

**Non-Propositional Knowledge in Plato and Wittgenstein**

by

Ian David Fryer  
B.A., Concordia University, 2006

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTERS OF ARTS

in the Department of Philosophy

© Ian David Fryer, 2009  
University of Victoria

All rights reserved. This thesis may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by  
photocopy or other means, without the permission of the author.

**Non-Propositional Knowledge in Plato and Wittgenstein**

by

Ian David Fryer  
B.A., Concordia University, 2006

**Supervisory Committee**

Dr. Jan Zwicky, Supervisor  
(Department of Philosophy)

Dr. Margaret Cameron, Departmental Member  
(Department of Philosophy)

Dr. Audrey Yap, Departmental Member  
(Department of Philosophy)

### Supervisory Committee

Dr. Jan Zwicky, Supervisor  
(Department of Philosophy)

Dr. Margaret Cameron, Departmental Member  
(Department of Philosophy)

Dr. Audrey Yap, Departmental Member  
(Department of Philosophy)

### ABSTRACT

In the *Blue Book*, Wittgenstein explicitly opposes his own method of philosophical investigation to that of Socrates, who will not accept a list of examples even as a preliminary answer to his 'what-is-x' question. Relying on *Meno* and the *Seventh Letter* however, I will provide an interpretation of Plato's epistemic priority principle that does away with the assumption that what Socrates seeks is the uniquely correct definition of x. Following the work of Francisco J. Gonzalez, I will argue that the philosopher seeks knowledge of x itself and that this knowledge is non-propositional. An interesting result is that Plato and Wittgenstein turn out to have extremely similar conceptions of philosophy. In particular, I argue that the distinction between *doxa* and *episteme* in Plato should be understood along the lines of Wittgenstein's distinction between *saying* and *showing*.

## Table of Contents

Title page	i
Supervisory Committee	ii
Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Dedication	vii
Introduction	1
<b>Chapter 1: Reading Meno</b>	4
I. How to approach Plato	4
II. What is primarily at issue	7
III. The <i>Seventh Letter</i>	13
IV. Better and Worse Definitions	18
V. Demonstrating Recollection	22
VI. The Method of Hypothesis	30
VII. What does 'teaching' mean?	34
<b>Chapter 2: Plato and Wittgenstein</b>	40
I. Introduction	40
II. Wittgenstein and <i>Anamnesis</i>	44
III. The Critique of Writing and the Importance of Literary Form	65
IV. Philosophy and Sophism	72
<b>Conclusion</b>	81
Bibliography	91

## Acknowledgements

Thank you very much to Sheila Mason at Concordia University for sparking my interest in Greek ethics, for recommending James C. Edwards' book *Ethics without Philosophy: Wittgenstein and the Moral Life*, and for introducing me to the philosophical work of Jan Zwicky. Without your influence I am absolutely certain that I would never have dreamed of, let alone accomplished, this project.

Thanks also to Kai Nielsen, whose courses and conversations profoundly influenced my thinking, and whose confidence in my philosophical acumen always meant a very great deal to me.

I am indebted to Zoli Filotas, who is often a more careful thinker than I am, and who has helped me to avoid awkward over-generalizations time and again. Likewise, for sympathetic conversation all throughout the development of this thesis, and for their friendship, I must warmly thank Lucas Hamilton, Michael Chang, and Sean McMillen.

I would like to extend my appreciation to Warren Heiti and Scott Howard for the generous and astute comments they provided on an early version of this thesis. Thanks also to Dr. Charles Kahn for the time he spent discussing Plato with me this spring when he visited Victoria, and for the careful consideration he gave to my ideas.

Thanks to Colin Macleod for his support with the graduate programme, and to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for financial aid in the form of a Master's Fellowship. Thanks also to the philosophy secretaries Elizabeth Wick and Jill Evans for all of the work that they do and for the coffee they make.

Thank you to Justin Kalef in the department of philosophy at Vancouver Island University for inviting me to speak about my research and for raising important objections. Thanks also to Patrick Rysiew for allowing me to give a presentation at the UVic philosophy colloquium. Thank you very much to Dr. David Gallop for attending that presentation and showing enthusiasm for the project. Your knowing nods were extremely comforting.

Thanks to James Tully and Tim Lilburn for their thought-provoking classes and their intellectual rigour. Thanks, also, to Marie Brown for giving me a place to live this last year, for keeping me going with nutritious and delicious “philosophy fuel”, and for teaching me something about the value of keeping an open heart.

Many thanks to Audrey Yap for showing me what there is to love about Rudolf Carnap and the Vienna Circle, and for every clarifying conversation about logic, language, Kant, mathematics and the notion of the *a priori*. Thanks also to Margaret Cameron for her insightful commentary and criticism, and for the positive attitude that she brought to this project.

When it comes to Jan Zwicky, I am infinitely indebted. When I first read *Wisdom & Metaphor* in 2006 I knew that I either wanted to study philosophy with her, or give it up altogether. I feel incredibly privileged to be her student, to have been able to participate in her seminars on Wittgenstein and the pre-Socratics, to have witnessed her lecture on Plato, and to have had the opportunity time and again to engage her in philosophical conversation. As a supervisor and an editor she has been attentive, patient and extremely encouraging. It is a great honour to count her among my friends and I cannot thank her enough.

This work is dedicated, with love, to my parents,

Marlene and Jerald Fryer,

the conditions of my possibility.

## Introduction

The investigation is to draw your attention to facts you know quite as well as I, but which you have forgotten, or at least which are not immediately in your field of vision. They will all be quite trivial facts. I won't say anything which anyone can dispute. Or if anyone does dispute it, I will let that point drop and pass on to say something else.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures on Mathematics 1939*

For Wittgenstein, "philosophy is in fact the synopsis of trivialities"<sup>1</sup>. What the philosopher does is to assemble reminders for a particular purpose, gaining the interlocutor's assent at every step. In this way, and only in this way, can misunderstandings be alleviated.

We must begin with the mistake and transform it into what is true.  
That is, we must uncover the source of the error; otherwise hearing what is true won't help us.  
It cannot penetrate when something is taking its place.  
To convince someone of what is true, it is *not enough to state it*; we must find the road from error to truth.<sup>2</sup>

This methodological and meta-philosophical stance strikes me as highly evocative of Plato, especially of the recollection thesis in *Meno*. My thesis thus reads Plato and Wittgenstein together and aims to display the internal connections between them. I will argue that Wittgenstein's distinction between *saying* and *showing* can help us make sense of three aspects of Plato's thought: the distinction between philosophy and sophistry, the doctrine of recollection, and the critique of writing.

On the face of it, perhaps, no two philosophers could be further from one another. In the *Blue Book*, for instance, Wittgenstein writes:

When Socrates asks the question, 'what is knowledge?' he does not even regard it as a *preliminary* answer to enumerate cases of knowledge...the discussion begins with the pupil giving an example of an exact definition, and then analogous to this a definition of

---

<sup>1</sup> Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein* p. 298

<sup>2</sup> *Philosophical Occasions*, "Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough" p. 119

the word 'knowledge' is asked for.<sup>3</sup> As the problem is put, it seems that there is something wrong with the ordinary use of the word 'knowledge'. It appears we don't know what it means, and that therefore, perhaps, we have no right to use it. We should reply: "There is no one exact usage of the word "knowledge"; but we can make up several such usages, which will more or less agree with the ways the word is actually used."<sup>4</sup>

But what is Socrates really after when he presses his interlocutors for a definition? Is it, in fact, a *definition*? I agree with Fransisco J. Gonzalez that a careful reading of *Meno* and the *Seventh Letter* shows that it is not. This gives us the room we need to re-think the relationship between Plato and Wittgenstein.

