

## Meno's Memory and Learning by Recollecting

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### 0. INTRODUCTION

The central topic of the *Meno*, introduced by Meno at the beginning of the dialogue, is how virtue is acquired and in particular whether it is teachable (*didakton*) or learnable (*mathēton*). This paper focuses on the concepts of teaching and learning, as they are presented in the dialogue. I want to consider, in the first place, what Meno's model of learning and teaching is and to explore its limitations. Then I want to turn to Socrates' Theory of Recollection, presented midway through the dialogue, to see whether it contains a model of learning that can meet the challenges faced by Meno's model.

The paper is part of a larger project which investigates models of learning and teaching in the Platonic corpus, both the models endorsed by Socrates' interlocutors and the challenges posed to those models by Socrates and his methodology. As will become apparent, the project of delineating and articulating pedagogical models, even in these ancient contexts, is one that draws on a variety of philosophical subfields. In the case of the *Meno*, what begins under the auspices of ancient philosophy of education quickly verges into epistemology and philosophy of mind. Although in much of what follows I stay relatively close to the text in an attempt to show that the models of learning I'm attributing to Socrates and Meno can actually be found in the dialogue, my hope is that I will also be able to suggest ways in which these models may connect up with issues in contemporary philosophy.

In the first section of the paper, I argue that Meno is committed to a model of learning according to which (a) teaching and learning are correlative, (b) only knowledge can be taught/learned, and (c) knowledge can only be taught/learned through direct transmission of knowledge from a knower to a non-knower. A knower teaches when he tells (or shows) a non-knower what he knows;<sup>1</sup> a non-knower learns by first listening to what the knower says and then committing it to memory. In the second section, I argue that the role which Meno accords memory in learning is supported by another commitment he has, namely, to the possibility of the Transmission

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<sup>1</sup> I will be using masculine pronouns throughout, since the cases of teaching and learning under discussion in the *Meno* typically involve male teachers and students.

of Knowledge by Expert Testimony (TK). Meno's commitment to TK and to the sufficiency of memorization for learning leaves his model of learning vulnerable to two problems, which I discuss in the third section. First, memorization of an expert's words is not sufficient for knowledge (and so for learning), at least on the account of knowledge presented in the *Meno*. To demonstrate knowledge, on Socrates' view, the learner needs to be able to answer questions about what he claims to have learned, to provide an account of the thing in question. But if one has *only* memorized the words of an expert, one won't be able to do this. Second, the commitment to TK leaves Meno vulnerable to a version of the questions he poses to Socrates about the possibility of successfully seeking without a teacher. If there is disagreement among putative experts about what *x* is, the complete novice will be unable to adjudicate among his candidate teachers, weeding the genuine experts from the imposters.

It is often noted that Socrates' Theory of Recollection (TR) provides Meno with an alternative model for knowledge acquisition by showing him that it's possible to seek for what one doesn't know without a teacher.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it is frequently concluded, the TR shows that Meno's model of teaching and learning is not necessary for *the acquisition of knowledge*, since there are other ways of acquiring knowledge besides learning/teaching. But I think the TR does more than this. In the fourth section of the paper, I argue that the TR provides Meno with a model for knowledge acquisition which is a *substitute* for his model of learning. That is to say, the TR, whatever it says about the possibility of acquiring knowledge without a teacher, shows that Meno's model of teaching and learning is not necessary for *learning*, since according to the TR it's possible to learn without having knowledge transferred directly from a knower to a non-knower.

## 1. MEMORY: LEARNING BY HEART

Meno is committed to three core assumptions about (a) the relationship between teaching and learning; (b) the relationship between knowledge and learning; and (c) the method by which knowledge is acquired by the learner and dispensed by the teacher.

The first assumption is that teaching and learning are correlative, and in particular that one can't learn without being taught. That Meno holds such a view about the relationship between

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Benson (1990, 134-136), Day (1994, 24), Fine (2014, 137), Nehamas (1985, 15-16), and Weiss (2006, 11).

teaching and learning is a commonplace in the literature on the dialogue,<sup>3</sup> and it's not hard to see why. The assumption shows up in Meno's opening questions:

Socrates, are you able to tell me: is virtue teachable [*didakton*]? Or is it not teachable but acquirable through practice? Or is it neither acquirable through practice nor learnable [*mathēton*] but accrues to men by nature or in some other way? (70a1-4)<sup>4</sup>

Notice that at the end of this passage Meno substitutes "learnable" for his earlier "teachable." The implication is that if  $x$  is teachable, it is learnable, and conversely. Of course this does not get us all the way to the view that one can't learn without being taught. To say that the *teachable* is also always *learnable* does not entail that the *agent* who learns  $x$  must learn it by being taught. Evidence for this stronger claim comes from Meno's acceptance (several times over) of Socrates' later assertion that "if there are no teachers, there are no learners" (96b6-c10). It's hard to see why Meno would accept this conditional if he doesn't think learning and teaching are correlative. But, assuming that learning and teaching are so understood, his acceptance of the claim seems reasonable. The thought would be that if there are no teachers, there is no teaching and hence no learning (assuming there is no learning without teaching); and so there are no learners (assuming that if there is no learning, there are no learners).

