress to their pre-enlightenment state?

Or again there is Hegel, whose whole system of thought is dominated by an idea still central to European philosophy (though less commonly avowed, at least explicitly, by anglophone philosophers). This is the idea that as time goes on there are ideas that it becomes *impossible to believe any more*—and just for that reason, lives that it is *impossible to live any more*, at least authentically. Thus there is a strongly Hegelian flavour to Bernard Williams’ remark that

[t]he life of a Greek Bronze Age chief, or a medieval Samurai, and the outlooks that go with those, are not real options for us: there is no way of living them.... Even Utopian projects among a small band of enthusiasts could not reproduce that life: still more, the project of re-enacting it on a societal scale in the context of actual modern industrial life would involve one of those social or political mistakes, in fact a vast illusion... to raise seriously questions in the vocabulary of appraisal about this culture considered as a concrete historical reality will not be possible for a reflective person.  
 (“The truth in relativism”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 75 (1974-5), pp.224-5)

Is the distance between us and Samurai or Homeric heroes, the distance of a leap of moral progress that cannot be undone? If the answer to any such questions is Yes, then we have an argument that, in these cases at least, and in the sense of “irreversible” that concerns me, there is indeed no irreversible enlightenment.

Of course, to stress it again, we need to particularise cases here. One choice that is important enough to deserve our immediate attention is set by the question “Whose knowledge?” What, that is to say, is the *vehicle* of the knowledge that might be attained in irreversible enlightenments, if there are any? Obviously we might speak of reversibility or irreversibility as a feature of individual knowledge: *I or you* can gain enlightenment, and later can or can’t lose it. But we might also speak of it in the case of social or cultural or collective knowledge: *the scientific community* or *our society* can gain collective enlightenment, and later can or can’t lose it. Not all philosophers believe there is any such thing as collective knowledge, at least as a distinct category of knowledge not reducible to a concatenation of instances of individual knowledge. I think they are wrong, and by the end of this paper, I will have said a little about why. For now we need only point out that the question of irreversible enlightenment can still be raised for collective knowledge, even if we believe that there is no *irreducibly* collective knowledge.

More generally we may say that the specialisation towards particular cases matters because, obviously, some kinds of enlightenment might be rationally reversible, and others not. And here too, even at the most abstract and schematic level we need to divide the possibilities along more than one axis. Suppose, at least for the moment, that we can agree on some contextually suitable content for the word “progress”. On that basis, we can depict four possibilities for any area of discourse X like this. We might present them in this order because we think that this is their correct ordering from optimism to pessimism, though there is also a case for saying that (3) is actually more pessimistic than (4):

- 1) Progress in area X can be rational and progress cannot be rationally reversed;
- 2) Progress in area X can be rational and progress can be rationally reversed;
- 3) Progress in area X cannot be rational and progress can be rationally reversed;
- 4) Progress in area X cannot be rational and progress cannot be rationally reversed.

(1) fits full-on Enlightenment optimism, which shows up in different ways in various particular domains; this is the view that goes naturally with the talk about “the inexorable march of progress” that the nineteenth century was so fond of. Science is surely its home territory, though obviously it is not always like this even in favourable areas of science; it can and does happen that two theories T1 and T2 are at some time in competition with each other, and that it is not yet clear which of them (if either) is the superior theory—so that we can know that, if it turns out that we have bought into T1 and T1 needs to be abandoned in favour of T2, then there will be a time when we rationally reverse our theoretical commitment to T1. Or it can happen that a theory seems well-favoured by the evidence—the available evidence—for a while, and then in the light of newly-arriving evidence seems to succumb to large-scale disconfirmation, so that once again it

becomes a position from which we not only *rationaly can* retreat, but *rationaly must*. Such cases from science bring us to the second of my alternatives sketched above; for in these cases, we have a situation more like (2) than (1).

(4) goes naturally with the pessimistic relativist idea that history has no direction, that it is (in Iris Murdoch's words as quoted above) "an interesting series of unconnected muddles", or (in Dorothy Parker's much better known words) "just one damn thing after another". This is an idea that will naturally tempt anyone who is old enough to have reflected carefully on some of history's more sobering, and indeed depressing, lessons. Still, such grey-haired pessimists might want to explore the prospects for more sanguine and progressivist visions of history; if only to establish exactly why those prospects look so poor.

The one remaining possibility is (3). If you thought (4) was pessimistic, maybe (3) is even more so: at least with (4) progress and regress were equally chancy, whereas what (3) apparently suggests is that rationality itself will have a one-way ratchet effect *against* progress. At times something like (3) seems to be there in the work of Bernard Williams, despite Williams' tendency at other times to align himself with some of the most optimistic movements of the 1960s. I am thinking, in particular, of Williams' famous remark that "reflection can destroy knowledge" (ELP p.164).<sup>6</sup>

### III

In any case it is precisely this, an irreversible enlightenment that is both cogent and secure, that is what the young and beautiful Thessalian aristocrat Meno is seeking when he rushes in upon the ugly old pleb<sup>7</sup> Socrates with the opening question of the dialogue that Plato names after him: ἄρα διδασκτὸν ἢ ἀρετή; "Can virtue (or excellence) be taught?", *Meno* 70a.

Virtue, *or* excellence. However boringly familiar it may be, it is always salutary to be reminded that the ancient Greeks, when they spoke of ἀρετή, did not mean what we mean when we speak of virtue. What is in question for them is neither just the sexual continency of a woman, nor those possible attributes of a man that David Hume, in *The Enquiry Concerning The Principles Of Morals* section IX, famously called "the monkish virtues".<sup>8</sup> (In fact, as Rosalind Hursthouse has pointed out,<sup>9</sup> only one of the attributes that Hume catalogues there is actually accounted a *virtue* even by the monkish, namely humility; the other things that he lists are all *practices*, not virtues; but let that pass.)

