Plato's Theory of Recollection

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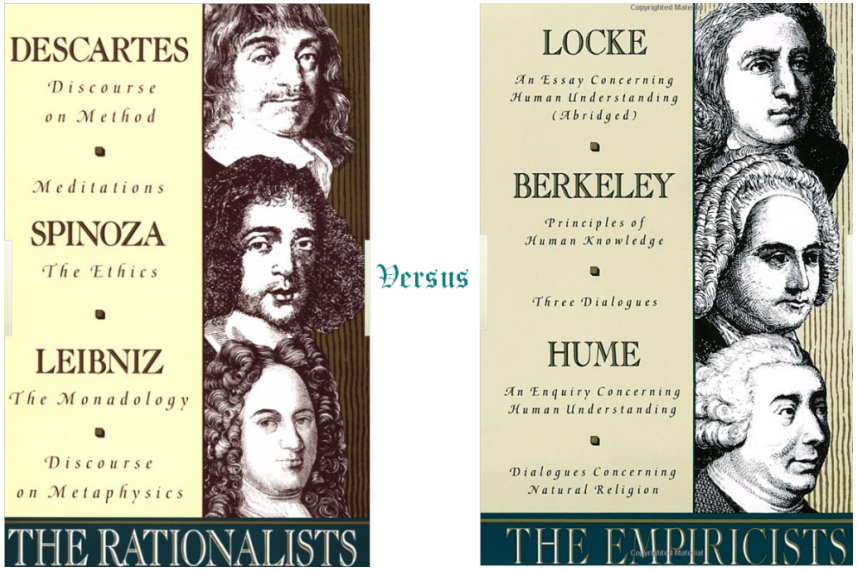
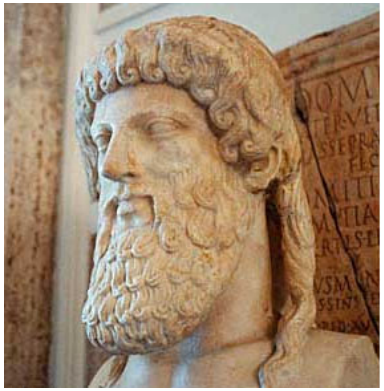
Empiricism vs. Rationalism



Empiricists = All knowledge comes from the senses
Rationalists = Some knowledge is innate; some comes from "rational intuition."

Plato's Nativism



Plato: Mathematical and ethical knowledge is, in a sense, innate; it is merely recollected.

Innate what?

Exactly what is innate according to rationalists? There are at least three options:

- **Concepts** - Virtue, Equality, Justice, etc
- **Propositional Knowledge** - That $2 + 2 = 4$, that "might does not make right", etc.
- **Abilities** - To add, to recognize equalities, to abstract, etc.

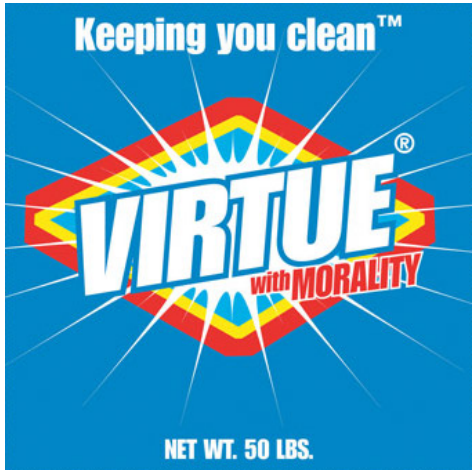
Innate what?

- Most empiricists (including Locke and Hume) grant we have innate abilities to abstract, reason, etc.
- What is controversial is that our concepts and/or propositional knowledge come from experience.

Innate what?

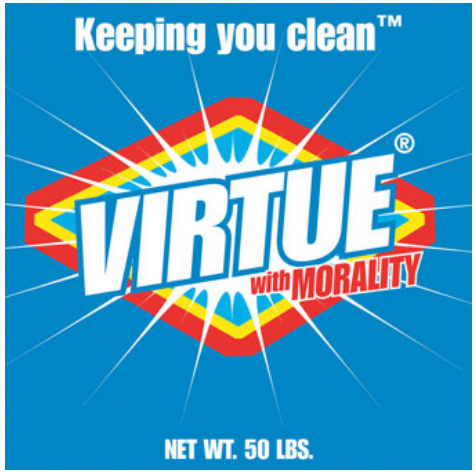
- Most empiricists (including Locke and Hume) grant we have innate abilities to abstract, reason, etc.
- What is controversial is that our concepts and/or propositional knowledge come from experience.
- My Interpretation: Plato's arguments in *Meno* and *Phaedo* are best interpreted as concluding that we have innate **concepts.** See [Cohen, 2007].