Meno's second assumption is that only knowledge can be taught and learned. Just before introducing the hypothesis that virtue is knowledge and embarking on the task of investigating this hypothesis, Socrates briefly considers an alternative hypothesis, namely, that virtue is something besides knowledge (i.e. that it is *not* knowledge), and he notes that if this hypothesis holds, virtue will not be teachable:

First, if it [virtue] is something besides some kind of knowledge, will it be teachable or not (or, as we said just now, "recollectable" – let it make no difference which of the terms we use, but is it teachable?) Or isn't it obvious to everyone that man is taught nothing apart from knowledge? (87b5-c2)

Meno accepts this claim readily: "It seems so to me, at any rate" (87c3).

Given the assumption that only knowledge can be taught, we can ask how Meno envisions the process of learning and teaching. We can glean at least four things about the nature of the process from the dialogue. The first two of these, which I will mention only briefly, are that (a)

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<sup>3</sup> See Fine (2014, 118), Hoerber (1960, 83), and Weiss (2006) for examples.

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine and are based on the Burnet (Plato 1903) text.

teaching and learning consist in a knower's making a non-knower (with respect to some subject) into a knower (with respect to the same subject) and that (b) the transformation occurs by the transmission of knowledge from the knower to the non-knower.<sup>5</sup> (a) and (b) are relatively uncontroversial, from an exegetical standpoint. However, the standard picture of learning and teaching in the *Meno* also contains two less familiar elements, regarding the way teachers teach and learners learn. First, it is assumed that the teacher gives his knowledge *directly* to the non-knower (i.e. by telling the non-knower what he (the knower) knows or by showing the non-knower how to do what the knower does). Second, it is assumed that the student receives that knowledge by first listening to and committing it to memory and then reproducing it. The student has learned (i.e. become a knower) when he is able to repeat, in words or actions, what the teacher has directly conveyed to him.<sup>6</sup>

My primary evidence for assumed directness of transmission comes from the geometry lesson (GL), which Socrates offers as an illustration of recollection. Throughout the GL, Socrates emphasizes that he is not *teaching* Meno's slave boy. It is sometimes said that what justifies this claim is Socrates' lack of knowledge: he cannot be teaching because teachers must have knowledge and Socrates doesn't.<sup>7</sup> However, while it's true that Socrates could have justified the claim that he is not teaching by pointing to his lack of knowledge, this is not in fact what he does. Each time Socrates insists that he isn't teaching the slave boy, he draws attention to the way he's interacting with the slave boy: Socrates is not *teaching* the slave boy, but only *asking questions*.<sup>8</sup> The assumption is that, in order for Socrates to count as teaching the slave boy, he would have to be directly telling the slave boy the answers to the questions they're investigating.

We might think this is an unjustifiably narrow view of teaching, and I suspect that the literature tends to overlook or deemphasize the contrast Socrates draws in the GL between teaching

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<sup>5</sup> For the assumption that learning and teaching consist in knowers making non-knowers into knowers, see 90c3-d6 and 96a6-b5. For the assumption that the transformation occurs via the transfer of knowledge from the knower to the non-knower, see 93b2-5.

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that so far this model of teaching and learning encompasses both the acquisition of skills and the acquisition of propositional knowledge. What flute-players hand down to their students is, presumably, knowledge of *how* to play the flute, while what geometers hand down to their students is knowledge of geometric propositions. A case of learning and teaching might also involve the transmission of both types of knowledge.

<sup>7</sup> Fine (2014, 117).

<sup>8</sup> See 82e4-6, 84d1-2, 85d3-4.

and questioning just because most of us do think that teaching can occur through the asking of questions as well as by other, more direct methods. However, Meno himself accepts Socrates' claim that he isn't teaching the slave boy, and he seems to accept it on the grounds that Socrates is only asking the boy questions. Thus, I take it that he is implicitly committed to the view that learning/teaching consist in *direct* transmission of knowledge.

By contrast, the thought that the student who has truly learned is able to reproduce some activity or recall some information may seem relatively uncontroversial. It seems intuitive to think that the ability to memorize and then recall or reproduce a lesson or activity is a *necessary* condition for having learned something. However, Meno seems to be committed to more than this. On his model of learning and teaching, the ability to memorize and then reproduce a lesson or skill is both necessary and sufficient for learning the relevant subject. My evidence for the claim that Meno holds such a strong view of the relationship between memory and learning comes from the first half of the dialogue.

