

Does the Theory of Recollection Preclude Learning? A New Dimension to Platonic Nativism

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Historically, much of the discussion regarding the relationship between the *Meno* and education has focused on the nature of teaching, quite rightly given the governing question of the dialogue (that is, can virtue be taught?).¹ Specifically, there are longstanding debates surrounding Socrates' claim that there is no such thing as teaching, but only recollection.² Socrates maintains this position throughout the dialogue, emphasizing during his conversation with the slave boy, for example, that he is not teaching the boy anything, but is only asking him questions as part of the process of recollection. It seems to be the case that Socrates' position is that the theory of recollection (TR) makes the concept of teaching empty.³ Interestingly, however, there is little discussion in the literature (or the *Meno* itself) about what the implications TR might have for the obverse concept of learning.⁴ Here I want to first offer a set of interpretive arguments for the claim that, although learning is discussed much less explicitly in the *Meno*, TR as it is expressed there entails similar consequences for learning as it does for teaching, namely that there is no such thing. This is particularly plausible, I suggest, because although TR is demonstrated by Socrates while occupying the role of "teacher," the theory is offered, after all, as an alternative account of knowledge acquisition (as opposed to transmission). Second, I want to tie Plato's radical nativism (the idea that some or all human knowledge and concepts are innate) to contemporary debates in the philosophy of mind and cognitive science regarding the difficulties around concept learning (specifically the arguments of Jerry Fodor) and suggest that those of us concerned with the nature of education would do well to take these types of argument and their implications for interactions in the classroom seriously. I sketch what some of these implications might be in the concluding section of the essay.

TR as described in the *Meno* rests on two foundational claims: the immortality of the soul and the claim of anamnesis, that is, the preexistence of all knowledge in the soul prior to embodiment. The second claim, which may seem to be (at least marginally) the more controversial of the two, is what Socrates takes himself to have demonstrated through his conversation with the slave boy (82a–86c), in which he aids the entirely uneducated boy in arriving at the truth of the Pythagorean theorem. Since he never explicitly teaches the boy anything, but rather utilizes diagrams drawn in the sand and strategic questioning,⁵ Socrates purports to have shown that the knowledge the boy now has was always in him and was only "stirred up" by Socrates' questioning (85c). Given the fact that the mathematical concepts recollected by the boy were in him before their dialogue, and given Meno's testimony that nobody in this life had taught him geometry previously, it follows that he either always had the knowledge or he acquired it at some point in the past before his soul was embodied in this particular form. Socrates takes this to be sufficient to demonstrate the

immortality of the soul, which he initially asserts following Pindar at 81c, since in either case there must be a soul that exists independently of our current physical body, which can store the knowledge prior to embodiment (and presumably after death).⁶ Socrates similarly utilizes the argument from anamnesis to support the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*,⁷ suggesting that the fact that “when men are interrogated in the right manner, they always give the right answer of their own accord” points to an immortal soul, which holds “the knowledge and right explanation inside.” The slave boy dialectic in the *Meno* can be seen, then, as a case study of the general line of argument suggested in the *Phaedo*.

Once these two premises are established, TR is equipped to explain how we come to know things in this life, namely by having our innate knowledge drawn out of us through dialogue and reflection. However, there is a key question which the theory, thus far, leaves unanswered, namely that of how knowledge came to be in our souls in the first place.⁸ Conceptually, and keeping in mind that our souls have always existed, this could go one of two ways. In the first option, our souls have always existed and all of the knowledge of reality has always existed with them back into infinity. Neither souls nor the knowledge contained therein can ever be said to have come to be in any meaningful way.⁹ In this scenario, the knowledge is never learned in any sense, but rather exists as an inherent aspect of individual souls. The second option is that there is an eternal soul, which exists without knowledge and, at some point in its progression through eternal time, begins to acquire knowledge through learning. A necessary consequence of this picture of the origins of knowledge is that, given the fact that all knowledge is currently in our souls, the process of learning has been going on long enough that we have had time to learn everything that there is to know. At this point in our soul’s history, we have nothing new to learn and are only ever engaged in recollecting things we already know but have forgotten in our present life. While Socrates never makes an explicit judgment about this question, I will argue that the explicit claims he does make about learning and its relationship to recollection strongly imply that he held the former position, and that this position commits him to the view that there is no learning.