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<sup>6</sup> "If we accept that there can be knowledge at the hypertraditional or unreflective level; if we accept the obvious truth that reflection characteristically disturbs, unseats, or replaces those traditional concepts; and if we agree that, at least as things are, the reflective level is not in a position to give us knowledge we did not have before; then we reach the notably un-Socratic conclusion that, in ethics, *reflection can destroy knowledge*."

<sup>7</sup> Sokrates gehörte, seiner Herkunft nach, zum niedersten Volk: Sokrates war Pöbel. Man weiss, man sieht es selbst noch, wie hässlich er war. "Socrates belonged by origin to the lowest folk; Socrates was rabble. One knows, one can still see for oneself, how ugly he was." Friedrich Nietzsche, "The problem of Socrates", in *Twilight of the Idols*.

<sup>8</sup> "Celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude, and the whole train of monkish virtues; for what reason are they every where rejected by men of sense, but because they serve to no manner of purpose; neither advance a man's fortune in the world, nor render him a more valuable member of society; neither qualify him for the entertainment of company, nor encrease his power of self-enjoyment? We observe, on the contrary, that they cross all these desirable ends; stupify the understanding and harden the heart, obscure the fancy and sour the temper. We justly, therefore, transfer them to the opposite column, and place them in the catalogue of vices; nor has any superstition force sufficient among men of the world, to pervert entirely these natural sentiments. A gloomy, hair-brained enthusiast, after his death, may have a place in the calendar; but will scarcely ever be admitted, when alive, into intimacy and society, except by those who are as delirious and dismal as himself."

<sup>9</sup> See Rosalind Hursthouse, "Virtue Ethics and Human Nature" (*Hume Studies* 25.1 (1999), pp.67-82, at pp.75-76. My thanks to Jeremy Reid for reminding me of Hursthouse's pleasingly combative response to the Hume passage.

What it is also salutary to notice, and what is perhaps less immediately noticed, is that it is not just we and the ancient Greeks who are at cross purposes about what ἀρετή/ virtue means. Meno and Socrates are at cross purposes too. What Socrates means by ἀρετή will eventually turn out—pretty clearly, if you’ll forgive a bit of slightly presumptuous exegesis—to be knowledge or understanding, ἐπιστήμη. Whereas what Meno means, or starts off meaning before the sting-ray gets him, is that ἀρετή is this (*Meno* 71e):

A man’s virtue is to be man enough to run his city’s affairs, and to run them so as to benefit his friends and harm his enemies—and make sure that no such harm ever comes to himself.<sup>10</sup>

αὕτη ἐστὶν ἀνδρὸς ἀρετή, ἱκανὸν εἶναι τὰ τῆς πόλεως πράττειν, καὶ πράττοντα τοὺς μὲν φίλους εὖ ποιεῖν, τοὺς δ’ ἐχθροὺς κακῶς, καὶ αὐτὸν εὐλαβεῖσθαι μηδὲν τοιοῦτον παθεῖν.

We might say that what Socrates means by ἀρετή is, roughly, *being like a sage*; whereas what Meno means by ἀρετή is, roughly, *being like a big-time political leader*. You will have what Socrates has in mind by ἀρετή if you are someone like Parmenides (Παρμενίδης δέ μοι φαίνεται, τὸ τοῦ Ὀμήρου, αἰδοῖός τε μοι εἶναι ἅμα δεινός τε, *Theaetetus* 183e), or like the “wise men and women” of whom we will hear more at *Meno* 81a ff. Whereas you will have what Meno has in mind by ἀρετή if you are someone like Themistocles (cp. *Meno* 93c): a dashing and triumphant hero both of the military and of the political realms, something like what the Duke of Marlborough was to early eighteenth-century Englishmen, or the Duke of Wellington to early nineteenth.

At this point it is worth asking ourselves how the two of them, Socrates and Meno, actually lived up in their own lives to the versions of ἀρετή that they endorsed. Socrates we know about: we do not have to be as uncritically reverential about him as some readers have been, to see that there is a very strong case indeed for saying that he lived up to his ideals, right up to the point where it cost him his life. But Meno?

To answer that we may begin with two clues: one in *Meno* 76e-77a, the other in 78c-d. At 76e, Socrates and Meno are warming up to defining virtue; they compare two definitions of colour that Socrates has forbearingly provided, one naïve and one pretentious. Meno prefers the pretentious one, but Socrates is unimpressed:

**Socrates.** But that isn’t the better definition, Meno son of Alexidemus; at least as it seems to me, my naïve definition was better. I’m sure that you’d come to the same view too, if you’d only stay and be initiated, and if you weren’t compelled, as you claimed to be yesterday, to leave before the mysteries.

**Meno.** But I would stay, Socrates—if you were to give me lots more answers like that.

**Σωκράτης.** ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἔστιν, ὃ παῖ Ἀλεξιδήμου, ὡς ἐγὼ ἑμαυτὸν πείθω, ἀλλ’ ἐκείνη βελτίων: οἶμαι δὲ οὐδ’ ἂν σοὶ δόξαι, εἰ μὴ, ὥσπερ χθὲς ἔλεγες, ἀναγκαῖόν σοι ἀπιέναι πρὸ τῶν μυστηρίων, ἀλλ’ εἰ περιμείναις τε καὶ μυηθείης.

**Μένων.** ἀλλὰ περιμένειμ’ ἂν, ὃ Σωκράτες, εἴ μοι πολλὰ τοιαῦτα λέγοις.

Where does Meno have to rush off to? We aren’t told. But compare this, at *Meno* 78c-d:

**Socrates.** You say that virtue is the capacity to get good things? **Meno.** I do, yes.

**Socrates.** And the ‘good things’ you mean are things like health and wealth?

<sup>10</sup> Except where otherwise specified, all translations are my own. The *Meno* translation that I use is the one that I made for my Open University Philosophy MA course “Reading Plato’s *Meno*”.