When Socrates claims in the first pages of the dialogue that he doesn't know at all what virtue is, Meno is incredulous: "But Socrates," he asks, "do you really not know what virtue is, and (ἀλλὰ) are we to announce this about you at home too?" (71b9-c2). Meno's incredulity suggests that *he* at any rate knows what virtue is, and we quickly learn the reason for his confidence: Meno thinks *Gorgias* knows what virtue is, and he remembers what Gorgias has said about it. Once Socrates ascertains that Meno knows what Gorgias has said and agrees with it, he invites Meno to tell him what virtue is (71c6-d8). Meno accepts the invitation with alacrity: "It's not difficult to tell, Socrates" (71e1). As it turns out, Meno's task is more difficult than he has anticipated. The first definition he offers is rejected by Socrates, and so are his second and third definitions. What is important here, however, is that each of the definitions Meno offers are definitions he has heard elsewhere. The second definition, like the first, stems from Gorgias. Just before Meno presents it, Socrates exhorts him to "try to tell and to recall what Gorgias, and you with him, say it [virtue] to be" (73c6-8), and this is what Meno proceeds to do. When this definition also fails, Meno appeals to a poet: "I think virtue is, as the poet says, 'the enjoyment of beautiful things and having power'. And I say that this is virtue: wanting beautiful things and being able to get them" (77b2-5).<sup>9</sup> Not once during the

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<sup>9</sup> See Bluck (1961, 391) for a discussion of poets as teachers in the ancient world.

conversation does Meno attempt to put forward his own, independent view. The knowledge he thinks he has is exhausted by his memory of what he has heard others say on the topic.

It's worth addressing here the issue of what Meno has memorized. What, precisely, is sufficient for having learned? One option is that he merely has to commit patterns of sounds or actions to memory. In that case, Meno would have learned as soon as he can parrot back to his teachers the sounds he heard them say. If Meno's view of teaching and learning is to be remotely tenable, the kind of memories he relies on must be more robust than this. At the very least, the student must have some understanding of what the teacher is saying, such that he could, for example, provide an unsophisticated paraphrase of the instructions given or claims made. Meno himself seems to be capable of giving such paraphrases: when he proposes the poet's definition of virtue, he also provides a gloss of that definition; similarly, Meno's first and second (Gorgianic) definitions do not seem to be *mere* repetition of Gorgias' words, but reproductions of his speeches which, while not verbatim, are faithful to the originals' content.

## 2. AUTHORITY: TAKING TEACHERS AT THEIR WORD

The more robust account of what Meno memorizes goes some way toward explaining why Meno might think that memorizing and reproducing the words of a teacher is sufficient for learning. However, even if we grant him this more tenable account of memory's role, a further problem remains. On Meno's model, learning consists in the transmission of *knowledge*. But to know what one's teacher means when he says that a certain theory is true does not obviously entail the student's believing, much less knowing, that the theory is true. Why would Meno think that committing the words of a teacher to memory is sufficient for knowledge?

We know from the dialogue that Meno respects and has confidence in the words of sophists and poets and craftsmen, people whom he takes to be experts in some field or other.<sup>10</sup> Meno's confidence in authority, combined with his assumption that knowledge is directly transmitted in learning/teaching, might have lead him to hold something like the following view:

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<sup>10</sup> As just one example, consider how eager Meno becomes when Socrates introduces the Theory of Recollection as a story he's heard from wise men and women, and poets too (71ab).

Transmission of Knowledge by Expert Testimony (TK): If an expert speaker *S* knows *p* and asserts *p* to a hearer *H*, and *p* is within *S*'s domain of expertise, and *H* accepts *p* on the basis of *S*'s testimony, then *H* knows *p*.<sup>11</sup>

For TK to come into play in any conversation, it only needs to be the case that an expert who knows *p* asserts *p* to a hearer. We can streamline this even further, once we take into account that an expert just is someone who has knowledge in a particular domain. So, TK will come into play whenever an expert in domain *x* asserts *p* (a member of domain *x*) to a hearer. In order for the hearer (e.g. Meno) to keep hold of this knowledge, he'll need to commit the claims the expert has made to memory. But nothing further would be required for learning, since at this point the transfer of knowledge would be complete.

Appeal to a principle like TK could explain why memory is sufficient for learning. But is Meno actually committed to such a principle? I think there is some reason to think he is. As I will show, Meno doesn't think that the two questions he has about seeking (presented to Socrates beginning 80d) apply to cases of learning. But it's not clear why he should think this, unless he is assuming TK.

