Socrates and The Paradox of Inquiry

In Plato’s *Meno*, Socrates famously argues that we can never learn anything new. He then uses this argument to help motivate his Doctrine of Recollection—the view that what we ordinarily call “learning something new” is really a matter of recalling things that we already knew from our previous existence. In this paper, I will present Socrates’ argument, explain his Doctrine of Recollection, and then develop an alternative account of how learning is possible.

1. The Paradox of Inquiry

Plato’s *Meno* is a dialogue featuring three characters: Socrates, Meno, and Anytus. Early on in the dialogue, Socrates indicates that he would like to learn about virtue. In response, Meno offers the following challenge:

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? (Cooper 1997: 880)

Socrates replies as follows:

Do you realize what a debater’s argument you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know? He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for. (Cooper 1997: 880)

We can state Socrates’ argument as follows:

1. In every case of inquiry, you either already know what you’re looking for or you don’t.
2. If you already know what you’re looking for, then inquiry is unnecessary.
3. If you don’t know what you’re looking for, then inquiry will be unsuccessful.
4. Every case of inquiry will either be unnecessary or unsuccessful.

This argument is often referred to as “The Paradox of Inquiry”. Premise (1) of the argument is true since it’s just an instance of excluded middle: You either know what you’re looking for or you don’t. Premise (2) also appears true since the whole point of inquiry is to gain knowledge. If you already have the knowledge, the inquiry is pointless. Finally,
Premise (3) also appears true since you can’t even get started if you don’t know what you’re looking for. Suppose, for example, that someone tells you to go find Fred for them, and you have no idea who Fred is. In that case you wouldn’t even know where to start. You would only know who to look for once your friend tells you who Fred is (e.g., “He’s the guy with the neckerchief, standing over there by that dog.”)

From these premises it follows that all inquiry is either pointless or impossible.

2. The Theory of Recollection

Socrates replies to The Paradox of Inquiry by denying the second premise. He claims that inquiry can be useful, even if you already know the answer. The key to understanding this position is to understand Socrates’ Doctrine of Recollection. Here is how he introduces this doctrine:

The human soul is immortal; at times it comes to an end, which they call dying; at times it is reborn, but it is never destroyed... As the soul is immortal, has been born often, and has seen all things here 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... searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection. (Cooper 1997: 88)

We can summarize this doctrine as follows:

The Doctrine of Recollection: Our souls already know all things; what we typically take to be cases of learning new things are really cases in which we recall things we already knew.

So, for example, if you set out to discover the correct theory of virtue and are successful in that inquiry, this just amounts to your soul recalling the theory that it has known all along. This would be like the case in which you forget someone’s name, and then a song or image joggs your memory and you recall what the name is. In that kind of case, it’s natural to think that you knew the name all along and that you just needed a little help recalling it. According to Socrates, every case of “learning” is just like this.

If this view is correct, then (2) is false—inquiry is not necessary to learn new things, since we already have all knowledge. However, inquiry is still necessary in the sense that it’s often required to jog our memory and turn unconscious knowledge into conscious knowledge.

3. An Alternative Account

Socrates’ Doctrine of Recollection may provide an answer to The Paradox of Inquiry, but it is also difficult to believe—it is difficult to believe that each of us has an immortal soul that (at least implicitly) knows everything there is to know. Fortunately, there is an al-
ternative account of how inquiry is possible that does not require us to accept Socrates’ position.

The key to this account is to note an ambiguity in claims of the form “x knows y”. This kind of claim can mean that x knows everything about y or that x knows something about y.¹

On the first reading, premise (2) of the paradox is true—if you know everything about something, then inquiry is unnecessary. However, premise (3) is false on this reading—if you don’t know everything about something, inquiry might still be successful. For example, suppose you’re a homicide detective on a case and you know that the murderer in this case is 5’10”, wears size 9 shoes, and was present at the residence at 11:30pm. You could then use this knowledge in your investigation to learn other things about the murderer—e.g., his or her identity.

Suppose instead that we read “x knows y” as meaning that x knows something about y. In that case, (3) is presumably false, since you won’t get anywhere in your inquiry if you don’t know anything about what you’re looking for. However, premise (2) of the argument is false on this reading. If you know something about an object, further inquiry might be necessary to learn more about that object. This is the case, for example, in the preceding story about the homicide detective.

In summary, there are two different ways of understanding “x knows y”. On the first, (2) is true and (3) is false; on the second, (3) is true and (2) is false. So, however we understand this phrase, the argument is unsound.

References


¹ S. Marc Cohen (unpublished) offers a similar criticism of Socrates’ argument, although he identifies a different ambiguity in “knows”.

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