**Meno.** Yes, and getting hold of gold and silver, and honours and power in the city.

**Socrates.** You wouldn't say that anything else might count as 'good things'?

**Meno.** No; just everything of that sort.

**Socrates.** So be it, then: as we are told by Meno, the hereditary guest-friend of the King of Persia, virtue means the getting of gold and silver.

**Σωκράτης.** τὰγαθὰ φης οἶόν τ' εἶναι πορίζεσθαι ἀρετὴν εἶναι; **Μένων.** ἔγωγε.

**Σωκράτης.** ἀγαθὰ δὲ καλεῖς οὐχὶ οἶον ὑγίειάν τε καὶ πλοῦτον;

**Μένων.** καὶ χρυσίον λέγω καὶ ἀργύριον κτᾶσθαι καὶ τιμὰς ἐν πόλει καὶ ἀρχάς.

**Σωκράτης.** μὴ ἄλλ' ἅττα λέγεις τὰγαθὰ ἢ τὰ τοιαῦτα;

**Μένων.** οὐκ, ἀλλὰ πάντα λέγω τὰ τοιαῦτα.

**Σωκράτης.** εἶεν: χρυσίον δὲ δὴ καὶ ἀργύριον πορίζεσθαι ἀρετὴ ἐστίν, ὡς φησι Μένων ὁ τοῦ μεγάλου βασιλέως πατρικὸς ξένος.

This is pretty pointed from Socrates. But it is especially pointed if, as is entirely plausible, the reason why Meno is in Athens in the first place is that it is 403 BC and he is on a fund-raising visit, and that once he has got his hands on enough silver and gold, he will be hurrying off to war—a war in which, as Plato's original readers must have known, Meno will be (arguably) abusing his status as hereditary guest-friend of the Great King, and will be defeated in battle and die horribly, within two years. We are used to dialogues, like *Crito* and *Euthyphro*, where it is part of the background that we know Socrates is in one way or another staring death in the face; the *Meno* is a dialogue where it is not Socrates, but Socrates' interlocutor, who faces the more immediate threat of death—and doesn't even have the self-awareness to know it.

With this Platonic evidence compare Xenophon, *Anabasis* 2.6.22-29, where we learn that Meno was, like Xenophon himself, one of the leaders of the Greek mercenary contingent that Cyrus the Younger raised in his attempted coup of 401 BC against his brother, the Great King Artaxerxes II.<sup>11</sup> This insurrection was defeated at the battle of Cunaxa in 401, where Cyrus died. Xenophon and his Ten Thousand famously managed to march their way back home from Mesopotamia, via their first sighting of the Black Sea near Trebizond (*thalatta, thalatta!*), to Greece. But Meno, despite being as Plato tells us a *xenos*, a guest-friend, of the Great King, did not get away: he was captured, imprisoned, and brutally killed.

Meno was not, then, an exemplar of the Themistoclean military virtues that he himself endorses; not at least if we measure those virtues, as by their own nature we clearly should, at least partly by success. Indeed, if Xenophon's account at *Anabasis* 2.6.22-29 is anything to go by, Meno was not a virtuous man by any contemporary measure at all. Xenophon's description of Meno is a bit long to quote in full; but no one could call it complimentary. Meno, according to Xenophon,

...was manifestly eager for enormous wealth—eager for command in order to get more wealth and eager for honour in order to increase his gains; and he desired to be a friend to the men who possessed greatest power in order that he might commit unjust deeds without suffering the penalty... he imagined that the shortest route to success was by way of perjury and falsehood and deception, while he counted straightforwardness and truth the same thing as folly... if he said that he was a friend to anyone, it would become plain that this man was the one he was plotting against... he thought he was the only one who knew that it was easiest to [steal from] friends [than enemies, because their guard was down]... those who were pious and practised truth he would try to make use of, regarding them as weaklings... Meno prided himself upon ability to deceive, the fabrication of lies, and the

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<sup>11</sup> This Artaxerxes, the third of that name, is different from the more famous Artaxerxes I, 490-424 BC; and Cyrus the Younger is different from the more famous Cyrus the Great, 590-529 BC. Cyrus the Younger is the Cyrus of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*.

mocking of friends; but the man who was not an unscrupulous scoundrel he always classified as one of the uneducated (τὸν δὲ μὴ πανοὔργον τῶν ἀπαιδευτῶν ἀεὶ ἐνόμιζεν εἶναι)... if he were attempting to be first in the friendship of anybody, he thought that slandering those who were already first was the proper way of gaining this end... he was not, like Clearchus and the rest of the generals, beheaded—a manner of death which is counted speediest—but, report says, was tortured alive for a year and so met a wicked man’s death (ὡς πονηρὸς λέγεται τῆς τελευτῆς τυχεῖν).<sup>12</sup>

There is more than a hint of literary revenge in this poisonous report: one is left wondering whether Meno, in his attempts to be first in Socrates’ friendship, might have slandered Xenophon. It looks, too, like Xenophon wrote this passage of the *Anabasis*—it would have been in about c. 370 BC—with the text of Plato’s *Meno* (c. 385 BC) very much in mind: note particularly the initial remarks about Meno’s greed for money (compare *Meno* 78d again), his avidity to rule (73d), and his habit of making fun of his friends (recall his unflattering sting-ray image of Socrates at 79e-80b).

Still, once we have allowed for personal animus and bias on Xenophon’s part, we are surely left with the conclusion that if even some of his description of Meno is accurate, then it would be perfectly reasonable to meet Meno’s question ἄρα διδακτὸν ἢ ἀρετῆ;, “Can virtue be taught?” with the riposte *alla mén ou soi ge*—“Not, at any rate, to you.” Compared with Meno, *even a slave-boy is more teachable*.