Before turning to the scope of and motivation for Meno's questions, I'll first say something about the questions themselves. At 79e6, Meno has just admitted, in a lengthy speech, that he doesn't know anymore what virtue is, and Socrates has insisted (again) that he also doesn't know what virtue is. Their lack of knowledge notwithstanding, Socrates recommends that he and Meno carry on their investigation of virtue: "Still, I want to investigate with you and jointly seek what it is" (80d4). But Meno balks. In his opinion, Socrates' proposal faces insuperable difficulties:<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Meno's underlying view would then have a respectable (if contested!) contemporary counterpart, namely, the view that knowledge can be transmitted by testimony. One way to codify this view is as follows:

Transmission of Knowledge by Testimony (TKT): "If [the speaker] *S* knows that *p* and *S* asserts that *p* to [the hearer] *H*, and *H* accepts *p* on the basis of *S*'s testimony, then *H* knows that *p*."

As it stands, TKT is a general principle that includes within its scope *any* *S* and *any* *H*; the version of the principle that I have tentatively attributed to Meno is limited to *expert S*'s. For the formulation of TKT in this note, see Adler (2015).

<sup>12</sup> Socrates reformulates what Meno says as a paradox. There's a debate about how, if at all, Socrates' paraphrase captures what Meno has said. Gail Fine thinks it does (2014, ch. 3), and I've been persuaded by her argument (cf. Benson (1990, 131, n. 14) and White (1976, 56) for similar views). Moravcsik (1994), Scolnicov (1976, 52), and Thomas (1980, 123 and 128-129) argue that Socrates changes the argument when he paraphrases it. But this debate is not relevant to the main issue.

How will you seek this thing, Socrates, when you don't know at all what it is [Q1]? Which of the things that you don't know will you set before yourself when you seek [Q2]? Or even if, in the best case scenario, you were to chance upon it—how will you know that this is what you didn't know [Q3]?" (80d5-8)

This is a notoriously difficult passage. I'll just present a somewhat simplistic interpretation of it which I believe roughly captures what's going on. Meno appears to have three questions. His first question (Q1) is how one can seek for what one doesn't know at all. This worry appears to be motivated by two additional worries. Assuming one doesn't know at all what one is looking for, it's not clear how one will aim and direct one's search (Q2) or how one will know when one's found the thing sought (Q3). Q1, motivated by Q2 and Q3, questions the possibility of successful seeking when one doesn't know at all what one is looking for (where a successful search would presumably be one that culminates in discovering what one was looking for).

Does Meno think that *all* seeking for what one doesn't at all know is problematic? Or are there special cases of seeking in which questions 1-3 won't apply? In order to settle these questions, we need to pay closer attention to the context in which Meno's questions arise.

The force of Meno's Q1 seems to stem from the inclusion of the phrase "at all [*to parapan*]." Meno himself has just admitted that, despite having made many speeches about virtue, he is now "completely [*to parapan*] unable to say what it is" (80b4). And while Socrates hasn't actually said that he doesn't know *at all* what virtue is in the passage immediately preceding the introduction of Meno's worries, he did put it this way back in 71a5-7 (see below). On one plausible interpretation of the "to parapan," Meno is assuming that he and Socrates are drawing a cognitive blank about virtue, i.e. that they have neither knowledge nor even true beliefs regarding virtue.<sup>13</sup> If that's right, then his Q1 seems legitimate. If Socrates and Meno really are drawing a cognitive blank about something, they're going to have a hard time acquiring knowledge about it all by themselves.

But does drawing a cognitive blank about something *always* poses an insuperable obstacle to coming to have knowledge of that thing. For Meno, the answer is 'no.' Very early in the dialogue, Socrates disavows knowledge of whether virtue is teachable as well as of what virtue is (71a5-7), and he disavows it completely, saying several times that he doesn't know these things at all (*to parapan*)—the same words Meno picks up on in his statement of Q1.<sup>14</sup> However, between Socrates'

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<sup>13</sup> Fine (2014, 76-77).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Nehamas (1985, 6).

first disavowal of knowledge and Meno's statement of Q1, Meno and Socrates were able to have a whole discussion about virtue. Furthermore, this activity, or at least what Socrates is doing, is described by both Meno and Socrates at various points as "seeking."<sup>15</sup> Yet at no point in this discussion does Meno declare that what Socrates is doing is impossible. So, it can't be that Meno thinks seeking for what one doesn't know at all is, in and of itself, problematic.

