

MENO'S PARADOX IS AN EPISTEMIC REGRESS PROBLEM

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ABSTRACT: I give an interpretation according to which Meno's paradox is an epistemic regress problem. The paradox is an argument for skepticism assuming that (1) *acquired knowledge about an object X requires prior knowledge about what X is* and (2) *any knowledge must be acquired*. (1) is a principle about having reasons for knowledge and about the epistemic priority of knowledge about *what X is*. (1) and (2) jointly imply a regress-generating principle which implies that knowledge always requires an infinite sequence of known reasons. Plato's response to the problem is to accept (1) but reject (2): some knowledge is innate. He argues from this to the conclusion that *the soul is immortal*. This argument can be understood as a response to an Eleatic problem about the possibility of *coming into being* that turns on a regress-generating causal principle analogous to the regress-generating principle presupposed by Meno's paradox.

KEYWORDS: Epistemic regress problem, Meno's paradox, reasons, epistemic priority

Introduction

An epistemic regress problem is about the reasons we must have if our cognitive states are to have an epistemic value such as *being justified* or *being cases of knowledge*. A key component of any regress problem is a *regress-generating principle*. A regress-generating principle says that a thing x has a property Φ only if some thing y also has Φ and stands in a Φ -relevant relationship to x . An epistemic regress-generating principle states that a cognitive state can have a target epistemic value only if it stands in a reason-providing relationship to some cognitive state that also has that value. It is plausible, for example, that we can know a proposition only if we know a proposition that is an epistemic reason to believe it. Because this principle implies that the reason for a case of knowledge must itself be a case of knowledge, the same principle applies to the reason. It follows that any case of knowledge must be the first component of an endless sequence of known reasons. Any such sequence of reasons must either loop back on itself and form a circle or go

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on to infinity. Each of these conditions, however, seems to be incompatible with having knowledge.¹

I give a rather freewheeling reading of key parts of Plato's *Meno* and argue that Meno's paradox is an epistemic regress problem about the possibility of knowledge. The paradox is based on a regress-generating principle to the effect that in order to have knowledge about something *X*, a person *S* must already have some knowledge about *X*—knowledge of *what X is*—among *S*'s reasons. But since knowledge about *what X is* would itself be knowledge about *X*, it follows that we can have knowledge about *what X is* only if we have prior knowledge about *what X is*. This is impossible. Meno thinks the paradox shows that we cannot know anything. Plato thinks the solution is to recognize that some knowledge is innate. From this result, Plato draws the conclusion that the soul is immortal. I provide a speculative explication of these arguments that, if successful, connects them to enduring problems in epistemology and metaphysics.

Inquiry and Human Excellence

Meno's paradox (80d–e) is a challenge to the possibility of inquiry. If inquiry is the pursuit of knowledge by means of thinking, it is uncontroversial that inquiry is possible. Seeking to know what human excellence is, Socrates and Meno are able to ask and to answer questions about its nature. They are also able to reason about those answers by identifying their implications and by thinking about whether those implications are correct. It is clear and therefore uninteresting that inquiry, understood in this way, is possible. Because Plato devotes a significant portion of the *Meno* to Socrates's response to Meno's paradox, it is likely that he has a more interesting problem in mind. What is at stake in Meno's paradox, I suggest, is not whether inquiry is possible but whether *successful* inquiry is possible. In particular, the problem is about whether it is possible to *acquire* knowledge by means of inquiry. This leads to a problem about whether we can have any knowledge at all if, with Meno, we assume that the only way to have knowledge is to acquire it by means of inquiry. For if knowledge must be acquired by means of inquiry and we cannot acquire knowledge by means of inquiry, then we cannot know anything.

One reason for taking Meno's paradox to be about the possibility of having knowledge is that this gives thematic unity to the dialogue. From the beginning, the

¹ For an earlier attempt of mine to unpack the logic of epistemic regress problems see Andrew Cling, "The Epistemic Regress Problem," *Philosophical Studies* 140 (2008): 401–42.