The first mention of the concept of learning in the dialogue comes at 81c, after Socrates cites Pindar as his inspiration for the idea of anamnesis, where Socrates claims that since the soul is immortal and has “beheld everything in this world and the world beyond” then “there is nothing it has not learnt,” a claim he reiterates three lines later at 81d. Prima facie, this would seem to be a textual counterexample to my claim that Socrates is committed to the nonexistence of learning, since he seems to explicitly affirm that learning takes place. However, examining Socrates’ subsequent claims helps to clarify these preliminary remarks. Immediately following his second claim that the soul has learned all things, Socrates goes on to remark that an individual’s “being reminded of one single thing” (81d2), that is, recollecting something, is the same thing as “what men call learning” (81d2). The implication here is clearly that the term “learning” is in some sense a misnomer for the process of what happens when an individual comes to know something, and that it is only to be understood conventionally in conversations among men, rather than as describing metaphysical

reality. Socrates further emphasizes this point in the next line where he states flatly that “learning and inquiry are then wholly recollection” (81d).

The exchange which follows this proclamation, and which directly precedes the slave boy dialogue, serves to shed further light on Socrates’ seeming acceptance of learning. Meno asks Socrates about what he means when he claims that we do not learn and that we mistakenly refer to as learning what is in reality only recollection, asking him to teach Meno about this topic (81e). Note here that Meno characterizes Socrates’ position primarily as a rejection of the possibility of learning. It is apparent to Meno that the position Socrates’ has staked out with regard to the acquisition of knowledge implies not only the impossibility of teaching, but the impossibility of learning as well. Socrates accepts Meno’s description of his position and responds only by chastising Meno for asking him to do the thing (teaching) that he had just argued cannot be done (81e). If it were the case that Socrates meant to allow for the possibility of learning in his picture and only wanted to rule out teaching, one would imagine that he would correct Meno’s obvious misunderstanding, which he does not do. I believe that when Socrates appears to allow for learning earlier in the discussion, we should take him to be speaking conventionally and in the language of men, as Meno apologizes for doing after Socrates rebukes his use of the idea of teaching (82a). Socrates pragmatically utilizes the commonsense language of men in order to ease Meno into the idea that both teaching and learning are only recollection.

One of the final, and most interesting, explicit references to the concept of learning in the dialogue come immediately after the conclusion of the slave boy dialogue. Socrates, having walked Meno through the idea that the boy has had the true opinions about geometry in him all along, and that Socrates’ questioning had only brought this latent knowledge to the surface, makes the following claim; “So if we are to say that there are true opinions present in him both during the time when he is and is not a man, and that those opinions become knowledge when roused by questioning, then his soul will ever be in a state of having learned” (86a). The logic here is subtle, but essential. *Prima facie*, Socrates again appears to be allowing for the possibility of learning. After all, how can one “be in a state of having learned” without at some point having learned? The key is that there is a critical difference between simply being in a state of having learned and being perpetually in a state of having learned, which is what Socrates describes as the state of human souls. If we examine what it means to be in a state of having learned, this distinction becomes much more clear, and we can see that Socrates is slyly ruling out the possibility of learning by utilizing the concept itself. Fundamentally, we could characterize the state of “having learned” as one that is reached after moving from a condition of ignorance, via some type of instruction or teaching, to a condition of understanding or knowing. Learning, then, necessitates both an initial state of ignorance and a subsequent state of understanding. After I am taught that $2+2=4$, I have entered a state of having learned that $2+2=4$, and if I have learned that $2+2=4$, then I know that $2+2=4$. We might say that “knowing” and “having learned” describe the same relationship between the knower and the thing known, or at least that having learned something entails knowing that thing.¹⁰ Said another way, there is no possible case

in which we have learned something but do not know it.¹¹ Since this is the case, we can restate Socrates' claim as its logical equivalent: "his soul will ever be in a state of knowing." It follows from this that I have never been in a state of ignorance, and since being in a state of ignorance is a requirement for learning to take place, it follows that I have never learned anything. Further, since all human souls are, according to Socrates, in this perpetual state of knowledge, it must be the case that nobody has ever learned anything and that nobody ever could. Learning, then, is impossible for human souls.

It appears, then, that Plato's radical nativism commits him not simply to the idea that there can be no teaching, but also to the claim that there can be no learning. With respect to knowledge, the only process that we undergo as humans is that of recollection, by which our innate knowledge is drawn out of us. As radical as this position may seem, particularly to those of us in education, it is not without its modern analogues.

