

BELIEF AND THE PROBLEM OF THE CRITERION IN THE *MENO*

Joseph S. Kallo

Can we choose our beliefs by a sheer act of will? Do we have a moral obligation to choose those beliefs which will lead us to be "better" people? These are two questions which I think Plato concerns himself with in the *Meno*. I will argue in this essay that answers to these two questions figure centrally into the dialogue in which Socrates and Meno engage. At perhaps the pivotal point in the essay, Meno accuses Socrates of being like the stinging fish which paralyses its victims after Socrates destroys yet another of Meno's attempts to account for virtue. Meno goes beyond expressing his exasperation with Socrates' method; he puts to Socrates the problem of the criterion which calls into question our ability to know. It seems knowledge demands a criterion and establishing a criterion requires examples of knowledge. To this, the most dumbfounding of skeptical arguments, Socrates responds with the doctrine of recollection. The textual clues indicate Socrates is not seriously committed to the story, and in his demonstration with the slave boy, he only thinly veils the way he guides the subject to the correct response. Instead, Socrates seems to believe that we have a responsibility to continue inquiry into the nature of virtue even in the face of the problem of the criterion, and that believing in the doctrine of recollection will, in some sense, make us better people. My task in this paper will be to show that Plato does indeed think we have the ability to choose beliefs in a certain way, and that such choosing is an integral portion of a virtuous life.

The portion of the *Meno* which is important for my purpose begins at 79d. Before this point, Socrates has met Meno who engages him with the question "Can virtue be taught?" Up to this point, the dialogue is made up of a typical Socratic dialectical exchange between Socrates and Meno. Socrates is seeking the singular virtue while Meno attempts to describe particular virtues. At 79d Socrates, after having destroyed Meno's most recent argument, asks once again for a definition of virtue. At this point, Meno is left literally with nothing to say. Instead of producing yet another definition for Socrates, he attacks Socrates for having reduced him to this state. He accuses Socrates of being like the stingray which leaves its victim numb.

Socrates' response is jocular. He suggests that Meno is making such a

comparison between Socrates and the fish so that Socrates will be forced to also compare him with something—presumably more fairly. Socrates also suggests that the simile is only apt if the stinging fish is also numbed when it stings; Socrates does not claim to discount others' arguments because he is himself in possession of better arguments. Instead, the numbing uncertainty which Meno is infected with began, says Socrates, within Socrates himself. Nonetheless, Socrates is ready to begin again the attempt to define the singular virtue.

Meno is not nearly as eager, and instead he expresses what must be counted as the linguistic equivalent of the stingray's touch. If we are not yet concerned about the plight of Socrates' inquiry, Meno's expression of his worry should trigger such concern. He says at 80d:

But how will you look for something when you don't in the least know what it is? How on earth are you going to set up something you don't know as the object of your search? To put it another way, even if you come right up against it, how will you know that what you have found is the thing you didn't know?¹

Meno, apparently unwittingly, espouses what has traditionally been called the problem of the criterion. The argument is perhaps the most potent of skeptical arguments, and it deserves a closer look.

The problem of criterion is, essentially, a problem of circularity.² Meno worries that it is impossible for him to seek virtue without first knowing what it is, since without such knowledge he could happen upon it without recognizing it. Socrates refines Meno's suggestion into the "trick argument" that a person cannot know as they wouldn't seek what they already knew while they wouldn't know what to look for in what they didn't know. Socrates has a similar concern in the *Theatetus* in his discussion of what exactly constitutes knowledge.³ There, he comes upon the trouble that if knowledge is true belief with an account, it seems we need the true belief in order to produce an account while belief is true only in virtue of having an account.

Socrates, though, does not allow Meno to end the inquiry into virtue with the skeptical argument. Socrates counters Meno's suggestion with a story of something "true . . . and fine" which he has learned from "priests and priestesses of the sort who make it their business to be able to account for the functions which they perform" (82a). The problem of the criterion specifically raises questions about our ability to *acquire* knowledge; its circularity suggests that we cannot begin the process of gaining knowledge.