Meno is about the nature of human excellence: that thing, whatever it is, that makes human lives worthwhile. Why would Plato suddenly switch the topic of the *Meno* from the nature of human excellence to the possibility of inquiry? The answer, I suggest, is that Plato does not change the topic. For Socrates thinks that human excellence is wisdom, a kind of knowledge. If we cannot have knowledge, then we cannot have human excellence. On this interpretation, Meno's paradox is a direct attack on Socrates's belief about what would make life worthwhile. Plato's anti-skeptical epistemology is a key part of his theory of the meaning of life.

Socrates indicates several times that he takes human excellence to be wisdom, knowledge of goodness. He argues that no one knowingly wants what is bad (77b–78a) from which it follows that to know the good is to desire it. So, insofar as our beliefs and desires give us control over how well our lives go, the key to a meaningful life is having knowledge of goodness. Later in the dialogue Socrates argues that since human excellence must be a beneficial state of the soul and the only state of the soul that is beneficial without qualification is wisdom, human excellence must be wisdom (88c–d). He purports to reject this argument for a manifestly bad reason—knowledge is teachable but virtue is not teachable because no one teaches it (89d)—but he surely recognizes that this objection is terrible. So this argument together with his rejection of weakness of will give us reason to think that Socrates accepts the idea that human excellence is knowledge of goodness. This explains why Socrates takes Meno's skepticism about knowledge to be a serious moral threat:

We must, therefore, not believe that debater's argument, for it would make us idle, and fainthearted men like to hear it, whereas my argument makes them energetic and keen on the search. (81d)²

I do not insist that my argument is right in all other respects, but I would contend at all costs both in word and deed as far as I could that we will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know, rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it. (86b)

Meno's Paradox

Meno poses his paradox with three rhetorical questions:

Meno: But [M1] how will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all

² All quotations from Plato are from Plato, *Plato's Meno* and are cited in the text by their Stephanus numbers.

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what it is? [M2] How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all?

[M3] If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know? (80d)

I take *inquiry* to be any more-or-less orderly way of thinking with the goal of acquiring knowledge about something. Knowledge about an object X would be a cognitive state that includes an accurate way of thinking about X and that is held in the proper way. (Saying just what it is to be in a cognitive state *properly* is one of the central problems of epistemology.) Because Plato thinks that *objects*—especially unchanging forms or universals—and not just *propositions*, can be objects of knowledge, we need a way to describe cases of knowledge that includes both beliefs and non-propositional cognitive states as potential cases of knowledge. To capture both kinds of knowledge, I shall take a case of knowledge to be a cognitive state that has both an *object* to which the knower is related and a way of thinking about that object, a *content*. To have *propositional knowledge* about an object X one must be related to X by believing a true proposition about X. To have *non-propositional knowledge* about X one must think about X by means of a content that is not propositional. To *acquire knowledge* is to go from a state in which one does not have an item of knowledge to a state in which one does have that knowledge. Meno's paradox is a problem about whether there can be a way of thinking by means of which we are able go from a state in which we do not have an item of knowledge to a state in which we do have that knowledge. It is also about what follows from this for the possibility that we have any knowledge at all.

Meno's first question [M1] is about the possibility of coming to know what human excellence is. Rhetorical questions are disguised statements and [M1] expresses the proposition that *in order to acquire knowledge about human excellence by means of inquiry a person must first know what human excellence is*. Question [M2] generalizes this claim by expressing the proposition that *in order to acquire knowledge about anything by means of inquiry a person must first know what it is*. These propositions echo Socrates's earlier claim that in order to know the qualities of a thing one must know what it is (71b).³ Each of these claims is about

³ This does not, strictly, imply that knowing *what something is* must be *epistemically prior* to knowing its qualities, but, given the paradox, I think this is what Plato has in mind. For Meno's paradox is about the conditions we must satisfy before we can acquire knowledge, that is, come to have knowledge we do not have to begin with. Put another way, the problem is about the resources one must have in the state of not having the target knowledge in order to come to have that knowledge, not just what the logical consequences of having knowledge are.

priority because the problem is about how to *acquire* knowledge. The idea here is that in order to acquire knowledge about a thing a person must *first* have a special kind of knowledge about it: knowledge of *what it is*.⁴ On this interpretation, [M1] and [M2] are not obvious. Without a plausible reason to believe them, they do not constitute a paradox.

