Meno's Paradox, Plato's Solution, and Restricted Phenomenal Conservatism

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Introduction

In this essay, I will first explain the main thesis of Socratic epistemology, according to which you can only know that x is F if you can define x. Then, I will discuss Meno's paradox and Plato/Socrates' answers to the paradox, namely the recollection theory. According to this theory, our souls possess knowledge that we are not aware of, and in the case of learning, we recollect or remember this knowledge. Next, I will discuss why Socrates responds to this rather than what seems to be an obvious response, which is to deny the dichotomy presented by Meno. I will claim that Socratic epistemology forces him to do so. Finally, I will try to provide a better solution that is compatible with Socratic epistemology and does not rely on the existence of immortal souls, which seems an unwanted commitment for an epistemological theory.

Socratic epistemology

Here is the main thesis of Socratic epistemology.

> *SE*: For S to know x is F, S needs to be able to define x *properly*.[1]

To clarify SE, consider the following case. Suppose S claims to know that courage is teachable. Then, SE requires S to define courage properly. Here, properly means the proposed definition is general so that it is applicable to all instances of courage and has no counter-examples. For example, in *Laches* (190e), Laches defines courage as the ability to maintain posture and defend himself in a war without running away. But this definition is not applicable to all cases of courage since, for example, we attribute courage outside of war as well (e.g., an introvert making a good presentation is courageous).

Now note that SE is a very strong criterion because it is usually difficult to have a good definition. For example, it seems very difficult to find a definition of virtue that is applicable to all cases of virtue since there are many different virtuous acts. This will be important in our discussion of Meno's Paradox.

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[1] This is a constant theme in Socratic dialogues, where Socrates wants the people to whom he speaks to define the concept they are talking about. For example, see Laches (190c-191a).

Meno's paradox and Socrates's theory of recollection

In *Meno* (80d), Meno proposes a challenge for the possibility of inquiry. He says if we know the object we want to inquire about, then the inquiry is not needed since we already know the object. And if we do not know the object we aim to inquire about, then we cannot look for it since we do not know it. We cannot recognize it if we were to see it in our inquiry. So, it seems, either way, we cannot inquire and learn what we aim to learn.

To solve this paradox, Socrates/Plato offers the theory of recollection (Meno, 81b-86c). According to this theory, our immortal souls possess all knowledge, but at first, we are not aware of our knowledge. But after trying to learn and inquire, we start recollecting knowledge that our souls possess. So, even if we do not know what we are looking for, we can still learn about it because, after inquiry, we will be able to recollect our knowledge of what we were looking for. As an illustration of his theory, Socrates examines a slave who has no education in mathematics. But after Socrates asks him questions, the slave seems to know a mathematical proposition (Meno, 82b-86c). And Socrates claims that he did not teach him and takes this to be a case where the slave recollected knowledge that was already in his soul.

On the face of it, the theory of recollection as a solution to Meno's paradox seems weird because the paradox has a much easier solution. Paradox seems to assume that we can either have absolute knowledge of a thing or not knowledge of it at all. For if we can have knowledge that is not absolute, then we would have *some* knowledge as to what to look for and recognize when we encounter it and still learn new things about it since we do not know everything about it. So, it is enough to deny that knowledge must be absolute or that there cannot be any knowledge whatsoever. And denying this seems to be very intuitive as we usually have some knowledge about things but not absolute knowledge. For example, we have some knowledge about water, that it is an odorless liquid, and then we come to learn that it is H2O. So, our non-absolute knowledge of water increased. Therefore, by denying that knowledge is absolute or there is no knowledge, we seem to easily solve the paradox. So, the question to ask is why Socrates does not respond this way and proposes such a theory.

I think there are two reasons. First, SE makes it impossible to accept the above solution. To see why this is so, let's suppose S tries to inquire about x. Now, it *seems* that for S to inquire about x, S at least needs to know some properties of x. For otherwise, she would have no idea whatsoever about x and would not really know what to look for it.[2] But then SE requires S to have a proper definition of x to know a property of x. However, to have a good definition, S needs to be in a *very* good

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[2] For one thing, she at least needs to know that x is searchable for a successful inquiry.

epistemic state since being able to define things seems difficult. Then, it seems S would already know a pretty good deal about x, and the inquiry would be unnecessary. So, we can restate Meno's paradox applied to SE like this. If you do not have a definition of x, then you cannot know its properties and look for it. If you know the definition of x, then you would not need an inquiry about x. So, a person who committed to SE cannot use our solution above since above we presume that we can know some properties of a thing without knowing its definition (i.e., we assumed I could know water is an odorless liquid without being able to define it). However, with the theory of recollection, you can solve Meno's paradox even if SE is true. For it is possible that even if you do not 'know' any property of x, you come to know what x is by recollecting your knowledge in your soul, as Socrates takes it to be the case in the slave's situation. As a result, one reason why Socrates proposes his theory of recollection is to solve Meno's paradox without abandoning SE.

