MENO’S PARADOX OF INQUIRY, PLATO’S RECOLLECTIONISM, & THE NATIVISM–EMPIRICISM DEBAT

How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?

– Meno (from Plato, Meno §80d)

The soul is immortal, has been born often and has seen all things and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both about virtue and other things. As the whole of nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, nothing prevents a man, after recalling one thing only—a process men call learning—discovering everything else for himself... for searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection.

– Socrates, (from Plato, Meno §80e)

To know that you do not know is the best. To think you know when you do not is a disease. Recognizing this disease as a disease is to be free of it.

– Lao Tzu

Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas; how comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from experience. In that all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself. Our observation employed either, about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the ideas we have, or can naturally have, do spring.

– Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690)

Meno’s Paradox of Inquiry

In order to make his case for recollectionism and nativism, Plato asks us to consider a serious epistemological problem, one regarding our pursuit of knowledge. That problem is known as Meno’s paradox of inquiry (hereafter, simply Meno’s Paradox). Why does he do this? To solve it. For he hopes to show us that our commonsense conception of knowledge lands us in trouble and that we need an alternative view. So, in an important sense, the problem provides a heuristic, namely, a way of correcting our thinking on an epistemological issue.

What then is Meno’s Paradox? While the argument is stated below, the point is to demonstrate this: Given (a) Socrates’ claim that he’s ignorant about the nature of (human) virtue, and (b) that the appropriate scientific methodology must follow what we’ve called the logical priority of knowledge what thesis—both of which seem entirely plausible—it looks like what remains is a full blown philosophical skepticism, namely, the view that

Philosophical skepticism. For some set of propositions, it’s not possible to satisfy the conditions for knowledge.
As you can see, philosophical skeptics deny the possibility of knowledge; they deny we know things.¹ And since Meno is attempting to defend this view, he is attempting to show us we lack knowledge. How does he make his case? Let us look at the argument he seems to offer:

**MP1.** Either (i) S knows what $x$ is or (ii) it’s not the case S knows what $x$ is. [premise]
**MP2.** If S knows what $x$ is, then S cannot inquire into what $x$ is. [premise]
**MP3.** If it’s not the case S knows what $x$ is, then S cannot inquire into what $x$ is. [premise]

Thus,

**MP4.** In either case, S cannot inquire into what $x$ is. [from MP1–MP3]

**MP5.** If (MP4) is true, then epistemê—and hence, science—is impossible. [premise]

Therefore,

**MP6.** Science is impossible. [from MP4 & MP5]

**Plato’s recollectionism, and the nativism–empiricism debate over mental contents**

It should be clear that the conclusion of Meno’s Paradox, if true, implies that a form of philosophical skepticism is true. Socrates finds this unacceptable; he replies to Meno’s Paradox by suggesting the doctrine of recollection, namely, the view that

*Recollectionism.* Learning is not the acquisition of new information, but rather the recalling of innate mental content that a person has at the time of birth, yet forgot due to “the shock of birth.”

If recollectionism is true, then Meno’s Paradox is solved and science is preserved. For it can be used to demonstrate that MP3 is false since MP3 is true only if learning is the acquisition of new (never had before) information. But what exactly is a recollectionist claiming? And what other issues are relevant here?

*On the nativism–empiricism debate: an initial discussion*

We are going to spend a lot of time in this course discussing issues concerned with human psychology, that is, issues concerning the nature of the human mind. Besides asking what the human mind is (is it an immaterial soul? Is it merely the brain or some process the brain does?), we will also focus on various debates over our mental contents, i.e., over the cognitive or informational contents of our minds (such as concepts, namely, categorical ideas regarding the nature of various kinds of things). (We will distinguish and say more about kinds of mental contents shortly.) In addition to attempting to answer the relevant logos question (what is mental content?), we will ask two other questions: what is the source of a human’s mental contents? and how does a human access their mental contents? Call these two questions the *source question* and the *access question*, respectively.²

Recollectionism is an answer to the access question; it tells us that we access innate mental contents (that is, mental contents with which we are born). So, recollectionism entails what we will call *nativism*. If so, then in answering the access question, the recollectionist has also answered the source question; for you cannot recall information that is not already present. But this means that we need understand the debate

¹ We’ll discuss the varieties of philosophical skepticism and the details and common defenses of this position when we get to Descartes.