[M3] is Meno's reason for [M1] and [M2]. What does it mean? One possibility is that it is the claim that *no one can acquire any knowledge by means of inquiry*. This, however, would make Meno's argument question-begging, not a paradox. A better possibility is that [M3] expresses the proposition that *to have knowledge a person must have knowledge*. As it stands, however, this is a much-too-plausible trivial truth. No skeptical conclusion follows from that. We need a way to strengthen [M2] so that it is a plausible, substantive claim that is a reason for [M1] and [M2].

There are two keys to [M3]. The first key is that it is about reasons. This is implicit in Meno's idea that it is possible to 'meet with' an object of inquiry and still not know it. This is possible, even in otherwise ideal conditions, if a person lacks a standard by means of which to identify accurate ways of thinking about the object of inquiry. To acquire propositional knowledge about an object X, we need a standard by which to identify true propositions about X. In this case, the standard we need is a factor that counts in favor of *believing* those propositions because it implies or indicates that they are true. To acquire non-propositional knowledge about X, we need a standard by means of which to identify accurate non-propositional ways of thinking about X. In this case, the standard we need is a factor that counts in favor of thinking about X in the relevant non-propositional ways because it indicates that those non-propositional ways of thinking about X are accurate. For both propositional and non-propositional knowledge we need a standard that counts in favor of thinking about X in a particular way because it implies or indicates that the *content* of that way of thinking about X is accurate. Without a standard for identifying accurate ways of thinking about X, we can 'meet with' a thing or a proposition—either directly or by thinking about it—but fail to think about it in a way that amounts to knowing it. A factor that counts in favor of thinking about X in a specified way is a *reason* for thinking about X in that way. Meno's paradox is about the kinds of reasons that we need in order to acquire knowledge.

⁴ Gail Fine, *The Possibility of Inquiry: Meno's Paradox from Socrates to Sextus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 31–34.

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The second key to [M3] is that it is about *epistemic priority*. Meno's paradox is about the conditions that one must satisfy in order to acquire an item of knowledge. Since acquiring an item of knowledge is going from a state in which one lacks that knowledge to a state in which one has that knowledge, it is about what we must know *before* we have the target knowledge. Although this priority has implications for the way in which inquiry must be organized in time, it is essentially *epistemic*, not temporal, priority.

Epistemic priority is about the relationships between a person's reasons and the cognitive states for which they are reasons. To define the concept of epistemic priority, we need a notion of the *reason ancestry* of a cognitive state. Letting capital letters with the form ' C_n ' refer to cognitive states by means of their propositional or non-propositional contents, we may specify the reason ancestry of a cognitive state C_1 recursively, as follows:

(RA1) If C_2 is a reason for C_1 for S, then C_2 is in the reason ancestry of C_1 for S.

(RA2) If C_3 is in the reason ancestry of C_2 for S and C_2 is in the reason ancestry of C_1 for S, then C_3 is in the reason ancestry of C_1 for S.

(RA3) Nothing is in the reason ancestry of C_1 for S except in virtue of (RA1) and (RA2).

According to this account, the reason ancestry of a cognitive state includes all of the reasons that a person has for being in that state, the reasons for those reasons, and so on.

We can now define epistemic priority in terms of the reason ancestry of a cognitive state. A cognitive state C_n is *epistemically prior* to cognitive state C_1 for a person S just in case C_n is in the reason ancestry of C_1 for S but C_1 is not in the reason ancestry of C_n for S. The central idea in Meno's paradox is that a cognitive state with a special content—*what X is*—is epistemically prior to any cognitive state that is a case of knowledge about X. So, according to Meno's paradox, a cognitive state that is a case of knowing *what X is* must be in the reason ancestry of any case of knowledge about X but not vice versa.