To this, Socrates responds with the doctrine of recollection in which he suggests that we are indeed able to have knowledge as the soul is an immortal type of thing; we, in a sense, "come equipped" with knowledge from our soul's previous incarnations. Learning, then, is not a process of discovering new knowledge but is, instead, a process of recalling that which our soul has previously learned.

Not content to simply suggest the doctrine of recollection, Socrates engages Meno and one of his household slaves in a process intended to concretely demonstrate the veracity of the doctrine. The process begins with the uneducated slave being asked questions about the geometrical relation of the length of the sides of a square to its area. The slave boy is able to answer several basic questions, but upon unsuccessfully attempting to answer a more difficult one admits "it's no use Socrates, I just don't know" (84a). He has reached, Socrates implies, the same point Meno had in the pursuit of defining virtue, but the slave boy is clearly in a better position than when he began as he is at least aware that he is ignorant rather than foolishly content with his erroneous belief. "The numbing process," says Socrates, "was good for him" (84c).

In the succeeding portion of the demonstration, Socrates claims to show that the slave boy can reach a state of knowledge concerning the geometry of the square simply through a process of recollection, albeit with some "help" from Socrates. In fact, this "help" is just short of explicit instruction, an observation which will be discussed shortly. Interesting, though, is the claim that the numbing was good for the slave boy and, presumably, Meno himself. Not only is the paralyzing quality of Socrates' contribution to the discussion "good," but Socrates suggests explicitly that belief in the doctrine of recollection itself will make us "better, braver, and more active men" (86c).

Socrates seems so convinced that believing in the doctrine of recollection will make us "better" in some sense, that he restates the point twice. Immediately after his initial suggestion that he has learned of such a doctrine from religious sources he says:

We ought not then to be led astray by the contentious argument you quoted. It would make us lazy, and is music to the ears of weaklings. The other doctrine produces energetic seekers after knowledge, and being convinced of its truth, I am ready, with your help, to inquire into the nature of virtue (81e).

In this first statement we find two distinct claims. First, Plato clearly suggests

that allowing ourselves to be persuaded by the problem of the criterion is to become lazy, and that greeting such an argument cheerfully (as Meno seems to have just done) is a sign of weakness. Such weakness, it would appear, would be *moral* as opposed to *intellectual*, as it is paired with the moral fault of laziness. Second, Plato is suggesting that believing in the doctrine of recollection will make us better moral beings. This claim is made explicit in his reiteration of the point:

I shouldn't like to take my oath on the whole story, but one thing I am ready to fight for as long as I can, in word and act that is, that we shall be better, braver, and more active men if we believe it right to look for what we don't know than if we believe there is no point in looking because what we don't know we can never discover (86e).

Even more clearly than in the first statement, Socrates is claiming that belief in the doctrine of recollection will make us better people, as we will overcome the debilitating doubt caused by the problem of the criterion.

The problem, though, is that Socrates himself does not seem to think that the story is true, and the most obvious clue that this is the case occurs in the passage quoted above in the midst of Socrates' description of the great benefits offered by a belief in the doctrine of recollection. We are likely to make the mistaken judgment about the statement that Socrates is ready to fight "in word and act" for the doctrine of recollection itself, but in fact this is the opposite of what is written. Socrates is ready to defend his claim that believing the doctrine of recollection will improve us; the doctrine itself he is not ready to commit himself to.

This may not be surprising as the language of Socrates' presentation of the doctrine is shot through with hints that he is only relating a tale, not offering an argument in response to the problem of the criterion. The first words he speaks about the doctrine are in the form of a sentence fragment. Usually critical of the appeal to religion to solve philosophical problems, Socrates' statement that "I have heard from men and women who understand the truths of religion" is both uncharacteristic and enigmatic. In the midst of a dialogue in which Socrates has repeatedly reduced Meno to speechlessness in his pursuit for a definition of virtue, Socrates is suddenly ready to recount the speeches of the religious, certainly the most biased voices on the subject, in order to answer Meno's paradox. Further, Meno has to prompt him to even finish the sentence; he seems unwilling to even relate the story itself.