The reason that Meno doesn't object to his and Socrates' initial investigation of virtue but does object to the joint investigation proposed at 80d is that the dialectical situation has changed. The investigation of the nature of virtue began on the assumption that Meno knew what virtue was, even if Socrates didn't, and that Meno could and would tell Socrates what virtue was. Meno and Socrates were thus engaged in what looked like (to Meno at least) a standard case of teaching/learning, with Socrates (the complete non-knower) asking questions and Meno (the knower) answering them. Much to Meno's dismay, what the discussion ends up showing is that Meno himself doesn't know what virtue is. So, when Socrates proposes a joint investigation at 80d, the two interlocutors are faced with the prospect of embarking on an investigation into something neither of them has any knowledge of; that is, they're faced with the prospect of seeking without recourse to a teacher or knower.<sup>16</sup>

What all of this shows is that Meno does not think his worries about seeking apply to cases of seeking with a teacher, i.e. cases of learning/teaching.<sup>17</sup> The reason Meno doesn't raise his questions about seeking earlier in the dialogue is that he is assuming that there is hope for the seeker of  $x$  (even for the completely ignorant one) as long as a teacher of  $x$  is available. However, it's not immediately obvious *why* Meno thinks learning avoids the difficulties of seeking by oneself. If a learner is really completely ignorant about a subject, then how will he know which questions to ask his teacher; and how, when he receives the answers, can he be sure that he has found what he was looking for? The learner, given his complete ignorance of the matter, won't be able to verify the truth of his teacher's claims. At first blush, the learner seems to have no better chance of successfully acquiring knowledge than the seeker does. It is precisely at this point that a principle like TK would come in handy. According to TK, the hearer knows  $p$  if he has heard an expert on  $p$  assert  $p$ . No extra

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<sup>15</sup> See 72a6-8, 73d1, 73d2, 74a7-8, and 74a11-b1, 75a4 for examples.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Benson (1990, 134).

<sup>17</sup> Henceforth, I will use "seeking" to refer to seeking without a teacher and "learning" to refer to seeking with the help of a teacher.

verification is required. Thus, the fact that Meno assumes that learning avoids the problems seeking without a teacher face provides some evidence that he would or did endorse TK. It's likely that Meno thinks the completely ignorant learner can acquire knowledge because Meno thinks learners can take teachers at their word.

### 3. PROBLEMS WITH MEMORY AND AUTHORITY

In the first two sections, I tried to bring out the main elements of Meno's view of teaching and learning. What I have shown is that, for Meno, the direct transmission of knowledge from a knower to a non-knower is completed when the learner comes to grasp the relevant knowledge in a particular way; that is, when he hears it (and understands it, at least to some degree), commits it to memory, and can reproduce it. I have argued that the view that memory of a teacher's words is sufficient for learning might be justified by appealing to TK, according to which, if an expert tells the learner something that lies within the expert's domain of expertise, the learner knows the thing he's been told.<sup>18</sup> Finally, I have argued that there is good reason to think Meno would or does endorse TK, given the fact that he doesn't think learning faces the difficulties that he thinks seeking does.

The question I turn to now is whether this model of learning, with its reliance on memory and authority, is adequate as an account of learning, within the context of the dialogue. I think the dialogue raises two problems for Meno's model. First, the standards for knowledge which Socrates introduces in the dialogue seem to require something more from the (genuine) learner than the rehearsal of memorized words or actions. Second, Socrates' emphasis on the fact that Meno's teachers might disagree with one another about the nature of virtue underlines the possibility that Meno's model may be vulnerable to a version of the worries he expresses about seeking.

Let me start with the first claim. The *Meno*, it is often remarked, contains the first account of knowledge as justified true belief. If that's right, then the standard for knowledge assumed by Meno's model is *prima facie* compatible with the standard for knowledge that Socrates (somewhat tentatively) proposes. This is because, according to TK, someone who accepts *p* on the evidence of an expert has a justified true belief *p*. The hearer has a true belief because he accepts what the speaker is

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<sup>18</sup> Strictly speaking, the learner knows as soon as he hears the words of the expert and grasps their meaning. Since learning is the acquisition of knowledge, we might think that the learner has learned at this point. But surely we need more than this for learning. The knowledge has to last and continue to be available to the learner from some longish duration. *That's* where memory comes in.

saying ( $p$ ) and  $p$  is true (since the speaker knows  $p$ ); furthermore, the hearer's belief is justified because the speaker is an expert and (by definition) has knowledge. That would be one way to justify one's beliefs. But this is not the kind of justification that Socrates seems to have in mind.

Towards the end of the geometry lesson, after establishing that the opinions the slave boy has been shown to have are his own, Socrates claims that if they were to continue asking the boy questions, they would see that he has knowledge as well:

And now these opinions of his have just been stirred up, as in a dream, but if someone were to ask him repeatedly about the same things and in a variety of ways, you know that he'll turn out to know about these things no less accurately than anyone. (85c9-d1)

The slave boy, if he genuinely knows  $p$ , will be able answer a wide variety of questions about it. If this is one of the things required for knowledge, however, Meno's model of learning won't always suffice. The completely ignorant learner when asked *why*  $p$  will be able to say "because he told me so"; he might even be able to draw some limited inferences from the things his teacher has said. But he won't be able to explain why or how  $p$  to the questioner. Even allowing that the learner memorizes  $p$  and the answers to a number of questions about it won't completely solve the problem. If this learner has a good memory, he'll be able to reproduce the answers he's memorized on demand. But his memorizing still won't do any good if the interlocutor goes off script and asks a question the answer to which is not obviously implied by what the student has memorized.