The Problem

We are now in a position to explicate Meno's paradox. It is this argument for skepticism: (1) In order to acquire knowledge about X a person must first know what X is, (2) all knowledge is acquired knowledge, and (3) persons cannot acquire knowledge about X if that requires an infinite regress of reasons, therefore (4) no one

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can have any knowledge about any object X. (1) and (2) jointly imply that knowledge requires an infinite regress of reasons. Together with (3), this implies that no one can have any knowledge. Let me explain.

I explicate Meno's argument as follows:

- 1) For all persons S, objects X, and cognitive states C_1 , C_1 is a case of acquired knowledge about X for S only if there is a C_2 such that (i) C_2 is a case of knowledge about X for S, (ii) C_2 is in the reason ancestry of C_1 for S, (iii) C_2 is a case of knowledge about *what X is*, and (iv) C_1 is not in the reason ancestry of C_2 for S.
- 2) For all persons S, objects X, and cognitive states C_1 , C_1 is a case of knowledge about X for S only if C_1 is a case of acquired knowledge about X for S.
- 3) For all persons S, objects X, and cognitive states C_1 , C_1 is not a case of knowledge about X if that requires that there are infinitely many cases of knowledge about *what X is* in the reason ancestry of C_1 .
- 4) \therefore For all persons S, objects X, and cognitive states C_1 , C_1 is not a case of knowledge about X for S.

(1) and (2) jointly imply this regress-generating principle:

(RGM) For all persons S, objects X, and cognitive states C_1 , C_1 is a case of knowledge about X for S only if there is a C_2 such that (i) C_2 is a case of knowledge about X for S, (ii) C_2 is in the reason ancestry of C_1 for S, (iii) C_2 is a case of knowledge about *what X is*, and (iv) C_1 is not in the reason ancestry of C_2 for S.

Clause (i) is a recursion condition essential to generating a regress. Clause (ii) expresses the reason-providing relationship that is essential to generating an epistemic regress in this case. Clauses (iii) and (iv) are the special conditions on knowledge implicit in Meno's principle [M3]. Clause (iii) is a special condition on the reasons that are required for knowledge: knowledge about *what X is* must be among our reasons if we are to have any knowledge about X. Clause (iv) is the *epistemic priority condition* about the relationships between the reasons we have for a case of knowledge, on the one hand, and that knowledge on the other.

(RGM) implies that any case of knowledge must be the first component of an infinite regress of reasons that are cases of knowledge. For suppose that a cognitive state C_1 is a case of knowledge about X for a person S. Given this, (RGM) implies—by (i), (ii), and (iii)—that there is a cognitive state C_2 that is a case of knowledge about *what X is* in the reason ancestry of C_1 for S. Since, however, knowing *what X is* is itself a case of knowledge about X, (RGM) implies—by (iii) and (iv)—that there

is an epistemically prior case of knowledge about *what X is*, C_3 , in the reason ancestry of C_2 for S, and so on. To see what this implies about the possibility of knowledge, we must consider three possibilities: (a) there is only one cognitive state that is a case of knowledge about *what X is*, (b) there are more than one but finitely many cognitive states that are cases of knowledge about *what X is*, and (c) there are infinitely many cognitive states that are cases of knowledge about *what X is*. In cases (a) and (b), (RGM) implies skepticism all by itself. (RGM) does not imply skepticism in case (c), so the no-infinite-regress principle (NR) is required for the argument to imply skepticism.

Suppose, as Plato seems to, that there is only one cognitive state that is a case of knowledge about *what X is*. This assumption together with (RGM) implies that knowledge is impossible. Let C_1 be a potential case of knowledge about X and let C_2 be the one cognitive state that is knowledge about *what X is*. (RGM) implies that C_1 must have C_2 in its reason ancestry. Because C_2 is itself a case of knowledge about X and C_2 is the only cognitive state that is a case of knowledge about *what X is*, (RGM) implies that C_2 must be in its own reason ancestry. (RGM) also implies, however, that this is impossible for it implies—via (iv)—that C_2 cannot be in its own reason ancestry. So if there is only one way to have knowledge about *what X is* and (RGM) is true, then knowledge is impossible.