Since the mid 1970s, Jerry Fodor, a prominent philosopher of cognitive science, has maintained in one form or another, the position that all lexical concepts (that is, those concepts which cannot be definitionally reduced to their component concepts) are "unlearned, indeed that they are, in a certain sense, innate."¹² Without wading out too far into the waters of contemporary philosophy of mind, it will be worth it for me to outline the structure of Fodor's argument at least in its broad strokes. Fodor's position stems from his theory, first articulated in *The Language of Thought*,¹³ that there is a type of internal system of representation contained within the human mind out of which thoughts are formed, similarly to the way sentences are formed out of individual words, a "language" which he refers to as "mentalese." Our concepts are the units out of which mentalese constructs thoughts. For example, the concepts DOG, LOG, JUMP, and OVER¹⁴ can be used to formulate the thought "The dog jumped over the log." Mentalese, Fodor argues, has expressive power comparable to any natural language, and mirrors most natural languages in its structure (that is, it has a combinatorial syntax and semantics).¹⁵ Importantly, mentalese must be sufficiently rich to enable us to utilize it to learn the natural language of our birth, and we must have this type of system of representation prior to any development of natural language.¹⁶ With respect to learning new concepts, Fodor follows the dominant trend in developmental psychology, which sees hypothesis formation and testing as an integral part of the learning process.¹⁷ That is to say, the way in which we come to learn a new concept from our natural language is by forming a hypothesis about what the concept refers to and then testing that hypothesis by attempting to communicate with others about the concept. I might form the hypothesis, for example, that the concept LION refers to a type of animal with a certain kind of fur that eats gazelles and then test that hypothesis by asking somebody what lions are, reading a book on lions, and so on. The important point to note for Fodor is that for this account to be workable we must already have a suite of concepts available to us for use in hypothesis formation (in this case the concepts ANIMAL, FUR, EAT, and GAZELLE). For the same reason that I could never say the sentence "A lion is an animal with fur that eats gazelles" without knowing the component terms of the sentence, I could never

have the thought “A lion is an animal with fur that eats gazelles” without having the component concepts. I can only define, and hence come to learn, concepts for which I already possess the terms necessary for the formulation of the definition.

This is all well and good in cases of concepts that break down in the way that LION might, but the problem arises when we think about concepts that are not decomposable in this way. For the sake of argument, let’s assume that the concept COLOR is non-decomposable to any set of component concepts. If we are to learn the concept, then we must do so by, *inter alia*, formulating the correct semantic hypothesis about the concept utilizing our other concepts to do so. However, since there are no component concepts, we cannot form the proper hypothesis without, of course, utilizing the non-decomposable concept itself, which is circular and which, given the fact that we do not already possess the concept (since we are trying to learn it), is impossible for us to do. On this picture, it seems to be impossible for us to ever learn non-decomposable concepts.¹⁸ Fodor argues that since we do undeniably know these concepts even in the face of the impossibility of their being learned, the best explanation is that they are already present within us in some capacity. Fodor ultimately suggests that these innate concepts are “triggered” by interaction with the outside world and objects, similarly to the Platonic process of recollection, which is induced through targeted questioning.

Fodor’s argument for innate concepts seems to be, at least in its broad strokes, an updated and refined version of the Platonic argument for the innateness of knowledge more generally.¹⁹ My point in drawing out this comparison has not been to lay out Fodor’s argument in all of its complexity, but only to suggest that nativism, as a position about certain types of knowledge and the attendant rejection of the possibility of learning, is not simply an artifact of philosophical history produced by a lack of knowledge about the learning process or theoretical underdevelopment, but rather that it is a serious position which merits serious consideration, particularly from our position as educators. As Fiona Cowie sums up in her analysis of Fodor’s arguments, “we have on hand neither a definitive account of where Fodor’s argument [for nativism] goes wrong, nor a plausible alternative to traditional acquisition theories” of learning, which Fodor has plausibly refuted.²⁰

