

Reminiscence in Plato's dialogues

Plato's theory of reminiscence is one of the more famous parts of his philosophy, referenced in quite a few dialogues, and explored in more detail in the *Phaedo* and the *Meno*. The *Phaedo* purports to show the conversations Socrates has just before his execution, and as such is concerned with the immortality of the human soul. Reminiscence is key to understanding Plato's view of the nature, composition and journeyings of the soul, and is integral to these particular conversations. Similarly the *Meno* examines how humans learn and have knowledge, particularly of virtue. The theory is in opposition to the idea that we come into the world as a blank slate: not because we have learned about the universe in a previous life (as Plato was also a believer in reincarnation) but in some manner previous to the living of any of these different earthly lives. This theory tries to answer two epistemological problems: how can we ever recognise anything without knowing it in some manner first; and how we can develop a satisfactory model of the universe if nothing relates the knower and its perception with the object of perception.

The first of these problems is posed by Meno who, having failed to define the essence of virtue adequately, asks how anyone can learn about a thing's essence, since either one knows it or does not - and in the latter case how would the supposed learner know when he or she had actually found it? For it would be unrecognized by someone who was entirely ignorant of it. Socrates responds by saying that he had come across wise men and women who understood that the self - the soul - is born with a latent knowledge of the principles of reality, from its previous experiences in other states. He says:

“The soul then being immortal, having been often born, having beheld the things which are here, the things which are in Hades, and all things, there is nothing of which she has not gained the knowledge. No wonder, therefore, that she is able to recollect, with regard to virtue as well as to other things, what formerly she knew. For all things in nature being linked together in relationship, and the soul having heretofore known all things, nothing hinders but that any man, who has recalled to mind, or, according to the common phrase, who has learnt, one thing only, should of himself recover all his ancient knowledge, and find out again all the rest of things; if he has but courage, and faints not in the midst of his researches. For inquiry and learning is reminiscence all. We therefore ought not to hearken to that sophistical way of reasoning afore-mentioned; for our believing it to be true would make us idle. And, accordingly, the indolent, and such as are averse to taking pains, delight to hear it. But this other way of thinking, which I have just now given you an account of, makes men diligent, sets them at work, and puts them upon inquiry. And as I believe it to be true, I am willing, with your assistance, to inquire into the nature of virtue.”

The other two dialogues that touch on this the most are probably the *Phaedrus* and *Timaeus*. The *Phaedrus* gives a metaphorical description of the knowledge and experience the soul brings into incarnation, and the *Timaeus* looks at how the soul was created. Both these dialogues give an insight into how the soul is part of the universe it inhabits both

epistemologically and ontologically – perhaps giving an answer to both the questions above and to the modern framing of the question: why are we so good at spotting patterns? The Delphic exhortation that Socrates and Plato reference through so many of the dialogues “Know Thyself” also seems to be in response to an entity that can correctly know the universe around them by looking at the truth residing in them.

We are going to look at two short extracts from the *Phaedo* (from 72e) and *Meno* (from 85c), using the Thomas Taylor/Floyer Sydenham translations but with a bit of editing for clarity, so that we have plenty of time to discuss how to interpret the theory of reminiscence and its implications.

(Socrates:) We confess without doubt, that if any one calls anything to mind, it is necessary that at some time or other he should have previously known this.

(Simmias:) Entirely so

Shall we not confess this also, that when knowledge is produced in us, after some particular manner, it is reminiscence? But I mean by a particular manner, thus: If any one, upon seeing or hearing any thing, or apprehending it through the medium of any other sense, should not only know it, but should also think upon something else, of which there is not the same, but a different knowledge, should we not justly say, that he recollects or remembers the particular, of which he receives a mental conception?

How do you mean?

Thus: In a certain respect the knowledge of a man is different from that of a lyre.

How should it not?

Do you not, therefore, know that lovers when they see a lyre, or a vestment, or any thing else which the objects of their affection were accustomed to use, no sooner know the lyre, than they immediately receive in their dianoëtic¹ part the form of the beloved person to whom the lyre belonged? But this is no other than reminiscence: just as any one, upon seeing Simmias, often recollects Cebes; and in a certain respect an infinite number of such particulars continually occur.

An infinite number indeed, by Zeus.

Is not then something of this kind a certain reminiscence; and then especially so, when any one experiences this affection about things which, through time, and ceasing to consider them, he has now forgotten?

Entirely so

¹ Dianoetic part - the faculty we possess which enables us to think via a number of linked steps - from the Greek ‘dia’ (through) and ‘noia’ (knowing).

But what, does it happen, that when any one sees a painted horse and a painted lyre, he calls to mind a man? and that when he beholds a picture of Simmias, he recollects Cebes?

Entirely so.

And will it not also happen, that on seeing a picture of Simmias he will recollect Simmias himself?

It certainly will happen so.

Does it not therefore follow, that in all these instances reminiscence partly takes place from things similar, and partly from such as are dissimilar?

It does.

But when any one recollects any thing from similars, must it not also happen to him, that he must know whether this similitude is deficient in any respect, as to likeness, from that particular of which he has the remembrance?

It is necessary

Consider then if the following particulars are thus circumstanced: Do we say that any thing is in a certain respect equal? I do not say one piece of wood to another, nor one stone to another, nor any thing else of this kind; but do we say that equal itself, which is something different from all these, is something or nothing?

We say it is something different, by Zeus, Socrates, and that in a wonderful manner.

Have we also a scientific knowledge of that which is equal itself?

Entirely so

But from whence do we receive the knowledge of it? Is it not from the particulars we have just now spoken of, *viz.* on seeing wood, stones, or other things of this kind, which are equals, do we not form a conception of that which is different from these? But consider the affair in this manner: Do not equal stones and pieces of wood, which sometimes remain the same, at one time appear equal, and at another not?