Suppose that there are more than one but only finitely many distinct cognitive states that are the cases of knowledge about *what X is*. This assumption together with (RGM) also implies that knowledge is impossible. Let C_1 be a potential case of knowledge about X and let $C_2 \dots C_n$ be the cognitive states that are cases of knowledge about *what X is*. Under these conditions (RGM) implies that some case of knowledge about *what X is* must be in its own reason ancestry. Since C_1 must have a case of knowledge about *what X is* in its reason ancestry and every case of knowledge about *what X is* is itself a case of knowledge about X, (RGM) implies that every case of knowledge about *what X is* requires that there be an epistemically prior, hence distinct, case of knowing *what X is* in its reason ancestry. Sooner or later there will be no new cases of knowledge about *what X is* to add to the reason ancestry of C_1 . So either the final case of knowledge about *what X is* in the reason ancestry of C_1 — C_n —has no case of knowledge about *what X is* in its own reason ancestry—in which case (RGM) implies that it is not a case of knowledge—or C_n has some case of knowledge about *what X is* in its ancestry. Since, by hypotheses, all of the cases of knowledge about *what X is* have appeared earlier in the reason ancestry of C_1 , this case of knowing *what X is* must have appeared earlier in the sequence and,

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therefore, will be in its own reason ancestry. (RGM), however, implies that this is incompatible with having knowledge. So if there are more than one but finitely many cognitive states that are cases of knowledge about *what X is*, (RGM) implies that knowledge is impossible.

Suppose, finally, that there are infinitely many distinct cognitive states that are cases of knowledge about *what X is*. This assumption together with (RGM) does not imply that knowledge about X is impossible. For suppose that a cognitive state C_1 is a case of knowledge about X. (RGM) implies that there is a cognitive state C_2 that is a case of knowledge about *what X is* that is in the reason ancestry of C_1 . Since C_2 is itself a case of knowledge about X, (RGM) implies that there is a distinct cognitive state C_3 that is a case of knowledge about *what X is* that is in the cognitive ancestry of C_2 , and so on. Since, by hypothesis, there are infinitely many cognitive states that are ways of knowing *what X is*, we need never run out of cases of knowledge about *what X is* to be in the reason ancestry of C_1 . So (RGM) does not imply that knowledge is impossible if there are infinitely many cognitive states that are cases of knowledge about *what X is*. This is why Meno's paradox requires the injunction against infinite regresses expressed by (3).

Platonic Rationalism and What X Is

Plato's response to Meno's paradox is to avoid commitment to the regress-generating principle (RGM) by rejecting (2). In his view, not all knowledge is acquired by means of inquiry, some is innate. Plato, however, accepts (1): in order to acquire knowledge about X one must first know *what X is*. This explains why Socrates restates Meno's paradox:

Socrates: I know what you want to say, Meno. 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. (80e)

Socrates restates the problem because he agrees with Meno that because (1) is true, if all knowledge is acquired, then we cannot have any knowledge. Since any acquired knowledge about X requires prior knowledge about *what X is* and knowledge about *what X is* is knowledge about X, the only way to acquire knowledge about X—assuming that there are at most finitely many ways to have knowledge about *what X is*—is to have innate knowledge about *what X is*. Socrates's interrogation of Meno's slave boy about the problem of doubling the square (82b–

86c) is designed to provide independent support for this rationalism. For, as we may put it in light of my explication of Meno's paradox, the knowledge the boy acquires as a result of this interrogation requires an epistemically prior, innate standard for distinguishing between accurate and inaccurate ways of thinking about squares.