#### IV

The *Meno* embodies the assumption that teachability, at any rate in the *Meno*’s place and time, is closely related to tractability as a respondent to Socrates’ questioning. But Meno is unteachable, because he is intractable in just that way. Already in the first ten pages of the dialogue, he shows his ignorance of the need to define our target terms, and of how such defining needs to be done; he brings into the discussion irrelevant appeals to Gorgias’ authority, and inappropriate come-ons to Socrates (in his full description, Xenophon is decidedly censorious about Meno’s flirtatiousness); he prefers the worse definition of colour to the better; he makes a promise about how he will contribute to the discussion—and then brazenly breaks it; he makes, as above, insulting personal remarks about Socrates’ appearance; and more besides. When Socrates calls Meno ὑβριστής at 76b, this is not humorous chaffing or idle banter. Meno has just broken his promise at 73c to explain what he and Gorgias say ἀρετῆ is. That Meno, like his teacher Gorgias with his exorbitant tuition fees, is overreaching and outrageous—that is Socrates’ serious assessment of him.

At a later point in the *Meno* (96b-c), Socrates will complain that he doubts that virtue can be taught because he cannot see anyone who looks like a teacher of virtue. The first ten pages of the dialogue have already suggested a different complaint. By the time Meno is reduced to the *aporia* that leads him to make his sting-ray comparison at 79e ff., it already looks like *there are distinctive virtues that pupils need to have*; just to be tractable pupils, we already need at least some kinds of virtue. But in that case, paradox looms for the particular case of being pupils of *virtue*. For it turns out that we can’t be taught any virtue unless we already have some virtue: specifically, the virtue of a pupil.

This paradox is evidently not the very same as “Meno’s paradox” (*Meno* 80e). But it is not a million miles away from it, either:

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<sup>12</sup> Translation slightly adapted from Perseus.



No one can inquire either into what he knows or into what he doesn't know. He can't inquire into what he knows; for he knows it, and there is no need for this inquiry for anyone who knows. Nor can he inquire into what he doesn't know; for he doesn't know what it is that he should inquire into...

οὐκ ἄρα ἔστιν ζητεῖν ἀνθρώπῳ οὔτε ὃ οἶδε οὔτε ὃ μὴ οἶδε; οὔτε γὰρ ἂν ὃ γε οἶδεν ζητοῖ—οἶδεν γὰρ, καὶ οὐδὲν δεῖ τῷ γε τοιοῦτῳ ζητήσεως—οὔτε ὃ μὴ οἶδεν—οὐδὲ γὰρ οἶδεν ὅτι ζητήσει.

Socrates' next move in the dialogue, his discussion of geometry with Meno's slave, is presented explicitly as an attempt to circumvent this, Meno's paradox. Perhaps we may say that it is also, at least implicitly, an attempt to circumvent the paradox about pupils that I have just suggested. In any case it is this second paradox that is most obviously to the fore when we consider the exchange with the slave. For one question that that exchange must immediately press on us is this: What is it about Meno's slave that makes him a more useful interlocutor to Socrates than Meno himself?

One venerably traditional way with the passage says that the point is that the slave-boy (*pais*) is, after all, a *boy*, and so not all that long-since born:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;  
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
Hath had elsewhere its setting  
And cometh from afar;  
Not in entire forgetfulness,  
And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God, who is our home:  
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

On this reading—and I must confess to having bought into it at least enough, when I translated this section of the *Meno* for my 1996 *Plato Reader*, to have quoted the Wordsworth there too—the slave-boy is a good interlocutor for Socrates *because he is an innocent*, a growing boy around whom the shades of the prison-house are yet to close, and who therefore retains particularly clear intimations of immortality. The slave, in fact, is something like an isolation-test for the *a priori*, a little bit like the wolf-child experiments by which eighteenth-century scientists of language hoped to recover “the language of Adam and Eve”: they left a child without linguistic contact with others for his first six years or so of life, in order to find out what language he in his isolation spoke spontaneously (they hoped it would be ancient Hebrew). Likewise the slave-boy, on this reading, is meant by Plato to be someone so inexperienced that he is virtually a *tabula rasa* on which, when we examine him, we can discern the contents of innate knowledge: we can pick out what anyone knows *before* “the vision splendid” has “faded into the light of common day”.

So interpreted, what the slave-boy passage is telling us is that the minds of the young give us particularly and strikingly clear evidence that the structure of all *a priori* rational knowledge is right there embedded in our own minds; all we need to do is dig down into the mind by Socratic questioning. In practice, this questioning could happen with anybody—after all, it does happen with Meno in the rest of the dialogue, and sometimes, there and in other dialogues, with even more perverse and unhelpful interlocutors; Anytus, for example, or again Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. But the reason why Socrates chooses the slave-boy as his interlocutor is because he is young and has not yet received many impressions of experience, and so in examining him we get down particularly fast to the level of innate ideas, at which

it is no wonder that the soul should be able to remember everything it ever knew, about everything including virtue; for the soul already knew it all before. Everything that exists is related to everything else, and the soul always already knew everything. So once the soul has recollected just one thing in this life—this recollection is what people call learning—there is nothing to prevent the soul from drawing out of it everything else there is to know: if we are only courageous in our quest, and do not grow weary. And so, inquiry and learning is entirely recollection.

ἄτε οὖν ἡ ψυχὴ ἀθάνατός τε οὖσα καὶ πολλάκις γεγονυῖα, καὶ ἐωρακυῖα καὶ τὰ ἐνθάδε καὶ τὰ ἐν Ἄιδου καὶ πάντα χρήματα, οὐκ ἔστιν ὅτι οὐ μεμάθηκεν: ὥστε οὐδὲν θαυμαστόν καὶ περὶ ἀρετῆς καὶ περὶ ἄλλων οἷόν τ' εἶναι αὐτὴν ἀναμνησθῆναι, ἃ γὰρ καὶ πρότερον ἠπίστατο. ἄτε γὰρ τῆς φύσεως ἀπάσης συγγενοῦς οὖσης, καὶ μεμαθηκυῖας τῆς ψυχῆς ἅπαντα, οὐδὲν κωλύει ἐν μόνον ἀναμνησθέντα—ὃ δὴ μάθησιν καλοῦσιν ἄνθρωποι—τᾶλλα πάντα αὐτὸν ἀνευρεῖν, ἐάν τις ἀνδρεῖος ᾗ καὶ μὴ ἀποκάμνη ζητῶν: τὸ γὰρ ζητεῖν ἄρα καὶ τὸ μανθάνειν ἀνάμνησις ὅλον ἐστίν. (*Meno* 81c-d)