The first problem with Meno's model, then, is that its standards for knowledge are just too low. TK might be sufficient for knowledge if we only require genuine knowers to be able to *justify* their beliefs, but it won't suffice if they must be able to provide *explanations* of what they believe as well.

The second problem with Meno's model is that it turns out to be vulnerable to a version of the problem seeking faces. As I said above, TK applies whenever the speaker is an expert. And if TK applies, then even the completely ignorant learner escapes the problems posed by Q1-3. But how does the completely ignorant learner know when TK applies? What resources can he use to ensure that the person whose words he's committing to memory actually knows what he's talking about? The problem might not arise in the case of the transmission of certain skills, since the world provides ample confirmation of the expert's knowledge: even the learner who doesn't know at all *how* to heal will be able to ascertain for himself whether a putative doctor is actually healing people. The

problem clearly arises, however, when we turn to the transmission of knowledge which is not readily verified by appeal to perception. How does the completely ignorant learner ascertain whether this man is really a geometer? How does he determine that this sophist can (or could!) teach him virtue?

The difference between Socrates' treatment of Anytus and his treatment of Meno late in the dialogue underscores Meno's vulnerability in this regard. When Anytus claims that any of the gentlemen of Athens will be capable of teaching virtue, Socrates' response is to point out (in detail) that some of the most virtuous Athenian men have utterly failed to pass on their virtue to their sons. The success of such a response relies on Anytus' ability to recognize (by appealing to his own understanding of virtue) that the statesmen in question have in fact failed to teach their sons virtue (92e-95a). When Socrates turns to Meno, however, he employs a different strategy. Instead of arguing that the good men of Thessaly and the sophists have failed at what they claim to be able to do, he argues that none of them can claim to be teachers of virtue because they disagree about what virtue is and whether it can be taught (96b). In context, the argument is meant to call into question virtue's status as a kind of knowledge. But the strategy of appealing to the disagreement (as opposed to the failure) of putative experts emphasizes the vulnerability of Meno's position as a learner, given his commitment to TK. He needs to be able to take his teachers at their word, but if all the candidate teachers disagree with one another, and Meno is a complete novice in the matter, he will have no way of distinguishing the genuine experts from the imposters.

#### 4. LEARNING AND RECOLLECTION

Meno's model of teaching and learning as the direct transmission of knowledge from teachers to students has shortcomings, and the dialogue itself underscores the model's limitations. The last question I want to consider is whether the Theory of Recollection addresses those limitations and, if so, how.

In order to show that his proposal of a joint investigation of virtue is viable, Socrates needs to respond to Meno's questions and show that seeking for what one doesn't know at all is possible. As far as I know, there is almost unanimous agreement in the secondary literature that the discussion which stretches from 81a5-86c7 (what I'll call the "Recollection Argument" or "RA")

contains Socrates' solution to at least one of Meno's questions.<sup>19</sup> Given the context of the RA, it is entirely reasonable to expect that it contains a response to Meno's questions about the possibility of seeking, and scholarship on the passage tends to focus on how, if at all, the RA shows that seeking is possible. In this paper, however, I won't directly consider whether or how the RA responds to Meno's questions. What I am interested in here is whether the passage contains a model of learning that can withstand the challenges faced by Meno's model.

Socrates begins the RA by appealing to a story he has heard from wise men and women, and poets as well, about the immortality of the soul. He then moves on to draw out the implications of the soul's immortality for its ability to learn and discover:

Since the soul is immortal and has come to be often, and [since] it has seen [*heōrakuia*] all things here and in Hades and all matters, it is impossible for it not to have learned [*memathēken*]. As a result, it is no wonder that it is able to recollect [*anamnēsthēnai*] about virtue and about the rest, which things it also knew [*ēpistato*] earlier. For, since all nature is akin, and since the soul has learned [*memathēkuias*] everything, nothing prevents a man, once he's recollected [*anamnēsthenta*] a single thing—which is what men call "learning" [*mathēsin*]—from discovering [*aneurein*] everything else by himself, if he is manly and doesn't grow tired of seeking [*zētōn*]. So seeking [*to zētein*] and learning [*to manthanein*] are, as a whole [*holon*], recollection. (81c5-d5)

It is important to note Socrates' claim that *both* learning and seeking are recollection. It is sometimes suggested that the forms of learning used in the passage refer to some part (or the whole) of *seeking* rather than to learning.<sup>20</sup> However, I think we have good reason to resist this reading. Although Meno has used "seeking" to refer either to seeking without a teacher or to what the learner does in the context of a knower/teacher, he never uses any form of "learning" to refer to seeking without a teacher. When Meno talks about learning, it is always as the correlative of teaching. Hence, it would be extremely misleading of Socrates to suddenly begin to use "learning" to refer to (any part of) seeking without a teacher.