Socrates can avoid being committed to the implausible view that all knowledge is innate on this interpretation. That all knowledge is innate is suggested in some places in the dialogue but Socrates does not need it. One place this view is suggested is at the end of Socrates's restatement of the paradox at 80d itself. For one way to read the final clause quoted just above is as the claim that unless *S* already has a given item of knowledge *G*₁, *S* cannot be in a position to recognize that the content of *G*₁ itself is accurate. It follows from this that all of the knowledge we have must be innate because we can identify accurate ways of thinking only by means of themselves. Another way to read the passage, however, is to take it as the claim that *G*₁ cannot be a case of acquired knowledge about *X* that we do not already have unless we first know *what X is*—have a standard for deciding that the content of *G*₁ is accurate—and we cannot know *what X is* if all knowledge must be acquired. This sort of reading is further supported by Socrates's later claims that seem to commit him to the idea that it is important to seek to acquire knowledge (81d) and that it is important to believe that we can “find out what we do not know” (86c). It is also supported by this suggestive, dark poetic passage:

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, if he is brave and does not tire of the search, for searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection. (81d)

This passage suggests that we are in a position to acquire knowledge if we have at least some—“one thing only”—knowledge that is innate. Plato seems to hold the view that our innate grasp of the unchanging forms provides us with knowledge about *what X is* for each type of thing and that this puts us in a position to acquire other knowledge about things of those types. Whether or not this interpretation can make sense of every relevant passage, it is evident that because the view that *some knowledge is innate* is weaker claim than the claim that *all knowledge is innate*, it is a more plausible version of epistemological rationalism.

I have not given an account of Plato's view about the content of any knowledge about *what X is*. One might think, for example, that the content of this knowledge must be the same as the content of a correct answer to a Socratic

interrogation about X.⁵ On this view, for example, the content of knowledge about *what human excellence is* must be the same thing as the content of a correct answer to Socrates's question to Meno, "what is human excellence?" If that answer must imply all of the necessary conditions on human excellence, it will be hard to have knowledge about what human excellence is and, therefore, harder still to know anything else about it. The same thing goes for any object about which we might seek to acquire knowledge: if any knowledge about X requires prior knowledge of the necessary and sufficient conditions for being X, it will hard to have any knowledge at all, whether or not Meno's paradox about acquiring knowledge can be solved. But Meno does not need this sort of view about the content of *what X is* for his paradox to arise. For, as I have argued, the paradox requires only that knowledge about *what X is* be a standard by which to identify accurate ways of thinking about X. Whatever the specific details about the content of knowledge about *what X is*, it is plausible to think that knowledge about anything X requires knowledge of an epistemically prior standard for identifying accurate ways of thinking about X. This is enough to make Meno's paradox a serious challenge to the possibility of knowledge.

Meno's Paradox, an Eleatic Principle, and Immortality

Plato argues from his claim that we have some innate knowledge to the conclusion that the soul is immortal. In this section, I offer an interpretation of that argument in light of my interpretation of Meno's paradox and a related principle that seems to be implicit in some Eleatic arguments about the possibility of *coming into being*.

Meno's paradox is a special case of an Eleatic problem about *coming to be*.⁶ In particular, it is a problem about how properties can come into being. According to a causal principle that seems to be presupposed in much ancient thinking, a thing can have a property Φ only if something else has Φ and causes Φ to be in the target object.⁷ For a property to come into being, there must be a prior time at which it

⁵ See Fine, *The Possibility of Inquiry*, 31–45.

⁶ Taking Meno's paradox to be analogous to an Eleatic problem was suggested to me by Michael McShane (unpublished lecture). In McShane's view, Meno's three questions are directly analogous to one of Zeno's paradoxes of motion: [1] motion cannot begin, [2] motion cannot continue, [3] motion cannot come to an end. In my view, by contrast, the problem is about what is required for a property to come into being.

⁷ For a discussion of the role of this principle in the Presocratics and Plato, see Henry Teloh, *The Development of Plato's Metaphysics* (State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press,

does not exist. Given this and the causal principle it follows that a property Φ can come into being only if there is a time at which Φ does not already exist and does already exist, an impossibility. Letting ' x ' and ' y ' range over objects and ' Φ ' over properties, we may state the relevant *causal principle* this way:

(CP) For all x and Φ , x has Φ only if there is a y such that (i) y has Φ , (ii) y causes Φ to be in x , and (iii) x is not in the causal ancestry of y .