On the present interpretation, Plato (or Socrates) here uses the innocence and blank-slateyness of the slave-boy to argue a very strong claim indeed about what kinds of knowledge and learning are possible (absolutely every kind), and for whom (absolutely anyone), and starting from where (absolutely anywhere), and on what presuppositional basis (none), and by what method (Socratic inquiry). On this account of knowledge—for reasons that we'll come to, I'll call it an encyclopaedist's account—what the exchange with the slave-boy will show is that there are enlightenments, because it is possible for us to gain this sort of innate knowledge by way of argumentation something like Socrates' dialogue with the slave-boy; and these enlightenments are *irreversible*, in the sense that to get hold of them at all is to get hold of something that is inherently both secure and cogent, and something that we cannot grasp without grasping it *as* both secure and cogent.

Now there may have been ancient Greek philosophers who argued for something like this encyclopaedism, this unrestricted rationalist apriorism about knowledge; after all, there is a fragment of Parmenides that says “It is all one to me where I begin from; for wherever it is, I will come back to it” (Ξυνὸν δέ μοι ἐστίν, ὀπόθεν ἄρξωμαι· τόθι γὰρ πάλιν ἴξωμαι αὐθις, DK28 B5). That this is not, however, what is going on in the *Meno*, I take to be certain; for at least two reasons.

The first point against the encyclopaedist reading has been recently pointed out by Rick Benitez, in “Boy! What Boy? (A Plea for Meno's Slave)” (*Ancient Philosophy* 36 (2016), 107–14).<sup>13</sup> It is that there is no reason to think that the use of *pais* for the slave means anything particular about the slave's *age*. When apartheid-era South Africans, or Americans of the Old South, called their male black servants “Boy”, there was no implication that the servant so addressed was young, any more than there was when old-fashioned French speakers called the waiter *garçon*; these thankfully outdated conventions all used the word “Boy” simply as a power-move, not as an indication of calendar age. The same, as Benitez points out, was true of *pais*. The *Meno* does tell us that the slave in question was “born in the house” (82b); but it says nothing about *when*. *Meno* 82b also tells us that the slave whom Socrates questions is selected by Meno pretty much at random (ἕνα, ὄντινα βούλει): he is not, then, selected for his age. When Socrates and Meno call him *pais*, they are saying nothing about how young or old he is; they are simply using the usual term by which a free person in their society addresses a slave. And to go by the evidence of *Republic* 549a, καὶ δούλοισι μὲν τις ἂν ἄγριος εἴη ὁ τοιοῦτος, οὐ καταφρονῶν δούλων, ὥπερ ὁ ἰκανῶς πεπαιδευμένος) this is something that a well-brought-up free person will scarcely notice themselves

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to Victor Caston for bringing this article to my notice, and to him, Julia Annas, Nicholas Denyer, Mehmet Erginel, Cynthia Freedland, Jake McNulty, Sara Protasi, and William Strigel for helpful discussion.

doing: it is bad character to be savage with slaves, but not for humanitarian reasons so much as because the cultured response to slaves is mostly just to ignore them as beneath one's notice.

A second argument against the encyclopaedist reading of the slave-boy discussion arises from a complaint that generations of students have made to me when we are reading the *Meno* together. This complaint is that if the purpose of the exchange with the slave-boy is to demonstrate by example the encyclopaedist thesis that it is possible for Socrates to use his method of inquiry to derive absolutely any kind of knowledge and learning, in dialogue with absolutely anyone (though perhaps particularly with someone whose innate ideas are still fresh), and starting from absolutely anywhere and with nothing presupposed—if that is his purpose, then *his demonstration fails miserably*. Like slave-boys (or slave-girls), students, young or old, have plenty of native wit. And what the students always say about this passage is that it is absolute nonsense for Socrates to claim, as he apparently does at 85d, that the slave-boy comes to understand the geometrical procedure to construct the square of twice the area simply “by recovering the knowledge himself, from within himself, with the help of no teacher, but merely of someone who asks him questions.” He doesn't just *remember* this; Socrates *makes him* remember it. He doesn't get to the right conclusion all on his own; *Socrates pushes him there*.

So say my students; and my students, surely, are quite correct. And if the students recollect their Nietzsche, they often offer a further point, of a kind that can bring them to cast a rather accusatory look at me (unless I control them carefully). Socrates claims repeatedly—as at 81c-d above—to be engaging in free, fair, and sincerely rational inquiry, such that, honestly pursued, an irreversible enlightenment results from it. *But the whole thing* (say my unruly students) *is a con*. All this brave talk of free-range inquiry is an ideological pretence, and what it disguises is, as usual, power-relations—exactly those power-relations, in fact, that are wrapped up in the little words ὦ παῖ (82b). The real reason why the slave-boy is a better interlocutor for Socrates than Meno is not because the slave-boy is a boy; it's because he's a slave. At 86d Socrates says quite openly that he can't control Meno—who actually is at most little more than a chronological boy, a *meirakion*. But what he has just been doing from 81e to 85c is, precisely, controlling the slave-boy—who is not a boy.

Does Socrates, as a creature suffering under oppression, enjoy his innate ferocity in the knife-thrusts of the syllogism? Does he wreak his revenge on the noblemen he fascinates?—As a dialectician a man has a merciless instrument to wield; he can play the tyrant with it: he compromises when he conquers with it... Can it be that dialectics was only a form of revenge in Socrates? ...he discovered a new kind of *Agon*, and he was the first fencing-master in the best circles in Athens. He fascinated by appealing to the combative instinct of the Greeks,—he introduced a variation into the contests between men and youths... “The instincts would play the tyrant; we must discover a counter-tyrant who is stronger than they”... When a man finds it necessary, as Socrates did, to create a tyrant out of reason, there is no small danger that something else wishes to play the tyrant. Reason was then discovered as a saviour; neither Socrates nor his “patients” were at liberty to be rational or not, as they pleased; at that time it was *de rigueur*, it had become a last shift. The fanaticism with which the whole of Greek thought plunges into reason, betrays a critical condition of things: men were in danger; there were only two alternatives: either perish or else be absurdly rational.