In the first chapter I will concentrate on the *Meno*, where an important lesson is not explicitly spoken but is left for the reader (or audience) to intuit. That is, Socrates never insists on the question "What is teaching?" the way he insists on the question "What is virtue?" yet the verb 'to teach' is manifestly ambiguous – there are two different activities that go by the same name. Plato's point in *Meno* is that only one of these activities (the one directed at *anamnesis*) imparts knowledge and can therefore be considered genuine teaching. The other activity consists of imparting information through words and ends in true opinion, at best. This is comparable to *Republic* 518bc, where "education is not a matter of putting knowledge *into* a soul that doesn't possess it, but rather of turning the eye of the soul, as it were, towards the light of truth"<sup>5</sup>.

Having laid the Platonic groundwork in the first chapter, the second will introduce and compare Wittgenstein's thought. I will argue that Wittgenstein's overall conception of philosophy, as well as his attitude toward philosophical

---

<sup>3</sup> See *Theaetetus* 146ff.

<sup>4</sup> BB, 20, 27

<sup>5</sup> Sharples, p. 8

writing, is startlingly similar to Plato's. My own intuition is that the comparison not only helps us make better sense of each of these philosophers, but of philosophy itself.

## Chapter 1: Reading *Meno*

### I: How to approach Plato

In the introductory remarks to his 1965 study of *Meno*, Jacob Klein begins by asking, "What considerations should guide the writing of a commentary on a Platonic dialogue?" His answer strikes me as a very good one.

First there is the conviction that a Platonic dialogue is not a book claiming to speak for itself. This conviction was, and still is, shared by many. Inferring from a remark in Aristotle's *Poetics* (1447 b 9-11) that a "Socratic" dialogue is akin to a mime, and nourished by information derived mainly from Diogenes Laertius (III, 18) and Athenaeus (XI, 504 b; XIV, 620 d – 622 d, *et al.*), historians and commentators have tried to see Platonic dialogues as dramas, philosophical mimes, philosophical comedies and tragedies, or at least to establish what their relation to mime, comedy and tragedy is.<sup>6</sup>

This is, broadly speaking, the interpretive strategy promoted at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Friedrich Schleiermacher, who says:

...if anywhere at all, it is here [in Plato's philosophy] that form and content are inseparable; each sentence can be properly understood only where it is placed, within the connections and limitations that Plato provided for it.<sup>7</sup>

The dramatic quality of the dialogues has been emphasized ever since and yet, says Klein, "it is curious to observe how little light the various attempts to cope with it throw on the actual drama aimed at in any given dialogue."<sup>8</sup> The reason, he thinks, is that commentators have paid insufficient attention to the way in which the dialogue form demands the *participation* of the reader.

Everything about Socrates' irony depends on the presence of other people who are capable of catching the irony, of hearing what is not said. A dialogue, then, presupposes people listening to the conversation not as casual and indifferent spectators but as silent participants. That this condition is actually fulfilled is sometimes obvious, sometimes explicitly mentioned. And it certainly obtains whenever Socrates himself is the narrator of the dialogue.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Klein, J. *A Commentary on Plato's Meno*, p. 3

<sup>7</sup> Schleiermacher, F. *Platon's Werke*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 1855-61 (cited and translated by Klein, p. 4)

<sup>8</sup> Klein, p. 5

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6

If we play a role in the dialogues, then “we have to be serious about the contention that a Platonic dialogue, being indeed an ‘imitation of Socrates,’ actually continues Socrates’ work.” This, again, is a thought Klein finds expressed by Schleiermacher, for whom Plato’s main point must have been:

...to guide each investigation and to design it, from the very beginning, in such a way as to compel the reader either to produce inwardly, on his own, the intended thought or to yield, in a most definite manner, to the feeling of having found nothing and understood nothing. For this purpose it is required that the result of the investigation be not simply stated and put down in so many words... but that the reader’s soul be constrained to search for the result and be set on the way on which it can find what it seeks.<sup>10</sup>

Klein notes that, “there is immediate plausibility” in this idea (that the Platonic dialogues are a continuation of Socrates’ work), and yet he laments, “its consequences are hardly ever accepted.”<sup>11</sup> Those consequences are that “we, the readers, are being implicitly questioned and examined, that we have to weigh Socrates’ irony, that we are compelled to admit to ourselves our ignorance, that it is up to us to get out of the impasse and to reach a conclusion, if it is reachable at all.”<sup>12</sup>

The dialogues, according to Klein, are “protreptic plays” based upon the oracular and paradoxical statements made by Socrates such as “virtue is knowledge,” “nobody does evil knowingly,” and “it is better to suffer than to commit injustice”. Since Socrates holds such statements to be true, Klein grants that the dialogues are not completely devoid of doctrine; yet he insists that these doctrines do not constitute what has come to be called a “philosophical system”. Rather, while the dialogues “discuss and state, more or less explicitly, the ultimate foundations on

---

<sup>10</sup> Schleiermacher, cited by Klein, p. 7, n. 23

<sup>11</sup> Klein, p. 8

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 8-9

which [Socrates'] statements rest and the far-reaching consequences which flow from them,"<sup>13</sup> Klein points out that:

...never is this done "with complete clarity." (*Sophist*, 254c6) It is still up to us to try to clarify those foundations and consequences, using, if necessary, "another, longer and more involved, road," (*Republic IV*, 435d3) and then accept, correct, or reject them – it is up to us, in other words, to engage in "philosophy."<sup>14</sup>

As participants in the dialogues Klein thinks our role is "fundamentally not different from that of Plato's own contemporaries"; yet "it is not within our power to remain untouched" by the philosophical and philological traditions we have inherited.

We must be on guard. These latter may "obstruct and distort" our understanding as much as help it.<sup>15</sup> Keeping the history of Plato scholarship itself firmly in mind, he suggests, "We can try to avoid at least two pitfalls."

(a) To become obsessed by the view that the chronology of the Platonic dialogues implies a "development" in Plato's own thinking and that an insight into this development contributes in a significant way to the understanding of the dialogues themselves; (b) to attempt to render what is said and shown in the dialogues in petrified terms derived – after centuries of use and abuse – from Aristotle's technical vocabulary.<sup>16</sup>

Systematic and developmental accounts of Plato's thought are still widespread but they appear to be facing resistance from a growing number of scholars, many of whom are reviving 'sceptical' or 'non-doctrinal' interpretations of Plato. The purpose of this chapter will be to explain, defend and bolster recent work by Fransisco J. Gonzalez that emphasizes the central role of *nonpropositional* knowledge in Plato and thus seeks to show that "there is a viable conception of

---

<sup>13</sup> Klein, p. 9

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, p. 9

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*

philosophy that renders it fundamentally opposed to systematization, and that this conception of philosophy is Plato's own."<sup>17</sup>

## II: What is primarily at issue

Central to understanding the *Meno* (and Plato, in general, I would like to say) is the distinction that Socrates draws in response to Meno's abrupt question, which opens the dialogue, about the ways in which virtue may be acquired. This is the distinction between knowing how a thing is *qualified* or knowing what *kind* of a thing it is (οποιον τι) and knowing what that thing *is* (τι εστιν). This distinction is the basis of what has been called Socrates' *epistemic priority principle*: the claim that we cannot know the former without first knowing the latter. This is what Socrates means to illustrate when he claims that he is ignorant of virtue, saying: "And if do not know what a thing is, how should I know what sort of thing it is?" He follows up playfully: "Or do you think it is possible for someone, who doesn't know at all who Meno *is*<sup>18</sup>, to know whether he is handsome or wealthy...?"<sup>19</sup> (71b4-7). Meno does not think this. He agrees with Socrates about the proper order of inquiry.