It is evident that (CP) is a regress-generating principle similar to (RGM). Like (RGM), (CP) contains an ancestry condition. In (CP) the ancestry condition is that no object that has a property can be in its own causal ancestry. This condition guarantees that (CP) can be satisfied only if there is a distinct object having Φ in the causal ancestry of any object that has Φ . It also explains the argument for the conclusion that no property can come into being. The claim that a property comes into being implies that there is a prior time at which it does not exist. (CP), however, implies that there is no prior time at which a property does not exist. Meno's paradox applies an analogous principle to knowledge. Since all knowledge requires some prior knowledge, it is not possible for the property of *being a case of knowledge* to come into being.

This provides us with the conceptual materials we need to make sense of a provocative Platonic argument from the existence of innate knowledge to the immortality of the soul:

Socrates: If then, during the time he exists and is not a human being he will have true opinions which, when stirred by questioning, become knowledge, will not his soul have learned during all time? For it is clear that during all time he exists, either as a man or not. —So it seems.

Socrates: Then if the truth about reality is always in our soul, the soul would be immortal so that you should always confidently try to seek out and recollect what you do not know at present—that is, what you do not recollect. (86a–b)

Taken literally, the first part of this passage is inconsistent with the view that all knowledge is innate. For since innate knowledge is knowledge that is not learned—acquired by means of inquiry—it is not possible to learn innate knowledge in this life or in a previous life. What might happen, however, is that we are able to learn both in this life and in previous lives, if we have some innate knowledge by which to identify accurate ways of thinking about things.

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The argument for immortality is given in Socrates's second speech above (86b): *we have some innate knowledge* therefore *the soul is immortal*. This argument makes sense given my interpretation of Meno's paradox and the causal principle (CP). Plato thinks that Meno's paradox shows that because we have knowledge, not all knowledge is acquired, that is, some knowledge does not *come into being*. Since knowledge is a cognitive state—a state of the soul, as Plato would have it—it follows that the soul does not come into being and, therefore, is immortal. I suggest that we explicate this argument more fully as follows:

- (E1) We have innate knowledge. [Established by Meno's paradox (80d–e) and the interrogation of Meno's slave (82b–86c).]
- (E2) Knowledge is a state of the soul. [Presupposed at 88c.]
- (E3) Innate knowledge cannot come into being by means of inquiry. [Follows from the nature of inquiry.]
- (E4) The only way in which any kind of knowledge can come into being is by means of inquiry. [Assumption.]
- (E5) ∴ The soul cannot come into being. [from (E1)–(E4).]
- (E6) What cannot come into being cannot go out of being. [Assumption.]
- (E7) ∴ The soul is immortal (=the soul cannot come into or go out of being). [from (E5) and (E6).]

Although I am not prepared to defend this argument—my suspicion is that even the friends of innate knowledge will have doubts about (E4)—any mistakes it makes can be uncovered only by means of careful philosophical thinking about important questions in metaphysics and epistemology that are still with us.

Conclusion

Meno's paradox is an epistemic regress problem. Its key premise is a principle to the effect that we can acquire knowledge by means of inquiry only if we have an epistemically prior reason by means of which to distinguish accurate from inaccurate ways of thinking about the object of knowledge. Together with the assumption that all knowledge must be acquired, this implies the regress-generating principle according to which all knowledge about any object X requires epistemically prior knowledge about *what X is*. The paradox is a special case of a general problem about *coming into being*. Because of this, Plato is able to use his belief in the reality of innate knowledge as a reason for thinking that the soul is immortal. The

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epistemological and metaphysical problems raised by these arguments remain serious and are not mere matters of antiquarian curiosity.⁸

⁸ I am very grateful to the other participants at the Vanderbilt Workshop on Ancient Epistemology who graciously endured a rough, early version of this paper. Their critical questions have greatly improved the result.