(From Friedrich Nietzsche, “The problem of Socrates”, in *Twilight of the Idols*: [The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Twilight of the Idols, by Friedrich Nietzsche.](#))

The first (encyclopaedist) reading of the slave-boy passage said that what it shows is Socrates demonstrating a full-on rationalist method of inquiry: without needing to rely on any presuppositions, we can take any mind, in any circumstance, and by the right kind of questioning

draw out of it absolutely any knowledge. But this faces the obvious objection that it is preposterously over-ambitious: there is simply no reason to think that any such procedure is possible, *even if* “the soul has always known everything”, and we certainly don’t see a clear demonstration of such a procedure in the *Meno*.

And so a second, genealogist, reading of the slave-boy passage, building on this critique of the encyclopaedist reading, says that it shows, and Socrates in it shows, nothing of the sort. Rather, what it shows is simply that Socrates is—as Callicles, Polus, Thrasymachus, Aristophanes, Nietzsche, and my students have all protested—a *bully*, who gets his results by browbeating his interlocutors. So he prefers the slave-boy to Meno as an interlocutor, because, as he admits himself, the slave-boy puts up less of a fight; he is easier to bully than Meno. What the whole passage really demonstrates is not what it professes to, that all truth is attainable, to anyone at all in any context at all, through free rational inquiry. On the contrary, what it shows is that what Socrates *calls* truth is attained, in those very specific contexts in which he operates with very carefully chosen interlocutors, by mind-control *disguised as* free rational inquiry.

## V

I speak of this as a conflict between an encyclopaedist reading of the slave-boy passage and a genealogist reading of it. I now want to argue that the best way of resolving the conflict between these two readings of the passage is to find a third reading that transcends their opposition. “Encyclopaedist” and “genealogist” are terms drawn from Alasdair MacIntyre’s *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*; and, in general in that wonderful book, the third term that resolves contradictions between the encyclopaedist and the genealogical approaches is *tradition-based inquiry*. What I want to suggest is that MacIntyre’s dialectical three-step between these terms is strikingly applicable to this famous passage of the *Meno*.

The encyclopaedist is right that rational and free inquiry is possible, and is or can be a powerful method of finding the truth. The genealogist is right, however, to criticise the encyclopaedist for thinking that inquiry into just anything can start just anywhere with just anyone, and can be completely free from antecedent presuppositions. From that correct criticism the genealogist draws the conclusion that the encyclopaedist is cheating us, by drawing an ideological mask over the power-relations that are in play in any such professedly purely rational inquiry. And this conclusion is also correct. But it does not mean what the genealogist thinks it means.

The encyclopaedist and the genealogist share a conception of rational inquiry as presuppositionless *a priori* questioning of the kind that both think Socrates is engaged in in the slave-boy passage. The difference between them is that the encyclopaedist thinks that rational inquiry in this sense is possible, while the genealogist denies it. So it’s all over for rational inquiry unless the encyclopaedist’s conception of it can be vindicated—for example unless we can show, in the case of the slave-boy passage, that Socrates’ inquiry is a pure inquiry, free of presuppositions and power-relations, and with nothing at work in it except rationality itself. And as I have said, in agreement with my own students, we cannot possibly show this. But on a better and more realistic understanding of rational inquiry, and of what is going on in the slave-boy passage, we don’t need to.

What the slave-boy passage really shows us by example is—among other things—that all real-world rational inquiry necessarily involves power-relations and presuppositions. As Wittgenstein says (in effect) in my second epigraph, all real-world rational inquiry begins with the distinction between *what we should take for granted* and *what we shouldn’t take for granted*. We learn this distinction

by being taught it; and being taught it involves submitting to be taught it. It involves being *prepared to shut up and listen while the basics are explained to us*, by someone who understands those basics better than we do, and hoping that we will grasp those basics quickly as they are explained. It means being prepared to accept the rules and the disciplines and the standards of merit or demerit, of success or failure, and of praise or blame/ shame, that are necessarily involved in the relevant form of inquiry.

For the slave-boy in the *Meno* passage this involves, for starters, the utterly basic ability simply to speak Greek (82b); it also involves being prepared to agree that a square is a right figure with four equal sides, that “quadrupling” means multiplying by four,<sup>14</sup> and that doubling the length of the sides of the square does not double the area but quadruples it. These are, as we might call them, admission-ticket points. They are not up for debate in the inquiry that Socrates and the slave-boy conduct; rather, they are part of the framework of parameters that makes that debate possible in the first place. If the slave-boy were to refuse to accept these points, he would deserve what I have elsewhere (in Katsafanas 2024) called epistemic shaming—social condemnation by the standards of the form of inquiry that he is involved in. If the slave-boy refuses to accept without further argument from Socrates that this is what a square is, or that this is what “quadrupling” means, or the non-linear relation between side-length and area, he will not be displaying a bold independence of mind; he will be being a tiresome ass.

The effect of refusing to grant a debate’s admission-ticket points is, as the name suggests, that you can’t get into the debate at all. And that doesn’t only mean that you will render yourself an impossible pupil; it also means that you will render yourself not, at any future time, a possible teacher. For the whole aim of accepting the admission-ticket points for any particular kind of inquiry is to get to the starting-line in the process of learning how to conduct that kind of inquiry. Once you have got far enough beyond that starting-line, you will indeed have learned how to conduct it; and then you will have precisely that freedom of thought—and that ability to see for yourself the rational connections that Plato believes are there in the nature of things—that the encyclopaedist conception of inquiry impossibly supposes can be there from the very beginning of the inquiry. But this freedom of thought is, like other kinds of freedom including free will itself, an acquired skill, a mastery of a craft (see KWTD ref). And no one can be a master craftsman who has not begun by being an apprentice.