Dominic Scott, in his recent study of *Meno*, takes the epistemic priority principle to mean what most contemporary philosophers seem to think it means: "the priority of definition."<sup>20</sup> He therefore thinks that Socrates is appealing "implicitly to a metaphysical distinction between features that are essential to an object ('what x is in itself') and those that are non-essential ('what x is like')," and

<sup>17</sup> Gonzalez, p. 6-7

<sup>18</sup> I have moved the italic from 'who' to 'is' based on conversations with Dr. Zwicky and what I take to be the proper interpretation of 'τι εστι'.

<sup>19</sup> I am following Sharples' translation because I have found it most useful in following the facing Greek text. Where Grube's translation is considerably clearer in English I will use it and note it.

<sup>20</sup> Scott, Dominic. *Plato's Meno*, p. 20

thus to something very much like Aristotle's distinction between *essential* and *accidental* properties.<sup>21</sup> On this view, Plato has "an 'apodeictic' conception of knowledge, according to which the definition acts as a principle from which we can deduce other properties."<sup>22</sup> In other words, "One only has knowledge – demonstrative understanding – of a necessary accident when one has derived it from the essence."<sup>23</sup>

If this reading is correct, however, then the analogy between 'knowing what virtue is' and 'knowing who Meno is' is not a very strong one. In fact, it's terrible. As Gonzalez notes, "The only similarity would be that in both cases some kind of knowledge precedes another, but the nature of this priority would be completely different in each case."<sup>24</sup> Coming to know somebody is not a matter of defining their essence and then deducing the attributes of their character. Yet this is, according to Scott, the way Plato thinks we should proceed with respect to virtue.

Scott bites his bullet and claims that the analogy is "easy enough to criticise":

The underlying problem...is the way it uses an individual (Meno) to illustrate something about a property such as virtue. Certainly the analogy should not be pressed too hard, and it is best treated as a pedagogical device to give Meno an intuitive hold on the idea of one question ('what is x?') having priority over another ('what is x like?')... By the end of the dialogue... once the analysis of knowledge has been given, we should see this analogy for what it is and not attach too much philosophical importance to it.<sup>25</sup>

I respectfully but firmly disagree with this way of resolving the issue. For one, Scott's view appears to be a good example of Klein's second pitfall: rendering "what is said and shown in the dialogues in petrified terms derived – after centuries of use and abuse – from Aristotle's technical vocabulary." Second, Gonzalez points

---

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, p. 21

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*

<sup>24</sup> Gonzalez, p. 156

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, p. 21-22

out that even if the position it attributes to Plato (i.e. Aristotle's) is philosophically defensible, it is certainly not self-evident. "Yet both Socrates and Meno appear to see the priority principle as requiring no defense."<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, says Gonzalez, "can we accept an interpretation of Socrates' distinction which renders nonsensical his own illustration of it? Even if 'knowing Meno' is only an analogy, it for that very reason should not be utterly disanalogous."<sup>27</sup> And finally,

...there is the evidence of *Republic* 1 (354b-c), where Socrates asserts that he cannot possibly know whether or not justice is a virtue if he does not first know *what* it is. To know that justice is a virtue is to know only something *about it*, not *what* it is. Yet if anything deserves to be called an "essential property" of justice, it is "being a virtue." In excluding whatever is known only *about* a thing, Socrates appears to be distinguishing *all* of a thing's properties from what the thing *itself is*. Likewise, Socrates' claim in the present dialogue appears to be, not that we cannot know some of Meno's properties before knowing others, but rather that we cannot know *any* of his properties before knowing Meno himself.<sup>28</sup>

Socrates' distinction between the *ti esti*-question and the *poion ti*-question cannot, therefore, be explained in terms of different kinds of properties.

What alternative is there? Instead, we could take "knowing Meno" for what it is – a form of "acquaintance"<sup>29</sup> – and see if we can plausibly save the analogy. On this reading, "'knowing Meno' ... parallels the later example of knowing the road to Larissa: we do not 'know' the road until we have actually travelled on it and *seen it*

<sup>26</sup> Gonzalez, "Failed Virtue and Failed Knowledge in the *Meno*" in *Dialectic and Dialogue*, p. 155

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, p. 155-156

<sup>29</sup> Gonzalez p. 157: "...the word 'acquaintance' should be understood here in its rich, everyday meaning, rather than in the extremely narrow sense it tends to have in contemporary philosophy, according to which "acquaintance" is simply a direct cognitive relation to sense data or simple objects...This sense of knowledge by acquaintance differs from the narrow philosophical sense in admitting variation in degree: from barely being acquainted with Meno to knowing him very well."

*for ourselves.*" (my italics)<sup>30</sup> In both cases, knowing *x* is not reducible to knowing that *x* is *y*.

Gail Fine has objected to this view: "I know who [Meno] is from having read Plato's dialogues." But would Socrates call reading about Meno a case of "knowing" Meno? Gonzalez replies that he "clearly could not."<sup>31</sup> If this counted as a case of knowing Meno it would efface the very distinction that Socrates is at pains to draw.

In claiming to know who Meno is by reading about him, Fine presumably means that she knows he is a student of Gorgias, a Thessalian aristocrat, arrogant, and so on. Yet this knowledge does not appear in any way to differ from, nor therefore to be prior to, what Socrates would call knowing what *kind* of a person Meno is.<sup>32</sup>

We avoid this problem if we take Socrates to mean that 'knowing' is never a matter of second hand reports but requires, as we have already suggested, a kind of first hand experience. Thus,

...we cannot *know* that Meno is this kind of a person until we actually meet him and "see for ourselves." This acquaintance with Meno serves as the ground for knowing his properties and is clearly distinct from knowing his properties.<sup>33</sup>

I agree with Gonzalez in his judgment that this is "the only interpretation that makes sense of what Socrates *says*," about knowing Meno.<sup>34</sup> The question now is: how is this model of knowledge by "acquaintance" to be extended to the analogue: virtue?

Gonzalez stresses that the difference between propositional knowledge and knowledge by acquaintance is not a "simplistic dichotomy between immediate

---

<sup>30</sup> *ibid*, p. 156

<sup>31</sup> Gonzalez, p. 156

<sup>32</sup> Gonzalez, p. 156

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*

intuition and knowledge of propositions, as if nothing else were imaginable.”<sup>35</sup>

Rather, knowledge by acquaintance admits of variations of degree. With this in mind, he writes:

According to a strict analogy with “knowing Meno,” it [“acquaintance with virtue”] would involve knowing virtue firsthand, that is, presumably, *having* virtue. In other words, knowing what virtue is “by acquaintance” would be indistinguishable from *becoming virtuous*... The point of Socrates’ priority principle thus may be that to know propositions about virtue, even if these propositions constitute an elaborate moral theory, is not equivalent to knowing virtue itself, that is, being acquainted with it firsthand, and that indeed the first kind of knowledge is worth nothing if not based on the second.<sup>36</sup>

I think this is correct. It might be objected, however, that it is possible to *see* virtue in another, and thus to *know* it by direct and ungainsayable acquaintance, without possessing it oneself. Alcibiades, for instance, can recognize that Socrates is virtuous even though he himself is not. His acquaintance with virtue, in other words, just is his acquaintance with the virtuous *person* – Socrates. How should we respond to such a challenge?

