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## Meno's Paradox

Socrates' method of inquiry is a problem that arises when trying to acquire knowledge about whether a given action is virtuous, without having the knowledge of what the definition of virtue is. This problem results in Meno's Paradox, which states that one cannot discover virtue if they already know what it is, nor can one discover virtue if they don't know what they're looking for. Socrates attempts to resolve this issue by means of the Theory of Recollection, in which the only way of acquiring knowledge is when an embodied soul recollects knowledge from its all-knowing and un-embodied state.

In response to Socrates' problem of inquiry, Meno presents the paradox of inquiry, also known as "Meno's Paradox." This paradox states that a man "cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for" (80E). This paradox consists of three key premises: 1) either you know X or you don't know X, 2) if you know X you cannot discover X, and 3) if you don't know X then you can't discover X. Then, based on premises one, two, and three, Meno is able to draw the conclusion that one can never discover X.

The first premise, the statement that either you know X or you do not know X, might appear to be true to someone when considering a question like, "what is the atomic number of iron?". It seems to appear, at a glance, that in order to answer such a question one would possess full knowledge of the answer or no knowledge of the answer at all. It also seems plausible that

someone might agree to this premise considering that it is not possible for someone to both know and not know something at the same time, regarding the same inquiry. So, if one is required to have all or nothing knowledge, and is also restricted by not being able to both know and not know at the same time, it seems reasonable that one must always either know something or not know something, just as the premise states.

The second premise, the statement that if you know X you cannot discover X, is true by the definition of “discover.” To “discover” means to gain knowledge or awareness of something that was not already known before. If one has knowledge or awareness of something, then they cannot discover it because it is already known or perceived.

The third premise, the statement that if you don’t know X you cannot discover X, might be true to someone based on the idea that, for example, if you don’t know what the color “red” is, how can you find the person wearing a red shirt? Or, if you don’t know what a “key” is, how can you help someone look for their keys? This premise seems reasonable since it is hard to imagine finding something without an accurate description or definition, let alone an absence of knowledge of it entirely.

The conclusion Meno draws from these premises, that you can’t discover X, seems conceivable if all other premises, as shown, are taken as true. For example, since premise one seems acceptable given a simple question like, “how many ounces are in a pound?”, and premise two is validated by means of definition, and premise three is then substantiated by the relatable idea that, “if one does not know what the color red is, one will never be able to determine it has been discovered,” then it would logically follow that since the premises are true, the conclusion is be found to be true as well.

However, although Meno's Paradox concludes that X can never be discovered, such a claim is contradictory to what Plato believes about discovering X. Because of this, there is one premise in the paradox that Plato finds to be false, and that is premise three. Plato is able to omit premise three using his "Theory of Recollection," where he describes that the human soul is immortal and all knowing, but while it is embodied, it loses its omniscience, yet retains the ability to recollect pieces of knowledge from its un-embodied state. This "recollecting" is what humans view as "learning" and is used as Plato's means to prove that it is possible for someone to acquire knowledge of things not previously known, and thus resolve Meno's Paradox.

In attempting to show that even if you don't know X, X can still be discovered, Socrates converses with one of Meno's slaves and "teaches" him how to calculate the baseline of an eight-foot square. Socrates acts as the "guiding hand" by bringing the slave boy from thinking he knows the length, realizing he does not know the length, and then observes as the slave boy finally comes to know the true length of the baseline. This transition from not knowing to knowing, without being "taught," is what Socrates says has happened via the process of recollection. According to the theory, the knowledge of geometry was residing in the slave boy's soul, from its previous un-embodied state, and then was recollected by the embodied soul (the slave boy).

What began as Socrates' method of inquiry, the idea that one cannot acquire knowledge about something without first having a definition for it, led to Meno's Paradox, a seemingly reasonable argument which senselessly concludes that knowledge of something can never be obtained. Noticing that the paradox had this obviously flawed conclusion, Plato refutes premise three, and via its omission, premise four is restated as, "Therefore you can discover X," which accurately coincides with Plato's view of how one acquires knowledge.