Since this is the case, I think we are right to take the forms of learning used in this passage to refer to apparently standard cases of learning. Thus, it is reasonable to take the passage as

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<sup>19</sup> Some scholars think the TR itself addresses Meno's questions, with the GL brought in to support the theory of recollection (cf. White (1976, 40-41)). Alternatively, some scholars (e.g. Fine (2014, 137), Irwin (1977, 139, nn. 13 and 17), and Nehamas (1985, 24, n. 41 and 15-16)) think that the GL itself contains Socrates' main response to Meno, with the TR only brought in to explain what makes such successful seeking possible.

<sup>20</sup> Fine, e.g., reads the text in this way (2014, 108). Moravcsik (1994, 113), and Nehamas (1985, 10-11) have a similar view.

containing a model, not just for seeking, but for learning as well. And, as I will argue, the model of learning (the “recollection model” or “recollection learning”) introduced in this passage also contains the resources needed to meet the challenges Meno’s model faces.

I’ll start with the recollection model’s response to the second challenge. Like Meno, Socrates gives memory a central role to play in learning. The process of learning involves the recollecting of what one has *previously* learned. It is useful to note here the close parallel between the structure of Meno’s model of learning and the structure of recollection learning. On Meno’s model, strictly speaking, the student has knowledge as soon as he hears and grasps the words of his teacher; thus, there is a sense in which the student has learned just as soon as he hears those words. But there is another sense in which the student has not yet learned; to count as having learned in the fullest sense of the word, the student must be able to remember and reproduce the words of his teacher. Thus, Meno’s model of learning also centrally involves the recollecting (remembering) of what one has *previously* “learned.” Where the two models diverge, however, is in the justification of the belief at the previous (first) stage of learning. Meno’s model of learning assumes TK: direct transmission of  $p$  is sufficient for the learner’s knowing  $p$ , provided the transmitter is an expert; hence, learning, at the first stage, is grounded in authority. Recollection learning, by contrast, grounds the original “learning” in sight, or (more generally) in first-hand experience.

In the passage quoted above, Socrates assumes a link between knowledge and learning, namely, that to have learned something just is to know it. This fits nicely with the view that one can only learn knowledge, a view I earlier attributed to both Meno and Socrates. But the passage also claims that the soul *must* have learned or acquired knowledge in its previous incarnations, and the grounds it gives for this claim is the fact that (on the assumption that the soul is immortal) it has *seen* all things. It seems likely that Socrates is using the word in a somewhat metaphorical sense, so that it captures intellectual perception (say, of geometrical truths) as well as physical perception.<sup>21</sup> But even allowing for the extended use of the word, it seems to me that the reference to sight in the passage is extremely important. Seeing something (intellectually or physically) gives one first-hand experience of that thing. On some views, having such first-hand experience is sufficient for knowledge, and Socrates seems committed to some such view in this passage. It’s the fact that the soul has *seen*

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Klein (1965, 95-96).

everything which necessitates that it must have learned or acquired knowledge over the course of its previous lifetime.

If the soul *originally* acquires knowledge through sight, and if we assume that sight is veridical, then the recollection learner won't face the problem that Meno's learner faces. Unlike Meno's learner, the recollection learner is not in the position of having to adjudicate among candidate experts in order to determine whose testimony to trust. On *this* model of learning the locus of authority is in the learner: he knows  $p$  because *he* saw  $p$ .

Recollection learning can also address the first challenge faced by the Meno's model. I have already noted that instead of telling the slave boy the answers to a series of questions, as we would expect in a case of Meno-style transmission learning, Socrates questions him. One of the purposes the emphasis on questioning serves is to prove to Meno that Socrates is not teaching the slave (in the transmission sense of teaching) and that therefore the slave must be recollecting his answers to Socrates' questions. Socrates also claims if he and Meno were to continue questioning the slave boy in the same fashion, they would find that the slave boy actually knows  $p$  (here, geometrical claims). One way of understanding how this might work is to think of the slave boy as demonstrating his knowledge by being able to articulate the content of his memories (in response to questions). If that's right, then once again we find a *prima facie* similarity between Meno's model of learning and recollection learning. In both cases, proof of knowledge lies in being able to remember and reproduce what one has heard or (in the case of recollection learning) what one has seen. But of course the two types of learning are not exactly the same. In particular, the object of the relevant memories and the type of reproduction required is quite different in the two cases. In the case of Meno-style learning, the learner remembers the words the teacher has said and can say them again. In the case of recollection learning, the learner remembers things he has seen (intellectually or physically) and can articulate what he's seen.