It must suffice here to note the significant difference between Alcibiades, who feels ashamed and worries about the state of his character when confronted with Socrates, and Meno who does not seem to take his discussion with Socrates as much more than an opportunity to flex his rhetorical muscles. That is, even if Alcibiades did not turn out to be a very good person in the end, when the opportunity afforded itself he was at least willing to engage in philosophical inquiry with Socrates and to be honest with himself about his own ignorance. As we shall see in more detail, Meno is not so willing, and Socrates calls him “wicked” (81e6), drawing our attention to a serious flaw in his character: he takes *learning* to be nothing other

---

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*, p. 158

<sup>36</sup> Gonzalez, p. 158

than being told. As Gonzalez notes, this is what he is accustomed to – it “is the way he has been “taught” by Gorgias and the other sophists.”<sup>37</sup> Meno thinks that he just needs to amass and remember more facts. Alcibiades, by contrast, recognizes that what is required of him philosophically is to change the way he lives, even if he cannot muster the strength and courage to actually do so.<sup>38</sup>

In any case, if, as Gonzalez suggests, propositions (according to Plato) can only ever predicate properties of *x*, and a set of properties can never constitute the knowledge of *x itself* that the philosopher seeks, then contrary to interpreters who hold fast to the ‘priority of definition’ this latter knowledge, the answer to the *ti esti*-question, must be *nonpropositional*.

This is only to say something that is not often said by philosophers, not something deeply mysterious in itself. “To say that there is such a thing as nonpropositional knowledge,” Gonzalez explains, “is to say that something can be manifest *without* being describable. This means, not that we cannot describe it at all, but rather that all of our descriptions will necessarily fail to do justice to how it manifests itself.”<sup>39</sup>

This seems to make sense in the case of the road to Larissa. We can describe the road correctly, i.e. know what is true *of* the road to Larissa, without ever having walked it, and thus without being familiar with the road itself. Perhaps we’ve discussed it at length with someone who has travelled it often; and perhaps we’ve

---

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, p. 166

<sup>38</sup> In other words, while we would say that Alcibiades is acquainted with, but does not possess, virtue, we would say neither of Meno. It is Alcibiades’ recognition that he himself does not possess virtue which allows us to say that he is acquainted with it – like Socrates, he has become conscious of his not-knowing. Meno, by contrast, *thinks* he knows and therefore does not desire to learn.

<sup>39</sup> Gonzalez, “Nonpropositional Knowledge in Plato”

had occasion to consult a map. Beliefs generated in these ways will be, in many cases, true and sufficient to guide our actions. However, they *may* be false.<sup>40</sup> They are never as reliable as having experienced something firsthand, which seems to be the proper sense of 'knowledge' for Socrates.<sup>41</sup>

Significantly, this kind of knowledge is not subject to the true/false dichotomy but admits of variations of degree<sup>42</sup>: I am *more* or *less* familiar with the road itself; it makes no sense to say that I have *true* or *false* acquaintance with it. The same goes for knowing Meno, but more importantly, it seems to hold for virtue as well. We are, all of us, *more* or *less* virtuous. We do not live in a world of purebred saints and sinners.

### III The *Seventh Letter*

This reading of Plato is explicitly supported by the *Seventh Letter*, where it is claimed that the subject matter of philosophy "cannot at all be expressed in words as other studies can."<sup>43</sup> Instead, "from living with the subject itself in frequent

---

<sup>40</sup> Because they remain at the level of language, i.e.  $\delta\omicron\chi\alpha$ : opinion; a conception which is open to persuasion by reason; fluctuation in reasoning; the thinking which is led by reason to the false as well as the true. (*Definitions* in Hackett's *Complete Works of Plato*)

<sup>41</sup> Compare, for example, *Theaetetus* 201a-c, where Socrates distinguishes the knowledge of the eyewitness from the true belief of the juror; also notice how this conception of knowledge makes sense of Socrates' rebuke of Anytus at 92c in *Meno*: "How then, my good sir, can you know whether there is any good in [the Sophists'] instruction or not, if you are altogether without experience of it?"

<sup>42</sup> This is characteristic of nonpropositional knowledge according to Gonzalez.

<sup>43</sup> There is, of course, still a dispute as to whether Plato is the author of the *Seventh Letter*, which I cannot hope to settle. According to Gonzalez, however, "probably the strongest possible argument against the letter's authenticity is that the content of the so-called "philosophical digression" contradicts Plato's understanding of philosophy in the dialogues." Following Gonzalez, I am arguing that this is not the case; that the *Seventh Letter* "provides an insightful and correct interpretation of dialectic as described and practiced in the dialogues" (p. 246). In other words, even if Plato is not the author, I agree with those who maintain that the ideas expressed in the *Seventh Letter* are true to the spirit of his philosophy.

dialogue, suddenly, as a light kindled from a leaping flame, [knowledge] comes to be in the soul where it presently nourishes itself." (341d)<sup>44</sup>

Connected with these somewhat cryptic comments, Plato makes two further claims: (1) "there neither is now nor ever will be a written work by me on [what I seriously study]"; and (2) "concerning all past or future writers who claim to have knowledge about those things...either as having heard about them from myself or others or as having discovered them for themselves: in my opinion it is not possible for them to have any knowledge of these matters." (341c)

What can this mean? Aren't the dialogues written works by Plato on the topic of philosophy? Isn't he obviously contradicting himself?

There is a plausible response to this worry along the lines of Klein's suggestions. In "How to Read a Platonic Dialogue," James A. Arieti reiterates the basic insight with admirable clarity:

Most of the problems in understanding Plato arise from studying the dialogues as if they were a part of the tradition in which Plato did not participate. When readers try to find systematic, consistent, straightforward positions in the dialogues, with sound arguments and clear, unambiguous meaning, they knock against an iron wall...

...I would like to toss out the premise of virtually all work on Plato: that he is writing the kind of philosophical work in which the philosopher writes as clearly, as straightforwardly, and as soundly as he can... Instead, I should like to assume that he is writing works of drama – works whose intention is principally to inspire – and that the inspiration in the dialogues is to engagement in a life of the mind, to the doing of philosophy with other people, and not with dead or even lively texts.<sup>45</sup>

On a reading that emphasizes the dramatic and artistic quality of Plato's dialogues their *meaning* is in no way exhausted by what the characters explicitly say.

Arieti puts this point well when he says:

---

<sup>44</sup> Gonzalez's translation, p. 248

<sup>45</sup> Arieti, James A. "How to Read a Platonic Dialogue", *The Third Way: New Directions in Platonic Studies*, p. 121

It is as much a mistake to assume that any of the dialogues is about what the *personae dramatis* discuss as it would be of Shakespeare's plays. *Lear* is not about how much the old king's daughters love him: it is about self-delusion, madness, and nature. The *Euthyphro* is also about self-delusion, about the self-delusion that drives a man to act with absolute certitude; it is about self-delusion so intense that it thrives even when the hollowness of its foundation is absolutely manifest.<sup>46</sup>

In other words, the essential meaning of a play, and thus of a Platonic dialogue, is made manifest in the dramatic action – in what the characters *do* (which perhaps includes, but is in no way limited to, what they *say*). The lesson is carried in *action* – deeds, not words – so we are required, as Klein puts it, to hear what is *not* said.

Szlezák adds, significantly in this context, that:

Again and again the plot shows that philosophical instruction is not randomly available, ready like wares for any purchaser, but is imparted only in accordance with the intellectual and moral maturity of the recipient.<sup>47</sup>

Once this is understood, claim (2) seems to be saying that anyone who behaves as if a philosophical lesson *can* be straightforwardly communicated in language thereby betrays their own ignorance of the nature of philosophy. They are shown not to have the knowledge in question by the very presumption that it is propositional knowledge. Thus, it is not Meno's failure to provide a definition that betrays his ignorance to Socrates, but rather his initial confidence that it is "easy" to do so.