Virtue and Mathematics?



- Plato's dialogue *Meno* is about the question, "What is virtue?"

Virtue and Mathematics?



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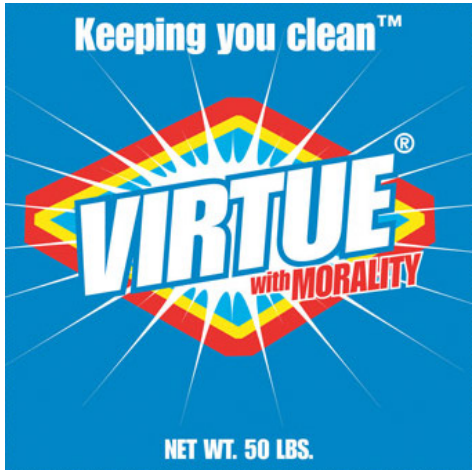
Virtue and Mathematics?



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- To show Meno that one can answer the question "What is virtue?", Socrates teaches a slave how to solve a geometric problem.
- Question: In what way is learning geometric truths relevant to learning about virtue?

Virtue and Mathematics?

- According to some philosophers, neither moral nor mathematical facts are experimentally verifiable.
  - Observing other students cheat does not confirm that cheating is moral. Seeing a boy scout help an old woman cross the street does not confirm to you the value of helping the elderly.
  - If you observe twenty mathematicians obtain 13 when adding 7 and 5, you would not not infer $7 + 5 = 13$.
- Neither moral nor mathematical objects (e.g., numbers, virtue, etc.) seem directly observable.

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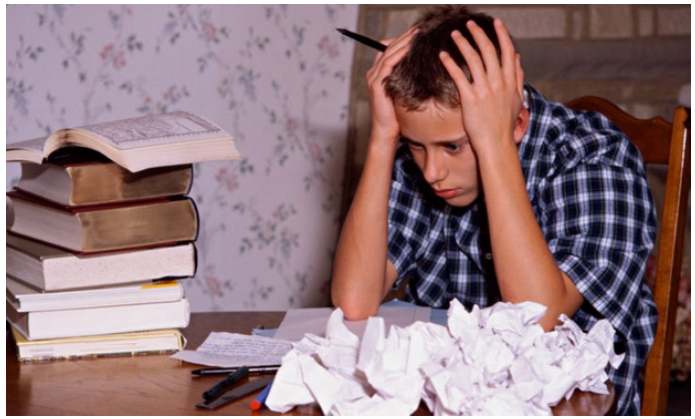
  - If you observe twenty mathematicians obtain 13 when adding 7 and 5, you would not not infer $7 + 5 = 13$.
- Neither moral nor mathematical objects (e.g., numbers, virtue, etc.) seem directly observable.
- Upshot: There might be a common way we learn moral, mathematical, and other non-empirical facts.

Ethical and Mathematical Learning



Meno presents a disconcerting argument, however, that the answer to the question "what is virtue?" is already known or incapable of being found.

You tell me! Summarize Meno's argument.

Meno's Paradox

> *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. Line 80e.

Meno's Paradox

According to many scholars, Meno's argument is silly.

Meno's Argument

Sorensen [2014] reconstructs the argument as follows:

- **Premise 1:** If you know the answer to the question you are asking, then nothing can be learned by asking.
- **Premise 2:** If you do not know the answer, then you cannot recognize a correct answer even if it is given to you.
- **Conclusion:** Therefore, one cannot learn anything by asking questions.

Meno's Argument

Cohen [2007] reconstructs Meno's argument as follows:

- **Premise 1:** If you know what youre looking for, inquiry is unnecessary.
- **Premise 2:** If you dont know what youre looking for, inquiry is impossible.
- **Conclusion:** Inquiry is either unnecessary or impossible.

Meno's Paradox

On either interpretation, the second premise admits of obvious counterexamples:

- Suppose you are an 18th century pirate looking for a cure for scurvy.
- You conduct a clinical trial in which several different treatments (e.g., drinking sea water, eating limes) are compared.
- You don't know what cures scurvy, but you can recognize a cure when you find it.

Meno's Paradox

My opinion: I think both interpretations are uncharitable.

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- Remember, Plato's question is "what is virtue?" which appears to be a question that is not easily resolved by empirical means.
- Further, many Platonic dialogues address questions like, "What is piety?", "What is courage?", and "What is justice?"
- The aim of these dialogues is to analyze some concept (e.g., piety, courage, justice) that is initially unclear.

Meno's Paradox

My interpretation: If Meno's paradox is understood to be an argument concerning conceptual questions of the form "Does $X = Y$?" (e.g., "Is knowledge true belief with an account?"), then the argument is much more plausible.