What are the implications, then, for education if nativism is a live hypothesis that rules out the very possibility of learning? We might think, *prima facie*, that the educative project is fundamentally undermined by such a possibility. Without teaching and learning, and consequently without teachers and learners, there appears to be nothing for education to do. I believe that this is something of a defeatist position, which fails to recognize the potentially fruitful, interesting, and indeed humanizing possibilities of a nativist educational model. Indeed Socrates himself, who many of us, myself included, might put forward as the paragon of the figure of the educator, and whose name is attached to the ideals of “Socratic education” and “Socratic dialogue” so often discussed among educators, was himself, if we are to take the Platonic picture of him at all seriously, committed to a type of nativism. For Socrates, the innateness of knowledge was not an excuse to give up on education, but an impetus for conversation and the joint project, as exemplified in *elenctic dialogue*,

of attempting to unlock the knowledge we already have. The development of a deep dialogic relationship between two individuals, the ostensive teacher and the ostensive student who are intellectual peers in everything other than experience and the attendant access to knowledge that it brings, is demanded by the nativist account. If nativism were to be adopted, the knowledge of the students as unique individuals with a unique set of experiences, likely dramatically distinct from those of the teacher, would demand a new type of respect and validation. Picking up on Fodor's notion of triggering, Deweyan concerns about learning by doing and offering children a wide array of tactile and physical experiences gains more conceptual traction, since the more objects, people, and situations that children are able to experience, the more innate concepts will be triggered into activity. Similar arguments would support a more vigorous and complete multiculturalism in the classroom, as the distinct ideas, artifacts, and history brought into the classroom by individuals with differing cultural backgrounds would be another layer of exposure, and hence another site of triggered learning. This positive picture that nativism paints to illustrate what the educational project entails actually turns out to align very closely with many of the classically progressive, democratic ideals of education.

Perhaps as importantly, the things that the nativist account of learning rules out also supports an equalizing democratic shift in educational practice. If knowledge of the world and ourselves is within us a priori, then almost all of the dominant models of contemporary educative practice must be dismissed as fundamentally wrongheaded. The dehumanizing and unsuccessful models of banking and transmission would no longer have a conceptual leg to stand on, since the notion of transmitting something that both parties already possess is obviously a nonstarter. Similarly, philosophies that attribute any type of inherent intellectual superiority or inferiority to any group or individual would be untenable. In a radically egalitarian inversion of the Lockean *tabula rasa*, educational nativism posits a sort of *tabula cretata* on which is written all (or at least most) objects of knowledge, bringing humanity onto the same plane intellectually, and reducing any distinctions in knowledge between individuals or groups to a simple question of access to their inner stores thereof, distinctions which would be readily explicable by appeal to the vagaries of personal history, social disenfranchisement, and the like.²¹

Educators can hardly be faulted for initially bristling at the suggestion that neither teaching nor learning are conceptually possible, but I have tried to suggest that rather than reading the case for nativism as a suicide pill for the entire educative enterprise, we ought to think of it as an invitation to a more properly Socratic and democratic educational practice. I side with Socrates, as I often do, that, as a society, we shall be better, "more courageous and less idle" (86b) if we "try boldly to inquire into and recollect what [we] do not happen to know at present" (86b) even, and especially if, we believe that what we do not know at present is already somewhere within us all.

1. See, for example, R.S. Bluck, *Plato's Meno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 20–22; A.E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work* (London: Methuen, 1960), 144–45; Daniel T. Devereux, "Nature and Teaching in Plato's *Meno*," *Phronesis* 23 no. 2 (1978): 118–26; Deron R. Boyles, "Sophistry,

Dialectic, and Teacher Education: A Reinterpretation of Plato's *Meno*," in *Philosophy of Education 1996*, ed. Frank Margolis (Urbana, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1997): 102–09, <http://ojs.ed.uiuc.edu/index.php/pes/article/view/2249/944>; and Chris Higgins, "Socrates' Effect/Meno's Affect: Socratic Elenchus as Kathartic Therapy," in *Philosophy of Education 1994*, ed. Michael S. Katz (Urbana, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1995): 306–15.

2. Plato, *Meno*, in *Dialogues of Plato*, vol. 1, trans. R.E. Allen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 81e. This work will be cited in the text for all subsequent references.

3. One of the main disputes about teaching in the *Meno* is whether or not Socrates' claim that there is no teaching can square with the idea that, as Socrates says at *DP*, 87c, nothing is taught but knowledge, implying that knowledge is actually taught, and hence that there is such a thing as teaching. I do not have the space to enter into this debate here.