In fact, there is no need to speculate – the author of the *Seventh Letter* goes to some lengths on this point.

...there is a true argument that contradicts the person who dares to write anything about these matters and that, though spoken by me many times before, must apparently be repeated now.

---

<sup>46</sup> Arieti, p. 127

<sup>47</sup> Szlezák, Thomas A. *Reading Plato*, p. 118

In relation to each being there are three things that are the necessary means of attaining knowledge, and this knowledge must itself be placed beside them as a fourth thing: the first is the name (ονομα), the second is the definition (λογος), the third is the image (ειδωλον), and the fourth is knowledge (επιστημη). To these we should add as a fifth thing the being that is known and that is truly being (αληθως εστιν ον). (342a)

Eventually it comes to this:

Many more reasons can be given to show how each of the four is unclear, but the greatest is the one we mentioned a little before: given that the being of an object and its qualities are two different things and that what the soul seeks to know is not the qualities (το ποιον τι) but the "what" (το τι), each of the four offers the soul, both in words and in deeds, what it does not seek, so that what is said or shown by each of the four is easily refuted by the senses. As a result they fill practically everyone with perplexity (απορια) and confusion. (343b6-c5)

The meaning of this is clear. Names, definitions (propositions), images and even knowledge (επιστημη) itself (at some level) can only give us το ποιον τι - the qualities of things. The *being* of things is distinct from the knowledge of them as well as the means towards that knowledge. It is *what* is known.<sup>48</sup>

And this is what we really seek to attain as philosophers according to Plato. We do not seek the kind of "mere" knowledge that can be stored in and recovered from books - we strive to attain *being*. Plato makes it absolutely plain, for instance, that philosophical knowledge is not separable from the state of our character:

...the process of dealing with all four, moving up and down to each one, barely gives birth to knowledge of the ideal nature [what a thing truly is] in someone with an ideal nature (ευ πεφυκτος ευ πεφυκτι)... In short, someone who has no affinity with the subject matter will not be made [to see] by memory or an ability to learn, for the principle or source [of knowledge] is not to be found in alien dispositions (την αρχην γαρ εν αλλοτριαις εξεσιν ουκ εγγιγνεται). Therefore, those who are not naturally inclined and akin to justice and other goods, but can quickly learn and retain lesser matters, as well as those who have such an affinity, but are forgetful and find difficulty in learning, will never know as much as is possible of the truth of virtue and vice. (343e-344b)

<sup>48</sup> Gonzalez p. 256: "A distinction is emerging here between a defective propositional knowledge and the nondefective, nonpropositional knowledge to which it is subordinated as means to end. Because knowledge is the link between names, propositions, and images, on the one hand, and the thing itself, on the other, it exists in this tension between being defined in terms of the first three and somehow transcending them in knowledge of the 'fifth'."

But while the goal of philosophy is clearly not propositional, Plato insists that we cannot reach it but through discourse.

Only barely (μογις), when the [three], that is, names, propositions, as well as appearances and perceptions, are rubbed against each other (τριβομενα προς αλληλα), each of them being refuted through well-meaning [non-adversarial] refutations (εν ευμενεσιν ελεγχοις ελεγχομενα) in a process of questioning and answering without envy, will wisdom (φρονησις) along with insight (νους) commence to cast its light in an effort at the very limits of human possibility. (344b-c)

Hence: dialectic. We must be careful, however, to observe the difference between the (proper) use and the abuse of words. Dialectic must be distinguished from its close relative, eristic – that empty, adversarial and victory-loving *wordplay*.<sup>49</sup> Let us note in passing that this is *not* to be done by assuming that the dialectician never employs fallacious arguments. As Gonzalez's reading of the *Euthydemus* has shown, Socrates' logic can be just as sloppy any Sophist's.<sup>50</sup> Rather, the difference is in the *aims* of these techniques: "while eristic aims to force a conclusion on the respondent with the purpose of defeating him, dialectic aims to convert the respondent to the pursuit of wisdom and virtue, a conversion that is not forced but is freely undergone (through *agreement*)."<sup>51</sup>

An important point that often goes unnoticed is that, from the fact that Socrates' 'What is *x*?' question asks for a definition, it does not follow that according to Socrates knowledge of *x* is definitional. A plausible alternative motive is that Socrates wants "to undermine the conceit of interlocutors who themselves claim to know *x* so well and so completely that they can say exactly what it is." Moreover, he believes that "the process itself of examining and refuting definitions of *x* can lead to

---

<sup>49</sup> cf. *Republic* 454a4-9

<sup>50</sup> Gonzalez, p. 103

<sup>51</sup> Gonzalez, p. 105

a knowledge of  $x$  that transcends all definitions."<sup>52</sup> (There is more than a little evidence in the dialogues to substantiate what is roughly the ancient sceptical interpretation that "the knowledge of virtue which Socrates seeks is found instantiated in the inquiry itself."<sup>53</sup>)

Socrates' behaviour in the *Meno*, thus interpreted, is consistent with the distinction between the *ti esti*-question and the *poion ti*-question as it is presented in the *Seventh Letter*, where, according to Gonzalez, Plato claims that "whoever thinks he can state in words (written or oral) the true being of a thing is a fool and that nevertheless the 'rubbing together' of propositions can spark nonpropositional insight."<sup>54</sup>

Is there any positive evidence, in the dialogue itself, that this is Socrates' view in *Meno*? We will now consider the definitions of shape and colour, the slave-boy episode, and the method of hypothesis in turn, in order to show that this interpretation resolves otherwise insurmountable difficulties and paradoxes that result from assuming that the 'priority principle' is a 'priority of definition' principle.

#### IV: Better and Worse Definitions

After two failed attempts on Meno's part to define virtue, Socrates recaps and clarifies the discussion for him with a hypothetical yet parallel inquiry into shape (*schema*) and colour. Meno has twice found *many* virtues where Socrates is searching for *one* thing. This much, Meno understands. He confesses, however, to being unable to find what Socrates seeks. So Socrates tries the following approach:

---

<sup>52</sup> *ibid*

<sup>53</sup> Gonzalez, p. 158

<sup>54</sup> *ibid*

...If someone asked you what I mentioned just now: "What is shape, Meno?" and you told him that it was roundness, and if then he said to you what I did: "Is roundness shape or a shape?" you would surely tell him that it is a shape? – I certainly would. – That would be because there are other shapes? – Yes. – And if he asked you further what they were, you would tell him? – I would. – So too, if he asked you what colour is, and you said it is white, and your questioner interrupted you, "Is white colour or a colour?" you would say that it is a colour, because there are also other colours? – I would.

After a little more preparation, Socrates exhorts Meno:

Would you still have nothing to say, Meno, if one asked you: "What is this which applies to the round and the straight and the other things which you call shapes and which is the same in them all?" Try to say, that you may practice for your answer about virtue.

Meno, characteristically, refuses to make the attempt and wants to be *told*.

Socrates agrees to do him this favour if Meno will then be willing to tell him about virtue. Meno says he will, so Socrates continues:

Come then, let us try to tell you what shape is. See whether you will accept that it is this: Let us say that shape is that which alone of existing things always follows colour. Is that satisfactory to you, or do you look for it in some other way? I should be satisfied if you defined virtue this way.

This is remarkable. Socrates gives Meno a formula he can now follow in giving his answer: something of the form "Virtue is that alone of existing things which always follows \_\_\_\_\_,"<sup>55</sup> will apparently suffice.