But now think about the difference between articulating memories of first-hand vs. second-hand experience. The memories of things one has experienced for oneself are plausibly much richer than one's memories of what one has heard another say. If my teacher tells me, a complete novice,  $p$  and I commit  $p$  to memory, I'll be able to say  $p$  again and I'll be able to tell someone the manner in which  $p$  was delivered (I could say, as Meno himself often says, that the claim was well put or nicely said or elegantly delivered). But I won't be able to say much beyond this. On the other hand, if I've

seen  $p$  for myself (i.e. the state of affairs which  $p$  represents), I'll be able to say a great deal more than this. I'll be able to remember features of  $p$  and how  $p$  stood in relation to other states of affairs and how  $p$  *might* stand in relation to certain states of affairs, given the features of  $p$  that I saw; I'll also be able to articulate features of  $p$  that are non-inferentially connected to one another. Access to this kind of modal richness may be what enables the recollection learner to give the kind of account required of the knower, and this modal richness, I contend, is precisely what the transmission learner lacks. This last proposal is admittedly speculative and needs to be worked out in greater detail. But it seems to me that recollection learning does have the resources to address the first objection Meno's model faces.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The theory of recollection Socrates presents in the *Meno* introduces a model of learning that avoids the problems faced by Meno's model. The fact that the memories involved in recollection learning are based on first-hand experience means that the learner doesn't need to first suss out whether putative experts are genuine before committing their words to memory and claiming knowledge; it also means that the learner's memories will themselves contain the resources required for an adequate account of their belief that  $p$ . In section three, I noted that there is reason to think that Meno's model is not sufficient for learning. But the RA's substitute model of learning pushes us even further than this. What the possibility of recollection learning shows is that transmission of knowledge from knower to non-knower is not even necessary for learning. If the student can learn by recalling things he saw for himself, all the knowledge acquired or arrived at will come from within; he won't need to get it from outside.

It is worth emphasizing that the RA doesn't challenge all of the elements of Meno's model. The RA challenges the role that Meno gives to memory in the learning process, and it challenges the view that learning occurs via direct transmission of knowledge from a knower to a non-knower. However, it does not challenge the assumption that one only learns knowledge, nor does it obviously challenge the assumption that learners must have access to teachers or knowers. Throughout the GL, Socrates repeatedly asks the slave boy extremely pointed questions, and, as I noted above, he never appeals to his lack of knowledge to show that he isn't teaching the boy. This leaves open the possibility that Socrates does have some (perhaps limited) geometrical knowledge

which informs the questions he asks. Socrates' role in the GL may show that the presence of a knower is *necessary* for recollection learning when the student is completely ignorant, though the knower's role will not be that of a transmitter. Instead, one could think of Socrates' questioning as means of directing the slave boy's attention. His questions, and presumably his gestures as well, direct the slave boy's physical attention (his eyes!) to the appropriate areas of the diagrams Socrates has drawn. But they also draw the slave boy's intellectual attention to the relevant features of the memories he has, helping to make salient what the slave boy might have passed over if left to his own devices. If that's right, then the GL does *not* show that the slave boy is presently capable of learning by recollection without the help of a teacher. The knowledge the slave boy ultimately recovers comes from within, but he needs a knower, in this case, Socrates, to help him access it. Of course, the fact that the slave boy requires help now doesn't mean that he will always require it. Perhaps, over time, the learner could acquire the ability to direct his own attention, to see what's important without the help of a knower. In this way, the truly successful student might come to acquire not only knowledge but the ability to recover knowledge from himself on his own.

Meno's model of teaching and learning, the challenges it faces, and the way recollection learning overcomes those challenges is instructive. Though most of us will find ourselves disinclined to limit learning to *direct* transmission, I suspect that many of us would be ready to accept some version of Meno's model; i.e., that we'd allow that knowledge can be (and often is) transferred from teachers to students and that memorization of an authority's words can (at least some of the time) suffice for learning. Insofar as we accept these features of Meno's model, we must face its challenges. We too must distinguish genuine experts from imposters and confront the limitations of memorization. Recollection learning is one alternative to Meno's model of teaching and learning, but here too I suspect most of us will balk. Recollection learning, for all its epistemological advantages, comes at a heavy metaphysical price: we trade the problems of disagreement and of giving adequate explanations of one's knowledge for commitments to souls and their immortality. I don't ask the reader to believe in the just-so stories of Socrates' poets, priests, and priestesses, but I do think it's worth working carefully through his account of recollection and its implications for the acquisition of knowledge. To do this may be to make some real headway, not only in Platonic scholarship, but in other philosophical arenas as well. We may find that we gain insights into the richness of

experiential memory, its role in justification and explanation, and its connection to learning. But I leave that for another time.

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