Entirely so.

But what, can *equals themselves* ever appear to you unequal? or can equality seem to be inequality?

By no means, Socrates.

These equals, therefore, are not the same with equal itself.

By no means, Socrates, as it appears to me.

But from these equals which are different from equal itself, you at the same time understand and receive the science of *equal itself*.

You speak most true

Is it not, therefore, either similar to these or dissimilar?

Entirely so.

But indeed this is of no consequence: for while, in consequence of seeing one thing, you understand another, from the view of this, whether it is dissimilar or similar, it is necessary that this conception of another thing should be reminiscence.

Entirely so.

But what will you determine concerning this? Do we suffer any thing of this kind respecting the equality in pieces of wood, and other such equals as we have just now spoken of? and do they appear to us to be equal in the same manner as equal itself? and is something or nothing wanting, through which they are less equal than equal itself?

There is much wanting

Must we not, therefore, confess, that when any one, on beholding some particular thing, understands that he wishes this which I now perceive to be such as something else is, but that it is deficient, and falls short of its perfection; must we not confess that he who understands this, necessarily had a previous knowledge of that to which he asserts this to be similar, but in a defective degree?

It is necessary.

What then, do we suffer something of this kind or not about equals and equal itself?

Perfectly so.

It is necessary, therefore, that we must have previously known *equal itself* before that time, in which, from first seeing equal things, we understood that we desired all these to be such as *equal itself*, but that they had a defective subsistence

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In the *Meno*, Socrates is concerned with how we move from that of double ignorance to simple ignorance i.e. from thinking we know something that we do not, to being aware of our ignorance on the subject. He uses a geometrical demonstration with a slave boy: first the boy think he knows the solution to the geometrical problem Socrates poses, which Socrates shows him he does not. Then Socrates, through further questioning, leads the boy to the correct answer. It is important that in this demonstration of Socratic-lead learning, Socrates himself gives the boy no actual answers but points out how the boy can pick his

way to the answer through a series of easy steps each of which he is able to take for himself. Once the steps have been taken the boy arrives at the final answer which in his earlier condition had been unknown to him. After, Socrates turns to Meno and asks:

SOC. Well; what think you, Meno? Has this boy, in his answers, given any other opinion than his own?

MENO None other: he has given his own opinion only.

SOC. And yet, but a little before, as we both observed, he had no knowledge of the matter proposed, and knew not how to give a right answer.

MENO True.

SOC. But those very opinions, which you acknowledge to be his own, were in him all the time: were they not?

MENO They were.

SOC. In a man therefore, who is ignorant, there are true opinions concerning those very things of which he is ignorant.

MENO It appears there are.

SOC. Those opinions then are stirred up afresh in the mind of that boy, as fancies are in dreaming. And if he should frequently be questioned of these things, and by many different persons, you may be assured he will at length know them with as much certainty as any man.

MENO Indeed, it seems so.

SOC. Will he not then know them without being taught them, having only been asked questions, and recovering of himself from within himself his lost knowledge?

MENO He will.

SOC. But our recovery of knowledge from within ourselves, is not this what we call reminiscence?

MENO Without doubt.

SOC. And this knowledge, which he now has, must he not at some time or other have acquired it, or else have always been possessed of it?

MENO Certainly.

SOC. Now if he was always possessed of it, he was always a person of knowledge. But if at any time he first received it, was it not in this present life? unless some person has taught him the science of geometry. For he will make his answers with no less certainty in every

part of geometry, and indeed in all the other mathematical sciences.² Is there any one, then, who has taught the boy all this? I ask you; because you ought to know, since he was born and bred up in your family.

MENO I am certain that no person has ever taught him those sciences.

SOC. And yet he entertains those opinions, which he has just now declared: does he not?

MENO It appears, Socrates, that he must.

SOC. If then he had this knowledge within him, not having acquired it in this present life, it is plain that in some other time he had learnt it and actually possessed it.

MENO It appears so.

SOC. And was not that time then, when he was not a human?³

MENO Certainly.

SOC. If true opinions then are in him, at both these times, the time when he is, and the time when he is not a man; opinions which, awakened and roused by questions, rise up into knowledge; must not his soul be well furnished with this discipline throughout all ages? for it is plain, that in every age he either is, or is not a man.

MENO In all appearance it must be so.

SOC. If the truth of things⁴ therefore is always in the soul, the soul should be immortal. So that whatever you happen now not to know, that is, not to remember, you ought to undertake with confidence to seek within yourself, and recall it to your mind.

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The profound (but often hidden) connection between the soul and the truths which underlie the manifested cosmos are - according to Platonic teaching - the result of the soul arising from the causative power of eternal intellect which holds those truths in a primary and undivided way. Proclus says in his *Elements of Theology* (194 and 195), "Every soul contains all the forms which intellect primarily possesses" and "Every soul is all things, containing indeed sensibles paradigmatically, or after the manner of an exemplar; but intelligibles iconically, or after the manner of an image."

² For every mathematical demonstration depends on viewing equal and unequal, like and unlike, in all computations, in all diagrams, and in all measures, whether of sound or of motion. - Sydenham.

³ 'When he was not a man' - by this phrase Plato distinguishes the soul in its pre-earthly state from that of an embodied soul, when the soul-body entity is a human.

⁴ The words of Plato are ἀληθεια των οντων. - The truth or reality of all things which are, depends on the truth of the first principles of things. For truth metaphysical is here meant. But in truths logical it is the same: all these depend on the truth of the first principles of science. - Sydenham.