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*The Possibility of Inquiry: Meno's Paradox from Socrates to Sextus* by Gail Fine (review)

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# Book Reviews

Gail Fine. *The Possibility of Inquiry: Meno's Paradox from Socrates to Sextus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. xiv + 399. Cloth, £55.00.

In the first half of this book, Gail Fine provides a renewed defense of her reading of Meno's famous paradox; in the second, she provides novel accounts of how Aristotle, the Stoics, the Epicureans, and Sextus Empiricus responded to the paradox. For reasons of space, I focus on the first half, where Fine defends the same basic account of Meno's paradox she put forward in her influential "Inquiry in the *Meno*" (1992). The book goes further, considering and dismissing several alternatives not considered there and arguing at length against recent accounts in the secondary literature, especially those of Dominic Scott and David Charles.

According to Fine, Meno's paradox rests on Meno misunderstanding what Socrates means by "not knowing at all." On her reading, Meno takes this to refer to a cognitive blank, then raises a problem for inquiring in a cognitive blank; Socrates does not think of "not knowing at all" as a cognitive blank, and so responds that it is possible not to know at all and still have true beliefs that allow one to inquire.

Is Fine right that Meno's paradox rests on misunderstanding "not knowing at all" as a cognitive blank? While this is a key point in the book, the only evidence Fine cites (71) is that, shortly before the paradox, when Meno accuses Socrates of being like a torpedo fish, Meno says that he can "no longer say [*eipein*] at all what it [virtue] is" (80b4). But this seems to point to Meno's inability to provide an acceptable answer to "what is virtue?"—not to his thinking he is in a cognitive blank about virtue. If someone reports that she cannot say what time the train leaves, she may still have views, but think that they are insufficiently justified to say. In fact, Socrates suggests earlier in the dialogue that one should only say what virtue is if one knows what it is. At the beginning of the dialogue Meno asks Socrates to "say" (*eipein*) whether virtue is teachable (70a). Socrates claims that Gorgias has given Meno the habit of expecting fearless and magnificent answers, as is reasonable from those who know (70b–c). But Socrates claims that people in Athens would laugh at the idea of answering Meno's question because they are so far from knowing whether virtue is teachable that they do not even know what it is (70c–71b). It is only after Meno suggests that he may have learned from Gorgias what virtue is that Socrates asks Meno to say (*eipein*) what it is (71d). Meno alludes to this earlier conversation in his torpedo fish objection, when, having been refuted, he reports that he no longer can say what virtue is.

Meno points to two different problems in his statement of the paradox. Fine treats it as clear that the first is a "targeting objection": how can you specify the thing you are inquiring into. She translates the sentence in question as "[f]or what sort of thing, from among those you don't know, will you put forward as the thing you're inquiring into?" (80d6–7). As translated, it is not clear that Meno is pointing to a targeting problem; one would like an argument for thinking this. But it is also not clear that this is the best way to translate the sentence. "What sort of thing" (*poion*) can be governed by the participle, "put forward," without being governed by the main verb, "inquire" (see Smyth, 2643). If read this way, Socrates is saying "[f]or what sort of thing, from among those you don't know, will you put forward when you inquire?" Up until this point, Socrates's and Meno's inquiries have involved putting forward proposed answers to the "what is it?" question. One could interpret Meno's question as pointing to a problem with putting forward such an answer,

rather than with specifying the target. Because the targeting objection is central to Fine's overall account, one would like an argument defending it as the best reading of the text.

Fine argues that (1) Socrates's basic response to Meno's paradox only requires true beliefs, (2) recollection is supposed to offer the best explanation for how we can work things out for ourselves, and (3) recollection does not involve any innate beliefs or knowledge. (She later argues that Aristotle and the Hellenistic philosophers also did not rely on innate knowledge to reply to Meno's paradox.) Let me focus on (3). First, Fine leaves it unclear how, without innate belief or knowledge, recollection would help to explain how one can work things out for oneself. Moreover, Socrates says that "to take up knowledge oneself in oneself is to recollect" (85d6–7). Fine only addresses this claim in a footnote and says that she "take[s] it to mean, not that knowledge is in one, but that taking things up oneself in a way that (if all goes well) eventuates in knowledge is recollection" (151n.43). But that seems far from what Socrates says, which is that recollection is taking up knowledge that is *in* oneself.

The most compelling parts of the book are Fine's arguments against her opponents, which often involve careful and nuanced readings of the text. But there are reasons to doubt that the text supports her own interpretation.

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Dominic Scott. *Levels of Argument: A Comparative Study of Plato's Republic and Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. 240. Cloth, \$70.00.

The results of this comparison of the *Republic* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*EN*) can be summed up thusly: (i) the texts share the same methodology, (ii) this methodology is based on a functional account of human nature, and (iii) whereas Plato believes that political philosophy needs grounding in metaphysics, Aristotle considers such a thing possible but superfluous.

I shall here focus on (i) exclusively. The shared methodology is characterized by two Platonic similes: the cave from the *Republic*, and the racecourse simile that Aristotle attributes to Plato in *EN* 1.4. Both represent a research program with three steps: starting from ordinary intuitions about political matters and ascending towards higher principles, grasping these highest principles and, finally, returning to the initial starting points. At the third and final step, the political philosopher applies his knowledge of the highest principles in explanations of the initial intuitions and intervenes in his society with a view to improving his fellow citizens through education and lawgiving.

This three-step methodology operates on two levels of argumentation: one that uses ordinary opinions and experience as a basis for its conclusions; another that uses metaphysical principles. The levels are distinguished in terms of precision and explanatory power. Borrowing a phrase from Plato, Scott calls them the shorter and the longer routes. Both routes are circular in that they return to their initial starting point in their final steps.

Socrates travels the shorter route in *Republic* 2–4 and 8–9, but offers only a description of the longer route in books 5–7. Whereas interpreters usually focus on the longer route, Scott has much to say about the shorter one. Most importantly, the shorter route has a more empirical basis than what we usually expect of Plato. In almost all cases, the shorter route does not presuppose the metaphysics of the central books (28). This is quite provocative. If Scott is right, how does he suppose that the shorter and longer routes relate to one another? It seems that he saddles the *Republic* with a version of the *chorismos*: if the two routes are completely independent of one another, but lead to the same conclusions, how then are the forms explanatorily relevant for Plato's political philosophy as found in the *Republic*? The problem is aggravated by the fact that there are indeed metaphysical assumptions on the level of the shorter route; Scott talks about a "middle route" that involves certain metaphysical assumptions (54). However, these are not the metaphysical claims found