In addition to this problem with the doctrine of recollection itself, there is the additional trouble with Socrates' demonstration in that he does not simply ask questions, but leads the slave carefully through the steps to a solution. As is often the case with a geometric proof, the nature of solving the problem lies not in acquiring certain bits of knowledge—which Socrates does indeed not provide—but in making a certain mental leap. The slave boy is not required to make this leap as Socrates guides him through the steps. Not having "seen" the form of the proof, it does not seem he has really solved the problem at all. The trick in finding the length of a figure twice as large as a certain square is to use the diagonal of the first square as the length of the second. The second square will then be made up of four portions which are each half of the original square thereby making the second figure twice as large as the initial one.

Not only is the slave boy not able to see the form of this proof, but Plato seems to make this failure as obvious as possible. If ABCD is our first square⁴, AFGJ is a square four times as large (79d). Speaking of lines BD, DH, HE, and EB Socrates says, "Now does this line going from corner to corner cut each of these squares in half?" and further, "And these four equal lines enclose this area," both of which the boy agrees to. When Socrates asks what the area of the resulting figure is, though, the slave boy admits, "I don't understand." Even if the boy guessed the answer at this point it is not clear how recollection has aided him, but in fact he cannot solve the problem. Socrates is able to lead the boy to the answer only after he reduces the contribution to calculation of simple arithmetic: "Socrates: And how many halves are there in this figure? (BEHD) Boy: Four. Socrates: And how many in this one? (ABCD) Boy: Two. Socrates: And what is the relation of four to two? Boy: Double. Socrates: How big is the figure then? Boy: Eight feet." The correct answer is indeed eight feet, but it is obvious that the boy did not reach the answer by recalling anything but instead by a rudimentary ability to perform basic mathematical functions—and quite a bit of help from Socrates.

What I find so interesting about these troubles with the doctrine of recollection is the subtle and yet definite way in which Plato draws them to the attention of the careful reader. The most obvious clue is Socrates' unwillingness to vouch for the theory almost immediately after it leaves his mouth. Once our attention is caught, we are able to reexamine the text for more evidence that Socrates was less than convinced of the truth of the doctrine of recollection. If, as I think is evident from my reading, Socrates did not believe or did not believe fully in the doctrine, the central question

becomes, "Why does Socrates propose the doctrine of recollection?" *Meno* has raised the skeptical problem of the criterion as a result of the numbing quality of Socrates' inquiry. This problem threatens to halt Socrates' search for a definition, and he responds by proposing a theory which (allegedly) allows knowledge even in the face of the problem of the criterion. He suggests this theory will make us "better" in some sense, but simultaneously includes obvious problems which seem designed to draw our attention to the fact that he wouldn't like to vouch for the whole thing. We are left wondering, "If he didn't believe it, why did Socrates propose the doctrine of recollection?"

Whatever we might say of the *Meno*, we find at 80 that we can be sure skepticism is certainly a very live option for him. *Meno* does not merely espouse a conceptual doubt in the possibility of knowledge; *Meno's* proposal of the problem of the criterion stems, it seems, as much from the visceral exasperation he experiences as it does from any rational conclusion that knowledge is unattainable. Socrates' proposal of the doctrine of recollection is a reminder that *Meno* does not, in the language of William James, have only one live option before him.

It is clear at the beginning of the dialogue that *Meno* does indeed believe that we can have knowledge of the specific sort that he is seeking. Socrates' examination, as *Meno* relates, numbs him; he is distraught enough that he forgets that searching for knowledge was something he had engaged in only a short time before. Once Socrates tells his myth, *Meno* is faced with a genuine option. At 81e, *Meno* has before him two live possible beliefs: He has the immediate and visceral possibility of skepticism, as well as the belief in knowledge gained through recollection. *Meno* is forced to choose between these options and the outcome of the choice is momentous. *Meno's* decision to reject the possibility of knowledge would indeed be grave and would have left *Meno* one of Socrates' only intellectual "casualties."

Notice that the doctrine of recollection does not serve the function of a real possibility for belief as much as it represents *Meno's* more ingrained tendency to believe that knowledge is indeed a possibility; the decision he faces is not so much one between skepticism and Socrates' story as it is between the skepticism and the possibility of knowledge. This is not to say that the doctrine is not crucially important to *Meno's* decision to continue his inquiry. It is quite apparent in the text that Socrates' story transforms *Meno* from "weakness" to a "brave" seeker.