4. In this essay I take it, unproblematically I hope, that the concepts of teaching and learning are distinct and can come apart in certain cases. That is, there are situations where I have taught something, or I am a teacher of something, but nobody has learned it, and situations where I have learned something but have not been taught it. For a sustained argument for the distinction between these two processes, see Israel Scheffler, *Conditions of Knowledge: An Introduction to Epistemology and Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983).

5. Of course, one of the major reasons that Socrates' demonstration of anamnesis has been historically rejected as definitive is the suspiciously leading nature of his questions, which raises worries about whether or not he really is teaching.

6. This may not be a warranted induction on Socrates' part, since it is conceivable that, while our souls did indeed learn things in a past life, they have not existed indefinitely into the past.

7. Plato, *Phaedo*, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 73a–b.

8. It is important to remember here that while Socrates ends the dialogue by suggesting that virtue is meted out neither by nature or learning, but rather by divine apportionment (99e), this claim comes with a pair of important caveats that limit its relevance to the discussion of the origins of knowledge: (1) Socrates makes clear that the hypothesis of divine apportionment would cease to be viable if "there is among statesmen a man who can make another man a statesman" (100a). This comment, while partly a joke at the expense of Anytus, with whom Meno and Socrates had just finished talking to, is also a serious criterion by which we could disprove the theory that virtue is given only by divine apportionment. (2) Socrates is similarly clear (100b) that the apportionment of the virtue hypothesis is only provisional, given that we don't know what virtue actually is. The implication that we should take from this is not that knowledge is given by divine apportionment, but rather that the discovery of virtue as knowledge would cast doubt on it being divinely apportioned. Further, it is generally thought that the hypothesis that virtue is knowledge is never actually entertained by Socrates in the dialogue.

For further discussion of this claim, see Lynn E. Rose "Plato's *Meno*, 86–89," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (1970): 1–8; and Harold Zyskind and R. Sternfeld, "Plato's *Meno* 89C: 'Virtue Is Knowledge' a Hypothesis?" *Phronesis* 21, no. 2 (1976): 130–34.

9. We might think of this as analogous to how many Christians have historically thought about God's omniscience in relation to his eternity.

10. Of course the two terms differ in that one specifies the mode of coming to know something (that is, learning it) and one does not.

11. The converse may or may not be true.

12. Jerry A. Fodor, "The Present Status of the Innateness Controversy," in *RePresentations: Philosophical Essays on the Foundations of Cognitive Science* (Brighton, UK: Harvester Press, 1981), 257–316, 275.

13. Jerry A. Fodor, *The Language of Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975). For other statements of Fodor's position, see note 12; and Jerry Fodor, "Concepts: A Potboiler," *Philosophical Issues* 6 (1995): 1–24; Jerry Fodor, "Fixation of Belief and Concept Acquisition," in *Language and Learning: The Debate Between Jean Piaget and Noam Chomsky*, ed. Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1980), 142–63; Jerry A. Fodor, *The Modularity of Mind: An Essay on Faculty Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1983); Jerry A. Fodor, *Concepts: Where Cognitive Science Went Wrong* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998); and Jerry A. Fodor, *LOT 2: The Language of Thought Revisited* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2008).

¹⁴. I follow the tradition in the literature of using the upper case to denote concepts as opposed to the words that express them or the objects to which they refer.

¹⁵. Fodor, *The Language of Thought*, 82.

¹⁶. There are obvious and interesting parallels between Fodor's arguments and those advanced by Chomsky. I cannot fully draw these out here, but see Piatelli-Palmarini, ed., *Language and Learning*.

¹⁷. See Fodor, "The Present Status of the Innateness Controversy," for a review of the literature and thinking here.

¹⁸. Fodor has independent arguments for the claim that the vast majority of our concepts do turn out to be non-decomposable. See Fodor, "The Present Status of the Innateness Controversy"; and Fodor, *Concepts*.

¹⁹. The parallel becomes even more obvious when you consider that the slight amendment to Platonic anamnesis evidenced in the *Phaedo* which limits innate knowledge to that of the forms, which seem to me to be rough analogues of Fodor's concepts.

²⁰. Fiona Cowie, "Mad Dog Nativism," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 49, no. 2 (1998): 227–52, 250.

²¹. For a more in-depth analysis of the implications of such a radically democratized education, see Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).