Meno fails to keep his promise, however. He does not, on the basis of Socrates' answer, tell Socrates about virtue like he said he would. He does not fill in the blank. Instead he protests ("eristically" according to how Socrates replies at 75c10) that Socrates' definition is "foolish" because it has left 'colour' undefined.

Socrates insists on the truth of his definition, but nevertheless agrees to go at it again in terms that are "friendlier", i.e. admittedly known to Meno<sup>56</sup>. He offers a second definition of *schema* in geometrical terms: "a shape is the limit of a solid".

---

<sup>55</sup> Wisdom? Knowledge?

Meno does not push on this definition the way he pushed on the first one, so presumably the terms are indeed friendlier, although they are clearly (perhaps comically) more abstract. All the same, he is forgetful of the commitment he previously made to Socrates and simply asks for more information. "And what do you say colour is, Socrates?"

At this point it is clear that Meno has utterly failed to engage in the inquiry. Socrates' subtlety has been lost on him, and he snaps: "You are outrageous, Meno." The Greek word is *hubristes*, and the comment is thereby suggestive of tragic self-confidence on Meno's part. After all, he has not yet experienced *aporia*; he still thinks he knows what he does not know. And what, for Socrates, is more tragic than ignorance of one's own ignorance?

Socrates proceeds to flatter him not only physically, but intellectually: he provides Meno with a definition of colour "after the manner of Gorgias" that he will "most easily follow".

Do you both say there are effluvia of things, as Empedocles does? – Certainly. – And that there are channels through which the effluvia make their way? – Definitely. – And some effluvia fit some of the channels, while others are too small or too big? – That is so. – And there is something which you call sight? – There is. – From this, "comprehend what I state," as Pindar said; for colour is an effluvium from shapes which fits the sight and is perceived. – That seems to me an excellent answer, Socrates. (76c-d)

But now Socrates turns critical once more with another reference to tragedy. Grube's translation is, "It is a *theatrical* answer so it please you, Meno, more than the one about shape" (76e3). The Greek word here is *tragike*, which I believe is meant to echo the accusation of *hubris*. The suggestion, in any case, is that if Meno wants to define virtue along these lines he will be very far from the mark indeed. Socrates

---

<sup>56</sup> As if colour could be something *unknown* to Meno! Zwicky correctly points out that Socrates is simultaneously admonishing Meno's confrontational attitude.

confirms this when he insists, without irony, "It is not better...but I am convinced that the other is." (76e6)

These three definitions (two of shape, one of colour) should be considered in terms of the distinction between the *ti esti*-question and the *poion ti*-question in order to understand why Socrates prefers the first two over the third. When we do so, however, we are confronted with an apparent paradox. The empirical definition that he rejects seems to be the one poised to say something about shape *itself* and thus to answer Socrates' 'what is *x*?' question, whereas the definitions of which he approves remain at the level of how shape is *qualified*, i.e. what can be truly predicated of it. Socrates thus appears to be violating his own 'priority principle'.

This is only the case, however, if we assume that the answer to the *ti esti*-question should come in words and not in experience. If philosophical knowledge is nonpropositional, on the other hand, then what actually happens is what we should expect. That is, if Socrates' idea is that a proposition can *never* adequately express the *being* of say, shape, colour, or virtue, and that such things must be known by "acquaintance," then the Empodoclean definition that purports to be answering the 'what is *x*?' question is transgressing the limits of what is possible. It ends up being nonsense, in the sense that, by being reductive, it doesn't really say much of anything at all. This is why Socrates says, "I think that you can deduce from this answer what sound is, and smell, and many such things." Meno seems to consider this a virtue of the definition, but Socrates is clearly dismayed. It in no way isolates what is being defined.

Socrates' first definition (the one with *poion* form), by contrast, distinguishes shape as "that alone of existing things" which has a certain property. It does not pretend to get at shape itself, but relates it to something else. It thereby remains firmly within the limits of what is expressible in language. And yet the 'priority principle', as I understand it, is *not* violated. For it remains true that we cannot know that we have *correctly* predicated anything of shape unless we are first "acquainted" with it through experience.

#### V: Demonstrating Recollection

Malcolm Brown makes an argument about the slave-boy episode on the basis of the distinction between the *ti esti*-question and the *poion ti*-question that I think is worth considering here.<sup>57</sup> He argues, controversially (and mistakenly in my view), that Plato does not approve of the slave-boy's response to Socrates. Specifically, and similarly to the "paradox" that we have already encountered, he claims that the slave does not satisfy Socrates' 'priority principle' by answering the *ti esti*-question that Socrates initially poses, and is thereby committing the same mistake that Meno commits with his initial question.

This is a very surprising conclusion because, "Socrates' summary comments and his allusion to Meno's topeo fish image in the course of the demonstration strongly suggest that this episode is to serve as a model for the investigation of virtue"<sup>58</sup>. Moreover, at the end Socrates seems to regard the whole thing as having successfully demonstrated what he meant by "recollection".

---

<sup>57</sup> Brown, Malcolm. "Plato disapproves of the slave-boy's answer".

<sup>58</sup> Zwicky, "Plato as Artist" p. 29

Brown's claim, nonetheless, is that the *ti esti*-question can only be answered *arithmetically*, which in this case is impossible, given that the length of the line sought is incommensurable with the length of the line given. It is an *irrational number* and can only be displayed *geometrically*.

Brown sees this as a weakness. He argues that the demonstration is deliberately divided into *arithmetical* and *geometrical* halves, and then looks to the history of Greek mathematics for evidence that arithmetical proofs were preferred over geometrical proofs by some mathematicians in order to bolster his argument that Plato, too, privileges them and is therefore disappointed with the outcome here.

I agree with the first part of Brown's conclusion, "that Socrates conducts the lesson in two distinct parts." But I disagree with the second part of his conclusion, which is that "the geometrical part is platonically suspect."

We must grant Brown the following: a) "...those questions with which Socrates elicits answers to the main question (what size must the required line be?) are exclusively *ti*-form before the interruption [occasioned by the *aporia* of the boy], and exclusively *poion*-form after it"; and b) at 84a1 the *poion*-form "is brought explicitly into contrast with the arithmetical form of all of the previous questions." This is straightforwardly in the text.

What is not in the text, of course; is Brown's interpretation of it, which I think can be defeated on the philosophical grounds I have been attempting to lay down. By claiming that the *ti*-question must be answered *arithmetically* he is, quite simply, committing the same fallacy that Gonzalez outlined above: from the fact that Socrates' 'what is *x*?' question asks for a definition, it does *not* follow that knowledge

of  $x$  is definitional. In other words, Brown is blinded by his unspoken allegiance to strictly propositional knowledge. If we assume instead, that as a model for the investigation of virtue, the demonstration must elicit nonpropositional (practical) knowledge, an alternative explanation of Socrates' behaviour emerges.

Socrates has the boy consider a square, each of whose sides has a length of two feet. Asked for the area of this square, the boy determines the correct answer: four feet. Socrates now asks him to imagine a square that has twice that area, eight feet, and puts to him this problem: determine the length of the side of this square.

Since it has twice the area the boy's first guess is that the side will be twice as long, so he answers four feet. Socrates demonstrates that a square constructed on a four-foot line would have an area of sixteen feet – quadruple and not double the area. Recognizing his error the boy determines that the correct length must fall between four feet and two feet. He naturally suggests three feet:

When Socrates once again demonstrates that the square on this line will not have the desired area (this one will be nine instead of eight – so close, yet so far) the boy is justly perplexed. The answer was shown to lie between two and four, yet it is not three! What else is there?