Second, the theory of recollection seems to justify Socratic inquiry. As we know, Socrates questions those who claim to know and asks them to give a definition, especially of virtue. Also, in *Apology* (38a), he says, "I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others." This seems to imply that he is optimistic about his inquiry, that we can learn from his discussions. Now, with the theory of recollection, he can also claim that discussion regarding virtue may make us recollect what we know, as in the case of the slave. So, we can learn and benefit from the Socratic inquiry. This is the second reason why Socrates proposes his theory of recollection.

Ontological burden of the theory of recollection and an alternative

As we see, the theory of recollection solves Meno's paradox while keeping SE. However, one problem with the theory of recollection is that, as an epistemological theory, it relies on the existence of immortal souls. But given the existence of souls is a highly controversial topic, we may want our epistemological theories to be indifferent as to whether there are souls or not. Given this picture, I think that to assess the success of the theory of recollection, we should find if there could be a solution to Meno's paradox that does not rely on the existence of immortal souls while keeping SE and making Socratic inquiry meaningful as the theory of recollection does. If there cannot be such a theory, then we should conclude Socrates has done his best to keep his epistemology consistent. If there is such a theory, then we should think that Socrates unnecessarily commits himself to the existence of souls, and people who accept SE should believe this theory rather than Socrates's theory of recollection. For it would

not have the ontological burden of the theory of recollection. For the rest of the paper, I will argue that there is such a theory.

Here is the epistemological thesis that I believe is such a theory.

> *RPC*: S is justified in believing P if (i) it appears to S that P and (ii) for any concept C in P, S forms a good definition of C based on her appearances.[3]

Let me first explain RPC and show how it can solve Meno's paradox in the way Socrates needs to solve it. Let's first look at appearances. What is appearance? It is hard to give a general definition of appearances,[4] so let's look at some examples. For example, now it *appears* to me that there is a computer before me. That's an example of perceptual appearance. Note that the content of this appearance is propositional since it can be false or true that the computer is before me. Another kind of appearance is intuitions. Intuitions are intellectual appearances whose content does not (solely) depend on experience.[5] For example, when you think about it, it seems that no object can be completely red and blue at the same time. Or it appears that all natural numbers must be either odd or even. Likewise, when you think, it seems pleasure is good and pain is bad, which is an example of ethical intuition.[6] Again, the content of these appearances is propositional as they tell something that could be true or false. Finally, note that in our daily life, appearances are common, as we provide the examples above, so RPC does not postulate ad hoc or mysterious entities.

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[3] RPC stands for Restricted Phenomenal Conservatism due to Michael Huemer (2007). Phenomenal Conservatism holds undefeated seemings (appearances) confer justification (Huemer, 2007), and RPC above somehow restricts this principle to seemings with well-defined concepts.

[4] If Socrates wants to defend RPC, then perhaps he has to give a definition of appearances. Alternatively, he might say some concepts have to be left undefined; otherwise, the chain of definitions would go to infinity. And he might add that appearances are fundamental terms so that they can be left undefined. For some discussion of the definition of appearances, see Huemer (2007).

[5] Although the concepts in an intuition may be acquired through experience. For example, the concept of red and blue may be acquired through experience, yet the appearance that no object can be completely red and blue is an intuition since its content does not depend on experience. It comes from the understanding of the terms 'object', 'red', 'blue', and 'completely'.

[6] Some philosophers are hesitant to consider intuitions as evidence although they think perceptual appearances are evidence. So, why should we think that intuitions can be evidence? It seems that we assume perceptual appearances are innocent until proven guilty; we can trust them unless we have a reason to believe otherwise. Then, we should treat intuitions similarly. After all, just like perceptual appearances, with intuitions, something strikes us as true. Thus, we need a reason to think that intuitions are unreliable. Now, we may have empirical evidence that under certain circumstances, certain kinds of intuitions are unreliable. But to reject intuitions in general as a source of evidence, we must show that *all* intuitions are unreliable. It seems to me that it is unlikely that we could find empirical evidence proving this.

Now, after explaining appearances, we can look at the second condition of RPC that states the subject has to have a good definition of concepts involved in the content of appearances to be justified in believing in the content of appearances. Consider again the appearance that every natural number must be either odd or even. If you have a good definition of natural, odd, and even numbers,[7] then RPC holds you are justified in believing the content of this appearance. Note that this makes RPC hard to satisfy, like SE.

After clarifying RPC, let's see how SE is compatible with RPC. First, let's define knowledge as justified true belief or something very close to it.[8] Then, RPC seems to imply SE since RPC holds to be justified, you need to have appearances that have well-defined concepts, and SE says you need definitions to know. This indicates that Socrates can hold RPC to motivate SE. Now, we should look at whether RPC can solve Meno's paradox and make Socratic inquiry meaningful.