Meno's Paradox

Meno's Paradox:

- **Premise 1:** If we possess the concept of X and of Y, it is unnecessary to inquire whether $X = Y$.
- **Premise 2:** If we lack the concept of either X or Y, then we won't be able to recognize whether $X = Y$. So inquiry is impossible.
- **Conclusion:** It is either unnecessary or impossible to inquire whether $X = Y$.

Meno's Paradox

- **Premise 1:** If we possess clear concepts of X and Y, it is unnecessary to inquire whether $X = Y$.

Under my interpretation, Plato denies P1 for three reasons:

- One can recognize $X \neq Y$ (e.g., that "might is not right.")
- Recognizing what you fail to know is valuable
- The possession of concepts is not a binary attribute: concepts can be clear or vague, and inquiry may bring into focus concepts that were previously vague.

Meno's Paradox

- **Premise 2:** If we lack the concept of either X or Y, then we won't be able to recognize whether $X = Y$. So inquiry is impossible.

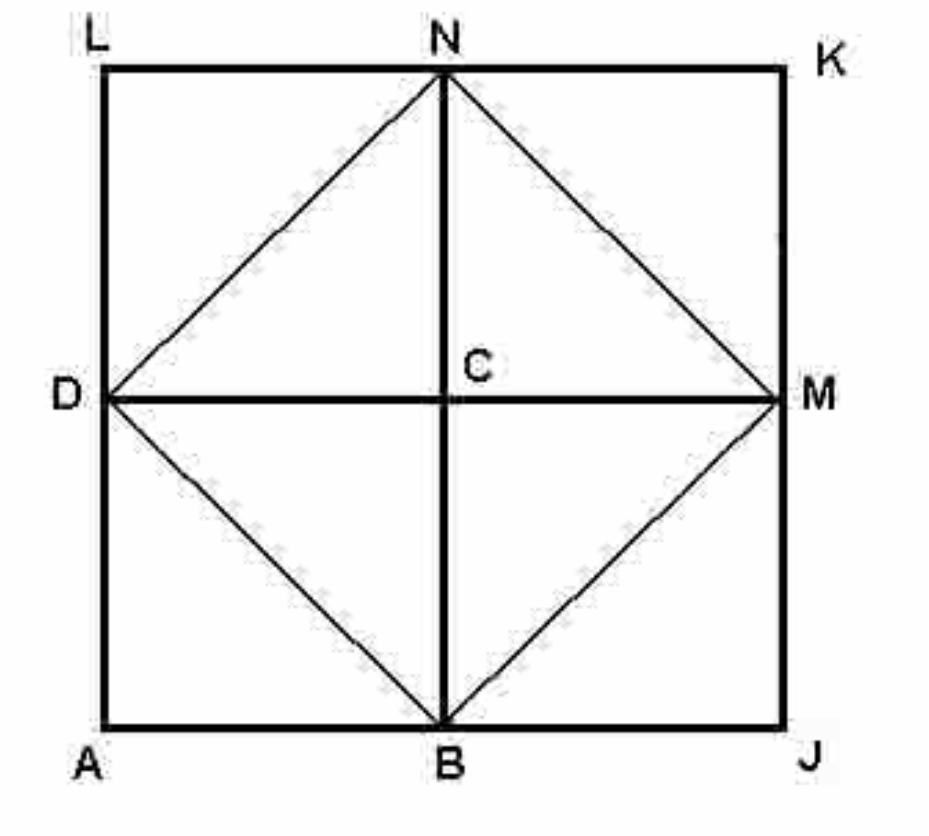
However, under my interpretation, Plato accepts P2:

- So it looks like we're in trouble if we don't have the concepts of virtue, justice, piety, etc.
- That's why we need ...

Plato's Theory of Recollection

You tell me! What does Plato teach the slave?

Construction in the Meno



Task: Given a square S, construct a square with twice the area of S.

Learning in the Meno

Socrates' Claim: The slave's ability to complete the task indicates that must have innate mathematical knowledge. Why?

- Socrates claims not to have taught the slave anything.
  - Socrates only asked questions.
- Moreover, the slave knew no geometry prior to the exchange (he was a slave!).

Learning in the Meno

Objection: Obviously, Socrates taught the slave. He asked leading questions, and he made assertions between questions (e.g., about the diagonal).

My best response: Socrates taught the slave boy how to **construct** the square, but the recognition of which intermediate areas were equal or greater than one another were elicited from the slave.

Innate Concepts in the Meno

Under my interpretation, Plato's argument might be summarized as follows.

- P1. We can "learn" new conceptual truths $X = Y$ (this square is double that one).
- P2. If we did not possess innate concepts, we could not learn such conceptual truths.
- C1. We possess innate concepts.

Recollection in the Meno

Plato's goal, therefore, is to **explain** how it's possible for us to have innate concepts.

