



Research Paper

Plato's Response to the Epistemic Crisis in the Meno

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Abstract

The present essay studies an epistemic crisis and Plato's encountering with it in the Meno. At this dialogue Plato deals with a problem which generally named as the paradox of Meno. The paradox claims that learning and knowledge is impossible because either completely we know a something or we don't know. Plato, in response, maintains theory of recollection and in practice verifies the existent sciences as a real case of the learning. Therefore the paradox is untenable and the learning as the recollection is possible. Plato's answer to the epistemic crisis represents the establishing of his positive and primary theory of epistemology that is based on the metaphysical foundations and religious views (soul and reincarnation in Pythagoreanism). Then the philosophical duty of Plato is to explain the possibility of the learning or knowledge by the theory of recollection and its prerequisites. Actually the paradox of Meno and its solution not only presents Plato's criticism of the Socratic method of elenchus as a nonsufficient in attaining knowledge, but also reflects Plato's critic of some presocratic thinkers who either explicitly maintain the cognitive relativism or their thoughts, implicitly undermine the validity of the sciences.



Extended abstract

1. Introduction and Method

The present essay focuses on an epistemic problem in the *Meno* and Plato's response to it. Plato in the end of his first period of thought writes the *Meno* which represents a theoretical transition. The aporetic method of Socrates i.e. elenchus as presented in Plato's early dialogues with negative conclusions is a serious problem. This method in practice is an example of the epistemic crisis which undermining possibility or value of the sciences and crafts. In addition, heiring some other kinds of the epistemic crisis from his predecessors, Plato tries to solve the problem in the *Meno*.

This essay at first goes on by method of reporting and analyzing of the main examples of the epistemic crisis which Plato encounters with them: 1- Since Thales, cosmological theories are vary or conflict with each other; 2- Heraclitus' theory of Flux and refutation of the universal and necessary propositions; 3- Xenophanes' thought on the impossibility of attaining complete truth by a one man; 4- Parmenides' theory on *being* and considering sense perceptions as subjective things, challenges credit of the physical sciences; 5- relativistic ideas in Protagoras (*homo mensura*) and Gorgias (the knowledge of things are not communicable); 6- Democritus' theory of atoms and vacuum as real things in contrast to the sense impressions; 7- Socratic elenchus as a method of investigation with negative conclusions and 8- Sense experience as knowledge in Cyrenaic school (Aristippus) and rejection of the universal concepts in Cynicism (Antisthenes).

2. Results

The logico-philosophical expression of the mentioned epistemic crisis appears in the *Meno*'s paradox. The paradox is a dilemma holding that learning or knowledge is impossible because completely we know a thing or do not know. At the both sides no investigation is possible: If we completely know, any research is needless and if we completely don't know, then we have no any idea of the thing that is to be investigated.

Therefore as an epistemological problem we encounter an impasse.

In response, Plato holds that our souls spent some previous lifes and learned some things which because of incarnation neglected them. Plato thinks that the occuring of some learnings and investigations, for example in geometry and physics, depicts a possibility of the science and knowledge with the universal and necessary judgements. Thus Plato maintains the learning and knowledge is recollection (*anamnesis*). This theory is based on metaphysical foundations and religious views as eternal Forms (especialy a metaphysical in the *Phaedo*), immortal souls and their reincarnation (under the influence of Phythagoreanism and Orphisicm). In practice Plato maintains the being of object and subject of knowledge. He thinks that knowing as saying or desiring always have an object and knowledge is implying the intention of something that *is*. *Nothing*, can not be intended as an object.

The recollection is necessarily a process based on the previous neglecting of some knowledge. At the same time Plato in the end of the *Meno* holds that the knowledge is different from the right opinion on the ground that the knowledge is infallible but the opinion is sometimes right and sometimes false. It is necessary to say that the distinction between the knowledge and right opinion is also held in the *Phaedo*. In the *Meno* we still not see *two world theory* as justified in the *Phaedo* i.e. the being of Forms on the sensible universe. Because of this fact, the distinction between the knowledge and right opinion in the *Meno* is at first a distinction by means of method and our right opinions which remained from previous life, can be changed into the knowledge. This process of recollection in the end of the *Meno* is the programme of conversion of the right opinion to the knowledge by rational reasoning or reasoning out the cause (*aitias logismos*).

The learning and knowledg as the recollecton implies the process of association of the Forms or Ideas by way of the sensible things which imitates those Forms. On the other hand, the process of recollection is an activity of the human soul and logically presupposes the



previous existence of right opinions which attained in the previous life. Because these right opinions of the Forms are as some latent remains slept in our minds. Therefore the process of recollection as the learning in this world, is a mediate knowledge and in a regression implies a kind of immediate knowledge that our souls attained in a direct contact with the Forms.

3. Conclusion

In Plato's thought the sciences and crafts with general propositions and judgements are indispensable and his philosophical duty is to explain the possibility of this knowledge. Therefore, the sciences and crafts need the epistemological basis without which we fall into the paradox of Meno. Thus Plato's philosophy in

the second period not only is rooted in an answer to the epistemic crisis but also based on the ontology. The Platonic philosophy in his second period has three principal sides: the knowledge as a rational cognition; the eternal Forms as the object and the human souls as the subject of the knowledge. All of these in the *Meno* and *Phaedo* depicts Plato's metaphysical foundations or philosophizing of the religious views as the basis of his epistemology.

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