² Note well. As we will see, though closely related, these questions spark two different debates: the *nativism–empiricism debate, and the mentalism–empiricism debate.*
between nativists and empiricists. For that debate concerns the source of one’s mental contents, that is, from where those mental contents come (and is not (directly) concerned with how one accesses of one’s mental contents). So what are these two theories? Let us initially define them as follows:

- **Nativism**: the view that all human beings are born with mental content. Famous nativists include Plato, René Descartes, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, and Noam Chomsky.

- **Empiricism**: the view that no human has any mental content whatsoever at the point of birth, but any acquisition of mental content ultimately depends on having sensory experiences of the relevant type. Famous empiricists include Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, John Locke, David Hume, Adam Smith, and Bertrand Russell.

Again, notice that these theories do not say anything about how we access our mental contents; they only provide an explanation regarding the source of those mental contents.

**Varieties of nativism: some important differences**

Distinction 1: strong versus weak versions of nativism

- Strong nativism: the view that all of the mental content we will ever have is present at birth, e.g., Plato, Leibniz.
- Weak nativism: the view that at least some mental content we will have is present at birth, e.g., Descartes, Chomsky.

Distinction 2: propositional versus concept versions of nativism

- Propositional nativism: the view that we are born with mental contents that include *propositional information*. While there is debate between propositional nativists over the exact mental content with humans are born, some oft-cited examples are such propositions as *that all events have a cause*, *that all bodies are extended*, *that lines are perfectly flat*, *that a divine being exists*, *that murder is morally wrong*, etc.
- Concept nativism: the view that we are born with mental contents that include *concepts*. While there is also debate between concept nativists over the exact mental content with humans are born, some oft-cited examples are such concepts as *causation*, *substance*, *numerical identity*, *infinity*, *arithmetical operations*, *a divine being*, *moral value properties*, etc.

**Arguing for nativism**

*On competing explanations and the use of Ockham’s Razor*  

As we will see, the nativism–empiricism debate centers on how we are to explain a certain datum, namely, that

HMC. Humans have mental contents that includes abstract ideas

(where an abstract idea is to be understood as a concept, namely, an idea of a kind or type of thing).³ Nativists believe that their theory can explain HMC and empiricist theories cannot. Empiricists demur. As we will see later in the course, empiricists either believe that the view does explain HMC or they deny that HMC is true. How are we to decide who is correct? Via arguments. Empiricists often argue for their view by an appeal to Ockham’s Razor. What does it say? It is thesis that

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³ Abstract ideas are contrasted with *concrete ideas*, namely, idea of a particular, concrete entities, e.g., Jones’ idea of Socrates.
Ockham’s Razor. All other things being equal, when selecting between two (or more) competing explanations $E_1$ and $E_2$, $E_1$ is preferable to $E_2$ if $E_1$ is simpler than $E_2$.

Whether Ockham’s Razor gives us evidence for empiricism is a question we will continue to discuss. For now, we need to be mindful of the fact that while Ockham’s Razor plays an important role in theory selection, it is often misused and misunderstood. As such we need to make sure we understand what it says and why it is supposed to be true.

There are a number of important things to note about Ockham’s Razor. First, to say an explanation $E_1$ is preferable to a competing explanation $E_2$ means that $E_1$ is more likely to be true. Ockham argued that the principle is true because “nature always moves toward simplicity.” This brings us to the second point: it should be clear that the phrase in Ockham’s Razor ‘...is simpler than...’ is extremely important. (Note: this talk of simplicity is to a large degree responsible for the confusion and misuse of the principle.) What does ‘...is simpler than...’ mean? With respect to Ockham’s Razor, ‘Simpler does not mean easier to understand, or easier to accept, or more scientific, etc. No, Ockham’s Razor is a thesis about rationality of ontological parsimony. That is, to say that ‘$E_1$ is simpler than $E_2$’ just means that $E_1$ is more parsimonious than $E_2$ (where ‘$E_1$’s being more parsimonious than $E_2$’ means that $E_1$ explains all the same data as $E_2$, but does so with less theoretical entities than $E_2$). As such, Ockham’s Razor guides us to select theories that avoid “ontological bloat,” i.e., avoid postulating more theoretical entities than is necessary to explain some data.