Theory of recollection: We "recollect" them; we acquired these concepts before birth.

- In *Meno*, there is no elaborate theory of recollection.
- Later dialogues (e.g., *Phaedo* and *Republic*) discuss the theory of the forms, and they argue that what we are recollecting are the forms.

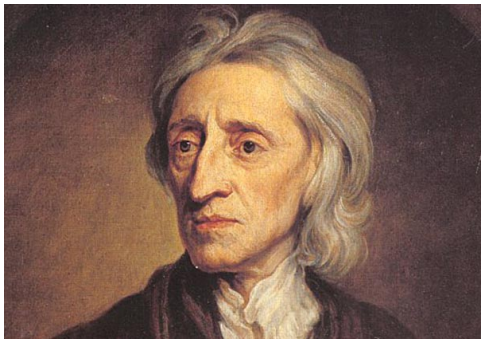
Recollection in the Meno

That leads to the following **inductive argument** for recollection:

- P1. We can "learn" new conceptual truths $X = Y$.
- P2. If we did not possess innate concepts, we could not learn such conceptual truths.
- C1. We possess innate concepts.
- P3. The theory of recollection is the best theory of how we have innate concepts.
- C2. We ought ought to believe in theory of recollection.

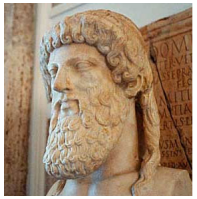
Phaedo

Abstraction for Empiricists



- Locke: Abstract ideas obtained by mentally "removing" features from perceived objects.
- Berkeley: Abstraction by "ignoring" irrelevant features of an object for an argument.

Anti-Abstraction



In *Phaedo*, Plato's argument entails that some mathematical ideas cannot be obtained via abstraction:

- You have never seen two objects that are **exactly equal** in length.
- So when you compare two objects, you cannot "remove" features of the objects (e.g., that you're comparing sticks) to obtain a general concept of equality of length.
- Nor can you "ignore" irrelevant features; the difference in length between two sticks is precisely what matters for forming the concept.

Equality in *Phaedo*

- **Premise 1:** No two physical objects bear the relation of "being equal" to one another.
- **Premise 2:** If no physical objects bear a relation R to one another, then our concept of R is not acquired via abstraction.
- **Conclusion:** Our concepts of equality is not obtained via abstraction.

[Plato, 1997]

Anti-Abstraction

Plato's reasoning looks like a general argument that some mathematical concepts are not learned via abstraction.

Anti-Abstraction

- **Premise 1:** Mathematical theorems describe properties (e.g., infinitely thin, perfectly round) that no physical objects have.
- **Premise 2:** Mathematical theorems describe relations (e.g., equality) to one another that no two physical objects bear to one another.
- **Premise 3:** If mathematical theorems describes a property P that no physical object has (or a relation R that no physical object bears to another), then our concepts of the property P (respectively, R) is not acquired via abstraction.
- **Conclusion:** Our concepts of some mathematical properties and relations are not obtained via abstraction.

Phaedo and Recollection

- **Premise 1:** To compare our sensations of the length, size, etc. of two objects, we need the concept of equality. .

Phaedo and Recollection

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- **Premise 2:** If we possess the concept of equality, then we either possess it innately (i.e. before birth) or acquire it from abstracting from experience (Implicit).
- **Conclusion 1:** We do not possess it from abstracting from experience (Previous argument).
- **Conclusion 2:** We possess the concept of equality innately.

Compounding?

- So far empiricists need not resist Plato's argument, as concepts are also acquired via **compounding**.
  - E.g., No physical object instantiates the property of "being a fire-breathing dragon", but we can obtain that idea via compounding "lizard", "flying", "fire", etc.

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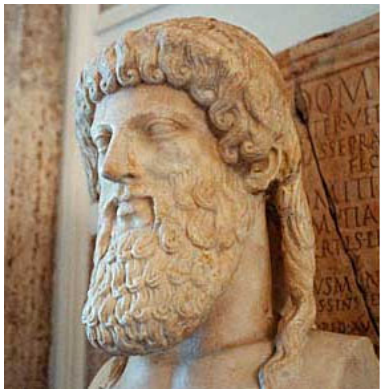
- However, Locke [1975, II.28.i] claims that equality is a simple idea, and hence, not obtained via compounding.
- Hume's discussion of equality is more complicated

Up Next

Where We're Going



Plato's Theory of Forms

Today's Response Question

Response Question: In groups of five students or so, outline Socrates' argument in *Phaedo* (Lines 74-75) that our concept of equality is innate. Then pick a premise that you think is problematic, and reconstruct an argument whose conclusion is the *negation* of the problematic premise.

References I

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