Do we see yet why the slave-boy is a tractable pupil for Socrates, and Meno is not? The genealogist is right that the difference between them is, in a certain sense, a difference about power-relations. What the free-spirited young aristocrat Meno will not do in the dialogue is submit to be taught the basics of the craft of inquiry that he wants to be an instant expert in; but that is precisely what the slave-boy does submit to be taught.

Moreover the genealogist is right that the difference is, in a certain sense, about innocence. Among the various kinds of innocence that Meno seems to have lost in his time with Gorgias is his freedom from dalliance with intellectual fashion. Meno is promiscuously moved towards whatever looks bright, shiny, and exciting in his philosophical milieu; he knows how to finish ten thousand arguments (80b), but has no idea how to begin even one; he can set a thousand clockwork statues walking, but cannot get a single one of them to stay in place (97d ff.).

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<sup>14</sup> In the Greek at *Meno* 83b the point is, strictly speaking, that τετραπλάσιον means τετραῶνς of areas. But this makes no difference to the argument.

The slave-boy knows nothing of this coruscating world of high-brow excitement. He is not dazzled by the kind of pretentious foppery that has spoiled Meno's judgement. He is a plain and honest fellow who "answers with what seems right to him" (83d): who calls it as he sees it. That is all Socrates needs to get his inquiry started. But Meno is so busy flitting about from one idea to another that he cannot even give Socrates that much.

## VI

"But now Chappell is simply denying the *Meno's* recollection-based model of learning and knowledge altogether, and offering instead some neo-Aristotelian account of inquiry as a *techné*."

No, she isn't. To start with, I deny the *instead*. The *Meno* is certainly a dialogue that can be seen as teaching the doctrine that all learning is really recollection, and that all real knowledge is recollected knowledge. But it is also a dialogue that takes great care to show us the constitutive conditions that must obtain in the first place if, *within some craft or practice of inquiry*, recollection is to be so much as possible. (Or in the case of Meno himself, not possible.)

I don't mean at all to up-stage recollection. No doubt recollection *should* be centre-stage in our account of the *Meno*, given, for example, the consideration that (as Dominic Scott points out) it is exactly central to the page-extent of the dialogue. But if we do make recollection centre-stage, then I want to point out what else needs to be on-stage in order for us to do that; "how much stage-setting in the language is presupposed" if the very ideas of inquiry and recollection "are to make sense" (*Philosophical Investigations* I, 257).

Indeed one of the things that is presupposed, when we put recollection centre-stage, is the stage itself. And here we already see one notable point about this presupposed background that provides the stage for Socrates' and the slave-boy's inquiry. This is that this background is not, itself, necessarily *a priori*. The network of shared assumptions on which Socrates and the slave-boy can rely, as they set about their geometry tutorial, include logical points about what follows from what, mathematical truths such as  $4 \times 4 = 16$ , and necessary truths of geometry such as the equal length of any square's diagonals; but they also include contingent facts about the Greek language such as the meanings of τετραπλάσιον and τετράκις, and indeed the contingent facts that Socrates and the slave-boy do both speak Greek and are as it happens present in Meno's house.

Above all, and what I following MacIntyre want particularly to insist on: Socrates and the slave-boy when they engage in geometry are engaging in a *techné zētētikē*, a craft of inquiry. That means in a skill, an expertise, that has a temporality to it. As to the future, it can be passed on—it is indeed teachable. As to the past, it *has* a past—it is a skill that is tradition-based, historical, and socially particular.

So when Socrates and the slave-boy get at geometrical truths, when they inquire and recollect together, they do so *in the way that such inquiries are conducted in their tradition*. But to say that is not to say, as an encyclopaedist—or a Cartesian—reader might have supposed, that their inquiry "lacks objectivity". On the contrary, this is what objectivity *is*: successful participation in an established practice of inquiry. To suppose that for objectivity they are required to step outside that tradition, as the encyclopaedist believes, or that failure so to step outside their tradition condemns them to mere subjectivity, as the genealogist believes, is to succumb to a rationalist fantasy. It is like supposing that in order to truly win a game I must step outside the contingent, local, historical parameters that define what that game is; or that since such stepping-out is impossible—as of course it is—no one can ever win at the game.

“So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?”—It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life.  
(Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* I, 241)

This matters when we return, as I want to in closing, to the question what if anything it might mean to call an enlightenment irreversible, and whether any enlightenments at all have any chance of having that status.

Perhaps the most famous thing in the *Meno* apart from the slave-boy passage is Socrates’ distinction between knowledge and true belief (97a ff.). Socrates begins his discussion with the puzzle why knowledge should be thought more valuable or honourable than true belief or opinion: either, after all, will suffice to guide you along the correct road to Larisa. But Socrates does have an answer to the question; and his answer is that knowledge is more valuable than true belief because it is more *secure*.

Here there is a connection with what Socrates takes teaching and learning to be. For Socrates, to get people merely to mimic virtue, or reliably copy virtue by happy accident or by mere habit or by grace, the inscrutable “gift of the gods”, would not be to *teach* virtue. Where virtue, or anything else, is truly *taught*, Socrates argues, there will be knowledge. (And must be knowledge: the connection between teachability and knowledge is, for him, a necessary connection.)

And that means that there will come, to the person who is truly taught, a kind of enlightenment that is secure, perhaps even in some sense irreversible. For the point about knowledge is that it “binds down”: it gives us not only true beliefs, but the ability to understand why those beliefs are true. Minds that have only true beliefs, without any such understanding, are easily dislodged from those true beliefs: one thought floats into those minds as easily and randomly as another thought floats out. To use Socrates’ own image, mere true beliefs are as wayward and unpredictable as clockwork mannequins like the ones allegedly made by the mythical Daedalus. But where knowledge is present, “the statues of Daedalus are tied down”: the thoughts that we have stay put, because we can see why they’re right.