Treating the doctrine of recollection as a sort of "epistemic pep talk" goes quite a long way in explaining the mystery surrounding Plato's repeated textual clues that he wanted the reader to recognize Socrates did not fully

embrace the story. Socrates tells the story to *Meno* without actually believing it himself because for Socrates the option between skepticism and its opposite is not ever a genuine one. Socrates never shows signs that skepticism is ever a live option for him. He recognizes the form of the problem of the criterion and even rephrases it for *Meno*, but when asked if he thinks it is a good argument he responds with a simple, "No." If the answer to the question, "Why did Socrates suggest the doctrine of recollection if he did not really believe it?" is the one I have suggested, that Socrates was seeking to offer *Meno* a genuine option between skepticism and its opposite, we should be left wondering why Socrates himself was able to escape skepticism as a live possibility. *Meno* and Socrates are involved in the same cultural and social location. Why, then, is Socrates able to escape the skeptical doubt which grips *Meno*?

This question draws forth one of the most important elements of the dialogue. It is clear from the context that Socrates, were he faced with a genuine option between the path of skepticism and its opposite, would choose to continue a pursuit of his definition of virtue because to do so is to be a "better" and "braver" man as Socrates tells us explicitly. Even if skepticism were a live option for Socrates when *Meno* retaliates with the problem of the criterion, Socrates would still decide in favor of continuing his pursuit as the practical ramifications of such continuance hold out greater goods than does the position of the skeptic. The potential for becoming "better" men sways the choice much the same as the potential for eternal reward suggested in Pascal's Wager sways the decision for one whom Christian doctrines are sources of live potential beliefs. Socrates begins the dialogue with the assertion that we should be looking for a singular virtue which causes the various virtues; Socrates believes there to be a singular virtue and the search for such virtue is a search which will make us better people. To one who begins the inquiry in such a way, the possibility of radical skepticism is both foreign and dead.

As antithetical to traditional accounts of Platonic doctrine as the suggestion may be, it seems that Socrates is indeed showing that we have a distinctly moral duty to choose our beliefs such that we are made better by them. *Meno* is faced with two possible beliefs, one of which promises to lead to despair and laziness, and another which holds out the potential of continuing inquiry. Socrates not only advises *Meno* to choose the path of knowledge, he persuades him with a story which bolsters *Meno's* flagging belief in the possibility of knowledge. Socrates does not do this as it is the rational thing to do; indeed, if the question is one of truth, Socrates would

probably admit that he did not even believe the story was true. Socrates successfully influences Meno to reject the skeptical argument because this was a *better* choice.

NOTES

¹All quotations are from Plato, *Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961) 13.

²There are at least two important contemporary works on this subject. Roderick Chisolm's small book *The Problem of the Criterion* (Milwaukee: Marquette UP, 1973) and the response Andrew Cling offers in his essay "Posing the Problem of the Criterion," *Philosophical Studies* 75: 261-292, 1994. Cling is especially aware of the historical lineage of the problem which is also present in Rene Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*. There the problem is not raised by Descartes, but is suggested by the apparent circularity extant in his proof for the existence of God offered in the fifth meditation. Commentators pointed out that Descartes uses his criterion to establish a certain bit of knowledge (the existence of God), but it is God which is responsible for the reliability of his criterion (which he calls true and immutable natures).

³At 209e Socrates says:

When we have a correct notion of the way in which certain things differ from other things, it tells us to add a correct notion of the way in which they differ from other things. On this showing, the most vicious of circles would be nothing to this injunction. It might be better deserve to be called the sort of direction a blind man might give. To tell us to get hold of something we already have, in order to get to know something we are already thinking of, suggests a state of the most absolute darkness.

Socrates is pointing to the fact that the account which must accompany true belief, is itself dependent upon knowledge. It is interesting to note that contemporary epistemologists are overwhelmingly concerned with answering the problems suggested by Gettier, while they ignore the problem Plato suggests here—even though taking Plato seriously leaves the Gettier problem essentially moot.

⁴For a diagram, see http://www.cut-the-knot.org/proofs/half_sq.shtml.