Now, at 84a, just before Socrates' remarks that the boy's confusion about the length is similar to Meno's confusion about virtue (and that this is a good state to be in since it makes one aware of one's own ignorance, which is the first step towards knowledge), we read the following:

Socrates: So we haven't yet got the eight-square-foot figure from the three-foot line, either.

Boy: No, indeed.

Socrates: But from what line, then? Try and tell us exactly; and if you don't want to work out a number for it, at least point out from what line.

This is Sharples' translation, which runs pretty close to the Greek, the last line of which is: *ει μη βουλει αριθμειν, αλλα δειξον απο ποιας.*

This line is central to Brown's argument. He notes:

This is a command with several important implications, two of which are relevant to the point I am now making. They are (1) that counting, the fundamental arithmetical operation, is contrasted with pointing to a line and (2) that counting, which had been the appropriate response of a *ti esti* question is contrasted with the pointing out of something in the diagram, as a response to a *poion*.

I am in agreement with much of this. A little later, however, Brown claims:

The clearest textual indication of Plato's intent to present [the geometrical answer] critically is contained in the already mentioned line... The key word is "alla". When *alla* is used to introduce the apodosis of a conditional sentence in which a command is expressed, and when the protasis is negative, it has a very pointed meaning. In a general way it implies a break in thought between protasis and apodosis. But more precisely it means that "the apodosis contains a more or less inadequate substitute for what is left unrealized in the protasis: 'at all events,' with a notion of *pis aller*. Thus the *alla* of Plato's 84a already brands the "deiktic" procedure which Socrates and the boy now turn to as inferior to the counting procedure... which better alternative they now abandon.<sup>59</sup>

Brown's Greek is doubtlessly better than mine, but his emphasis on a single connective as the "clearest textual indication" in favour of his conclusion, I think, probably betrays its weakness. Grube, for one, seems to agree with me, leaving out the English words 'at least' in his translation and thereby minimizing the importance of the Greek '*alla*'.

A plausible alternative interpretation, in any case, relates what is going on here to Socrates' preference for the definitions of shapes over the definition of colour that we considered in the previous section. There, too, we found that Socrates preferred a definition that had *poion ti* form over one that had *ti esti* form, yet we

---

<sup>59</sup> Brown, p. 207

discovered that it made sense as long as we took nonpropositional knowledge seriously.

Brown thinks that in choosing a mathematical problem of considerable technical difficulty, "it is Plato's intent to present a model of an inquiry which at first fails to find an accurate answer, then succeeds in finding an answer but only after abandoning the demand for perfect accuracy."<sup>60</sup> On my view, this is nearly, but not quite, correct.

The strength of the nonpropositional interpretation on my view is also that Socrates' choice of mathematical example, involving as it does an irrational (and therefore inexpressible) numerical solution, is rendered incredibly apt. On my reading, however, the point is that although the slave *cannot* say what the length is, he *can* see it. He can recognize it – *this* is how the *ti esti*-question is answered – and *thereafter* he can say, "there it is," giving a description of it that has *poion* form.

The case of the slave is thereby made more exactly parallel to the case of Meno (as Socrates clearly indicates it should be), for in both cases Socrates is making an impossible demand; asking for something which he knows cannot be given, as a way of sparking a genuine nonpropositional insight. It seems to me that Socrates wants Meno to make roughly this connection: there *are* things that cannot be put into words; they make themselves manifest (for who could deny that the line *exists* and that it has *some* length?). Furthermore, Socrates hopes that Meno will get the hint and realize that *virtue is also like that*.

---

<sup>60</sup> Brown, p. 223-224

Gonzalez puts it thus: "...Socrates' request for a completely adequate definition of virtue no more implies that he believes virtue to be definable than his request for a numerical measurement of an incommensurable length implies that he believes it to be commensurable."<sup>61</sup>

Only after the slave has recognized the correct line does Socrates give him a way of speaking about it. He says, "[Sophists] call this the diagonal; so if this is named the diagonal, then it is the diagonal as you say, Meno's boy, that will give the double figure." To which the boy replies, "Yes, certainly, Socrates." (85b5)

Brown notes that many translators omit the negative connotations of *sophistai* by translating the word in this passage as "experts" or "those who know".

His analysis runs as follows:

...when it is noticed that "diagonal" is a name which stands for a description of its geometrical position, and that this description is a *hopoion ti* rather than a *ho ti*, a position, not a size, it becomes plain enough what is sophistical about it. It is the very thing that is sophistical about Meno's eagerness to answer on what virtue is like in advance of finding out what it is. And this readiness to substitute the derivative question for the fundamental one, with its consequences, namely, that the order of inquiry is confused and the result of it becomes unreliable, is a carelessness which in Meno is charged indirectly against Gorgias.<sup>62</sup>

It is true, as Brown notes, that "a distinctive fact about both Gorgias' and Polus' responses to Socrates' search for a definition of rhetoric itself is that they are eager to speak first to a derivative question, namely how noble and valuable it is."

But is the order of inquiry truly confused in the case of the slave? Although "diagonal" is a description of the line's geometrical position we must ask ourselves, is it a *true* description? I can't imagine anyone saying that it isn't. If it is a true description though, how has it been arrived at? According to Socrates we cannot

<sup>61</sup> Gonzalez, "Nonpropositional Knowledge in Plato" p. 271

<sup>62</sup> Brown, p. 218

know that we have predicated anything truly of the line without first answering the *ti esti*-question. It would make nonsense of everything he has maintained to think that we could simply abandon that question and yet go on to describe the line properly with any amount of confidence.

The order of inquiry thus *cannot* be reversed here; it does not make sense to say, as Brown does, that the *ti esti*-question has been left “hypothetically” answered. On the contrary, “acquaintance” with the line is the basis upon which the definition, which *must* remain at the level of what can be truly predicated of it, is properly achieved. There is nothing hypothetical about it.

What is sophistical about the name “diagonal”, if anything is, is that it is not informative – it is a *name*, but it doesn’t give us any understanding of the *length* of the line, the way a whole number, or even a rational fraction, admittedly would. We *can* have insight into the length although we *cannot* simply state it. The name “diagonal” may create the illusion, however, that we can say what cannot be said. It has the potential to create a lot of empty talk (the kind, on analogy, that is also generated by the term “virtue”).

It might be objected that we *can* easily say what the length of the line is: it is  $\sqrt{8}$ . I want to say that even this will not do the trick, and I think that a relevant exchange in the *Theaetetus* (147e5) can be brought to bear here.

*Theaet.* We divided all numbers into two classes: those which are made up of equal factors multiplying into one another, which we compared to square figures and called square or equilateral numbers; – that was one class.

*Soc.* Very good.

*Theaet.* The intermediate numbers, such as three and five, and every other number which is made up of unequal factors, either of a greater multiplied by a less, or of a less

multiplied by a greater, and, when regarded as a figure, is contained in unequal sides; – all these we compared to oblong figures, and called them oblong numbers.

*Soc.* Capital; and what followed?

*Theaet.* The lines, or sides, which have for their squares the equilateral plane numbers, were called by us lengths; and the lines whose squares are equal to the oblong numbers, were called powers or roots; the reason of this latter name being, that they are commensurable with the former not in linear measurement, but in the area of their squares. And a similar distinction was made among solids.<sup>63</sup>

Saying " $\sqrt{8}$ " is just like saying "diagonal". It designates the line, but it does *not* give us the length of the line in arithmetical terms. It describes the line in relation to something else, namely the area of the square that is built on it. As Theaetetus says, the line in question is not commensurable in linear measurement, but only in the area of its square. So " $\sqrt{8}$ " is way of pointing, of saying "*that* line, the one that is the basis of the 8 foot square." It is *not* to give its precise numerical measurement, which of course, can never be given because it would take an infinite amount of time. " $\sqrt{8}$ ", it must be recognized, is nothing more than shorthand, however useful, for a length that simply *cannot* be fully expressed<sup>64</sup>.