*Socrates.* There would not be much value in owning one of Daedalus’ statues if it was not tied on a string. It would be like “owning” a runaway slave, for the statue would not stay put. But if the statue is on a string, then it is well worth having; such pieces of handicraft are very fine. What I am talking about is *true opinions*: just as long as true opinions do not shift, they are a fine thing to have, and bring about all sorts of goods for us.

But they tend not to last very long; they make their getaway out of our minds so soon that they are of little value, until we bind them with an account of *why* they are true. This account, my friend, is recollection.

When once the true opinions have been bound like this, at once they become knowledge; and later, they become permanent knowledge. This is why knowledge is more valuable than true belief; and it differs from true belief by being secure.

τῶν ἐκείνου ποιημάτων λελυμένον μὲν ἐκτῆσθαι οὐ πολλῆς τινοῦς ἄξιόν ἐστι τιμῆς, ὥσπερ δραπέτην ἄνθρωπον—οὐ γὰρ παραμένει—δεδεμένον δὲ πολλοῦ ἄξιον: πάνυ γὰρ καλὰ τὰ ἔργα ἐστίν.

πρὸς τί οὖν δὴ λέγω ταῦτα; πρὸς τὰς δόξας τὰς ἀληθεῖς. καὶ γὰρ αἱ δόξαι αἱ ἀληθεῖς, ὅσον μὲν ἂν χρόνον παραμένωσιν, καλὸν τὸ χρῆμα καὶ πάντ’ [98a] ἀγαθὰ ἐργάζονται:

πολὺν δὲ χρόνον οὐκ ἐθέλουσι παραμένειν, ἀλλὰ δραπετεύουσιν ἐκ τῆς ψυχῆς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ὥστε οὐ πολλοῦ ἄξιαί εἰσιν, ἕως ἂν τις αὐτὰς δῆσῃ αἰτίας λογισμῶ. τοῦτο δ’ ἐστίν, ὃ Μένων ἐταῖρε, ἀνάμνησις, ὡς ἐν τοῖς πρόσθεν ἡμῖν ὡμολόγηται. ἐπειδὴν δὲ δεῦσιν, πρῶτον μὲν ἐπιστῆμαι

γίγνονται, ἔπειτα μόνιμοι: καὶ διὰ ταῦτα δὴ τιμιώτερον ἐπιστήμη ὀρθῆς δόξης ἐστίν, καὶ διαφέρει δεσμῶ ἐπιστήμη ὀρθῆς δόξης.  
(Plato, *Meno* 97e-98a)

There is then a kind of irreversible enlightenment that interests Socrates: namely learning, coming to know. The contrast between coming to know, and merely arriving at a true opinion, does not get much grip in a corrupt society like Athens, where nobody respects any particular craft of inquiry enough for that difference to make a practical, political, or sociological difference. But where the distinction does get a grip, the distinction is precisely about reversibility. Nothing fixes a true opinion in place; but a belief is a true opinion that *is* bound in place, by a *logos*. And that means that knowledge, unlike true belief, is not readily reversible; it cannot just wander out of the mind at random. Once it is there, it will stay there. Or at least, it will under favourable conditions; and we might spend some time, as Plato does in some of his later dialogues, particularly the *Republic*, the *Theaetetus*, and the *Philebus*, wondering what those favourable conditions might be. (One of them, as already mentioned, is memory; which is why memory, in a sense of the word clearly distinct from *recollection*, becomes such a theme in all three. Cp. Chappell 2021.)

From all of this I draw two final conclusions. First, we were wondering in section II above what actual and credible irreversibility might look like, for any actual and credible enlightenment. Well, here in the text of the *Meno*—or only a little way beyond that text—is one answer.

And secondly, I suggest that it should begin to appear by this point that one consequence of a tradition-based conception of inquiry such as I, following MacIntyre (and Aristotle), am advocating is that there will be many cases of knowledge as justified true belief where the individual, or the group, who have the true belief are able to *outsource at least some parts of their true beliefs' justification*. For the tradition and the craft of the inquiry, the *zetetike technē*, is itself crucially part not only of what justifies certain true beliefs that good practitioners of that craft will come to; it is crucially part, too, of what makes the question of justification for those beliefs as much as stateable.

This tradition and this craft is not “inside the individual’s head”, not at least in the kind of way that encyclopaedists might insist must be possible, and genealogists deny could be possible; rather it is located in the nexus of social, professional, and personal relationships that are involved in being one practitioner, among other practitioners, of the craft in question. And hence, the justification of at least some of our true beliefs is not in our heads either—it is in the tradition and the craft: which means, in the city, the community, of which we are members.

This is (in part at least) what it is for true beliefs to be justified within a craft. It is also an at least partial explanation of what we might mean by *progress* in our understanding, by *reverses* to that progress, and by the achievement, in suitably favourable circumstances, of progress and of enlightenment that is irreversible. For on this account, progress will be movement toward the improvement and perfection of the craft of discovery within which we are working, as a way of achieving the distinctive kinds of insight and discovery that it is aimed at; reverses will be moments when we move away from those ends; and the progress that we make will be *irreversible*, if and only if it cannot be reversed by simply deserting or abandoning the standards intrinsic to our craft of discovery.

This is, of course, an extremely weak sense of irreversibility; but that, I think, was only to be expected. The positive to focus on here is that we began with a concept, the concept of irreversible progress or enlightenment, that intuitively seemed like it must have *some* sense to it; the difficulty was to say what that sense might be. If we have located a sense for this concept of irreversibility, that is itself progress—and enlightenment.



In this way, then, it turns out that there is more than one way in which Plato, and even the Plato of the *Meno*, can agree with his great successor Aristotle in the opening words of the *Posterior Analytics*: Πᾶσα διδασκαλία καὶ πᾶσα μάθησις διανοητικὴ ἐκ προϋπαρχούσης γίνεται γνώσεως.

## *References*