Let's first see how RPC solves Meno's paradox. First, let's look at the case or the horn where you do not have knowledge. Suppose you have an appearance that courage is teachable; when you think about courage, it seems to you that it is teachable. Further, suppose that you do not have a definition of courage. Then, RPC implies you are not justified in believing in any appearance regarding courage, including the above one, as you do not have a definition of courage. Can you inquire about courage? I think the answer is yes because you have at least a starting point, an appearance. You might assume that the content of this appearance is correct and see what it implies. Along the way, you can use other appearances as well, such as courage, which is a fine thing, and this or that person has it, and so on. And if this appearance implies a proposition that does not seem to be the case, then you would reject the beginning appearance. But if you can construct a good definition of courage at the end, then your beginning appearance becomes justified, and inquiry would be possible. Also, this process seems to be similar to the hypothesis method mentioned by Socrates in Meno (86e-87a) since, in the method of hypothesis, you assume something and look at where this assumption would lead.[9]

So, although we are not justified in appearances at the beginning, according to RPC, they at least give us a starting point and something to look for so that inquiry

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[7] Supposedly you need to have some knowledge about set theory.

[8] Gettier (1963) famously argues that justified true belief is not a sufficient condition for knowledge. It turns out that it is very difficult to define knowledge properly. But for the purposes of this essay, we can think of knowledge as something very close to justified true belief. Also, the referee points out that Plato may himself reject this definition. See Theaetetus (201d-210). I use this definition just to illustrate how SE and RPC are compatible with each other.

[9] For example, in *Meno* (87c), Socrates says if we assume virtue is a kind of virtue, then we should conclude it is teachable as well.

would be possible. And I think something like RPC can account for Plato's inquiry about justice in the *Republic*, which would be an example of how inquiry under RPC should work. Although, at first, he does not have a definition of justice in the soul, he has some appearances of how an ideal city would look like, and virtues like courage, moderation, and wisdom can be found in the city. Then, he is able to find justice in the city- that everyone is doing his own job- and after arguing that the soul is like the city as they are composed of three parts, he concludes justice in the soul is the harmony of different parts in doing what they should do (Republic, Book IV, 443d) So, he started with certain appearances and ended up with a definition. Therefore, with the help of appearances (though they are unjustified in the beginning), RPC can solve the first horn of Meno's paradox that we cannot inquire about what we do not know.

This also shows how Socratic inquiry is meaningful under RPC. Through Socratic inquiry, we can question whether certain appearances support the proposed definition. If not, we can start a new inquiry by using appearances to try to obtain a good definition.

Now, let's look at the second horn of Meno's paradox. Suppose I know that every natural number is either odd or even. Then, RPC and SE imply I have good definitions of natural, even, and odd numbers. Can I inquire further about natural numbers? The answer seems to be yes again since although having the definition of natural numbers requires very good epistemic states about them, it does not require knowing every property of natural numbers. This, I think, is the position of mathematicians. Although they have good definitions of mathematical objects, they do not know every property of the object in question. After inquiry, they discover new properties of objects that they defined previously. This is ultimately how mathematical knowledge is obtained.[10] Therefore, RPC can solve the second horn of the paradox as well.

Overall, we saw that RPC could solve Meno's paradox and show why Socratic inquiry is useful while being compatible with SE. Also, RPC does not seem to rely on the existence of immortal souls, while the theory of recollection does. Therefore, this is an advantage over RPC, as we discussed at the beginning of this section. Now, RPC relies on certain kinds of appearances like intuitions and holds that they confer justification given the concepts in them are well-defined. Some empiricists might find this problematic since the causal relation between intuitions and the relevant part of reality seems to be absent. But this is a general problem for rationalism if it is a problem. And Plato has rationalist tendencies, as the theory of recollection suggests.

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[10] For example, although mathematicians have definitions of integers, they did not know whether Fermat's last theorem was true before 1994 when Andrew Wiles proved it.

So, RPC, being a rationalist theory, is not a problem. After all, we want to find a theory that Socrates/Plato can accept that does not have unnecessary ontological burdens. And RPC is such a theory.

As a result, Socrates could have done a better job at solving Meno's paradox because, as RPC shows, there is a solution that does not need the postulation of immortal souls.

Conclusion

In this paper, I explained Socratic Epistemology (SE), according to which to know that x is F, one needs to define x properly. Then, I described Meno's paradox that says an inquiry is impossible since if we know what we want to inquire about, then the inquiry is unnecessary since we already know it. And if we do not know what we want to inquire about, the inquiry is impossible because we cannot recognize what we are looking for even if we encounter it since we do not know it. Then, I explained Socrates/Plato's solution, which is the theory of forms. It holds all knowledge that exists in our immortal souls, and we recollect them upon inquiry. This solves Meno's paradox since we can recollect knowledge in our souls upon inquiry. Then, I explained why Socrates did not solve Meno's paradox in a seemingly easy way that includes rejecting either that knowledge is absolute or that there cannot be knowledge at all. The reason is that his commitment to SE makes it impossible to use the easy solution. Also, Socrates wants to show that Socratic inquiry is meaningful. Finally, I argued that Socrates could have done a better job at solving Meno's paradox since there is a solution to the paradox that does not have an unnecessary commitment to the immortal soul. I showed that one such theory is RPC, as it does not commit any immortal soul and can solve Meno's paradox through the concept of appearance.[11]

References

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[11] I wish to thank the anonymous referee for *Prokopton* for helpful comments on this essay.