Finally, although we should avoid “ontological bloat” wherever we can, that is not the only important thing that we must learn from Ockham’s Razor. No, there is another—possibly more—important phrase in Ockham’s Razor of which we need to be mindful: namely, the phrase all other things being equal. Ockham’s Razor tells us that the simpler of two (or more) competing explanations is to be preferred if those explanations have equal explanatory power, that is, if the proffered theories explain the data equally as well. Often times either all other things are not explanatorily equal or it’s not clear they are. In cases of the former type, one proposed theory does not have as much “explanatory power” as it competitors (even if some think otherwise). In cases of the latter type, whether a proposed theory is equally as good as explaining a set of data as its competitors is the subject of much debate. And it is the work of those in the relevant discipline to argue for and against the ability of a theory to explain all of the relevant data. (Note: most of the work that goes on “behind the scenes” in philosophical/scientific disciplines is of this type: debating over the explanatory power of various theories.) Related to the nativism–empiricism debate, there’s no question that empiricism is more ontologically parsimonious than nativism. It purports to explain HMC without the need for innate mental content. Whether or not empiricism can explain HMC is the topic of debate between nativists and empiricists, however. As we will see with the following arguments, nativists argue that empiricism cannot explain HMC. Hence, they argue that all other things are not equal and thus Ockham’s Razor does not provide grounds for adopting empiricism.

Poverty of the Stimulus Reasoning

The primary defense for nativism is known as poverty of the stimulus reasoning. According to that reasoning, nativism is true given that (i) that HMC is true, and (ii) it is impossible that humans acquire abstract ideas either via sensory experience or some operation of the mind on experience. In this way, they are claiming that experience of any variety is too impoverished to generate the mental contents we actually have. Consider an example of this kind of argument:
a. There are specific abstract ideas that we possess, e.g., that of a straight line, that of a point in space, that of a cause, etc. (Call the set of those ideas ‘ABSTRACTS’.) \[premise\]
b. It is not possible to acquire ABSTRACTS by means of sensory experience, i.e., via one or more of our sensory faculties given that sensory experience is too impoverished to be the source of ABSTRACTS. \[premise\]

So,

c. There are specific ideas that we possess which we could not have acquired by means of sensory experience. \[from (a)-(b)\]
d. If we have an idea \(i\) and do not acquire \(i\) by means of sensory experience, then \(i\) must be acquired in some other way. \[premise\]
e. There being innate ideas is the only way to explain our acquisition of ABSTRACTS. \[premise\]
f. If there are innate ideas, then nativism is true and empiricism is false. \[premise\]
Therefore,

g. Nativism is true and empiricism is false. \[from (c)-(f)\]

As we see in the book *Meno*, Plato uses this kind of reasoning when he has Socrates and Meno conduct an experiment by having an uneducated slave boy do a bit of geometry. We will call this *Plato’s Slave Boy Understands Geometry Argument* (hereafter PSUG).

**Summary of the argument.** Demonstrate the theory of recollection (and, by implication, nativism) by eliciting a case in which an uneducated slave boy gains knowledge without any training.

1. Johnny knows how to double a square. \[premise\]
2. If Johnny knows how to double a square, then Johnny knows a bunch of facts about squares.\(^4\)

Accordingly,

3. Johnny has geometric knowledge \[from (1)\&(2)\]
4. Given that Johnny has geometric knowledge, either he has always known these things, or at some point, he acquired these items of knowledge. \[premise\]
5. As evinced by his errors, Johnny did not always know these things. \[premise\]

Therefore,

6. Johnny acquired these items of knowledge. \[from (3)-(5)\]
7. If Johnny acquired these items of knowledge, then either he was taught these things in this life, he generated that information on his own, or he acquired that information prior to this life. \[premise\]
8. No one has taught Johnny these things in this life, and he did not generate that information on his own. \[premise\]

Therefore,

\(^4\) Recall that we distinguished three kinds of knowledge: *epistemê*, *technê* and *phronesis*. The kind of knowledge being discussed is both *epistemê*, so-called factive knowledge, and *technê*, so-called procedural knowledge. What is *epistemê*? Here we see that Plato has in mind the following: \(epistemê =_{\text{def}}\) the state of having a well-grounded true opinion that is accompanied by understanding. What is *technê*? Here we see that Plato has in mind the following: \(technê =_{\text{def}}\) the state of being able to know how to perform a task based on understanding facts about the task in question.
9. Johnny acquired that information prior to this life. [from (6)-(8)]
10. If Johnny acquired that information prior to this life, then Johnny's knowing these things is matter of his recollecting innate mental contents. [premise] Therefore,
11. Johnny's knowing these things is matter of his recollecting innate mental contents. [from (9) & (10)]
12. What is true of Johnny is true of all human beings. [premise] So,
13. Recollectionism is true: any person's geometric knowledge is matter of recollecting innate mental contents. [from (11) & (12)]

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