Brown takes the slave-boy episode to be a model of the dialogue as a whole. More specifically, he takes the second, geometrical, part of the slave-boy demonstration to be "essentially the same" as the 'method of hypothesis' (the last section of the dialogue), which according to him "assume[s] an answer to the *ti esti* question and then [proceeds] (in the manner of the geometers) to a *poion* question."<sup>65</sup> The slave, however, in no way *assumes* an answer before he proceeds to

---

<sup>63</sup> Jowett's translation.

<sup>64</sup> Of course, I am not denying that we can compute the value of  $\sqrt{8}$  – the Greeks apparently had methods of doing this (though certainly an uneducated slave would not have been privy to them). It remains true, however, that whatever number we give will be an *approximation* of the true value, which can never be *fully* expressed. Brown seems to agree with me on this point.

<sup>65</sup> p. 208

a correct description, *especially* if by 'answer' Brown requires him to have a number in mind. For one, it is hard to understand how an assumption should lead him to the correct description, but moreover, he does not need to assume anything because he *sees* it. He *knows* which line it is. If he did not know he would not be able to point to it, just as he is not able to point to it when Socrates first offers him the alternative of showing the line instead of giving its number.

#### VI: The Method of Hypothesis

We have already seen that there is a severe disanalogy between Brown's own interpretation of the method of hypothesis and the 'geometrical' part of the slave-boy demonstration that he thinks are "essentially the same" – namely that there is no *assumption* on the boy's part whatsoever.

Taking the nonpropositional interpretation of the *ti esti*-question into account renders Brown's reading even more problematic, however. As soon as we adopt this view, the very idea that the 'method of hypothesis' *assumes* an answer to the *ti esti*-question becomes totally incoherent, for there is no way to *assume* "acquaintance" with something. 'Assumption' only makes sense in connection with propositional beliefs that are either true or false.

If something is assumed in the 'method of hypothesis,' it can only be something propositional. This method must therefore restrict itself to the properties of a thing and attempt to explore the logical relations between them. In using it, we assume that *x* has property *y* and see what follows *conceptually*. It is in this sense that the method is truly 'hypothetical': it leaves the *ti esti*-question completely by the wayside.

It is not hard to see that this is how it actually works in *Meno*, and that the 'method of hypothesis' is thereby to be *contrasted* with the slave-boy episode. The 'method of hypothesis' uses statements that predicate things *of* virtue: "Virtue is good," leads to "Virtue is knowledge," leads to "Virtue is teachable". The reason these are 'hypothetical' is not that Socrates doesn't believe that they are true – it is that *as pieces of language they do not carry within themselves the understanding that is requisite for making that judgement*. This leaves a lot of room for ambiguity and slippery inferences that create confusion, as Socrates demonstrates by eventually deducing the apparent contradiction, "Virtue is not teachable".

That this method is not the same as the slave-boy episode is indicated most clearly, I think, by the fact that throughout the geometrical demonstration Socrates' repeatedly emphasizes the distinction between 'teaching' and 'recollecting', the difference being that in the latter the answer must be "sought exclusively among opinions which the boy already holds, by means of questioning."<sup>66</sup> In the last section of the dialogue where the 'method of hypothesis' is pursued, however, Socrates is willing to gloss over this very distinction. Furthermore, Socrates does not proceed by asking Meno his opinions. It is, rather, Socrates' himself who puts forward 'hypotheses' and who works out the conceptual consequences thereof; Meno merely follows along. In fact, it is apparent that Meno continues to fail to engage in the kind of inquiry that Socrates is hoping to involve him in.

The move to the 'method of hypothesis', after all, comes at a particularly startling moment. With the geometrical demonstration Socrates has just given Meno

---

<sup>66</sup> Brown, p. 199

yet another paradigm that he may follow. He has not only repeated the importance of working from one's own opinions, he has also shown Meno directly that it can succeed. Now he lays off the mythology in order to make sure the main point has been firmly grasped.

*Soc.* ...As far as the other points are concerned, I wouldn't altogether take a stand on the argument; but that we will be better and more manly and less idle if we think one should search for what one doesn't know than if we thought that it isn't possible to discover what we don't know and that we don't need to search for it – *this* is something that I would certainly fight for to the end, if I could, both in word and in deed. (86b5-c4)

Meno replies, "Well, I think you're right about *this*, Socrates." Socrates is perhaps momentarily overjoyed. It *sounds* as if Meno has finally understood enough. He has agreed that we will be better people just by engaging in the inquiry.

*Soc.* Then, since we agree that one should search for what one doesn't know, would you like us to attempt to search together for what excellence is? (τι ποτ' εστιν αρετη;)

Meno raises his hopes for another split second before letting him down completely. "Certainly. But, Socrates, I would most like to consider and hear from you what I asked first of all, whether one should make the attempt assuming that it can be taught, or that it is something that men possess by nature, or that they possess it in what way?"

Meno has failed to grasp a single thing that Socrates has been trying to teach him. The 'priority principle', which was introduced at the very beginning of the dialogue, has been totally lost on him. As Brown puts it, "The rule is: unless it preserves the distinction between fundamental questions and derivative questions, always attacking the fundamental ones first, any inquiry will end in confusion."<sup>67</sup> This has been the point of pretty much everything Socrates has said and shown so

---

<sup>67</sup> Brown, p. 198-199

far, and yet Meno still wants to go straight to the derivative questions! Socrates' next statement clearly acknowledges this. He says:

Well, if I was master, Meno, not only of myself but also of you, we would not be considering whether excellence is teachable or not before we had first of all considered what it is; but since you don't even try to master yourself – I suppose, so that you can be a free man – but rather try to be my master and indeed *are*, I will give into you – for what can I do? – and so it looks as if we must consider *of what sort* something is (ποιον τι εστιν) when we don't yet know *what* it is (οτι εστιν).

It is here, where Socrates “gives in” to Meno, that he introduces the ‘method of hypothesis’ – *as a way of doing precisely what he does not want to do*. And what we should notice is that Meno is no longer asked to give his own ideas, definitions and opinions, as he was in the first part of the dialogue where we often heard Socrates ask “What do you yourself say, Meno?” Instead we witness Socrates working things out while Meno mindlessly assents – I count twenty-four variations on “yes” before Socrates interrupts the pattern by suggesting that maybe they were not correct to agree that since excellence is knowledge, it is teachable.

Moreover, we have textual evidence here that directly contradicts Brown's assertion that the assumption we make in using the ‘method of hypothesis’ involves an answer to the *ti esti*-question. Socrates introduces the approach with an obscure geometrical example (indeed, suggesting that there may be a *kind* of suspect geometry), but then makes the connection to virtue as follows.

Similarly then concerning excellence: since we don't know either what it is or what sort of thing it is, let's make an assumption and consider whether it is teachable or not teachable, as follows: what sort of thing (Ει ποιον τι εστιν) among those connected with the soul would excellence be, to make it teachable or not teachable?

What *sort* of thing, the *poion*-question, is indeed what the ‘method of hypothesis’ limits itself to. It does not concern itself with excellence itself, but only

with what is *said of* excellence. This is as about as damning a piece of evidence as we could hope for against Brown on this point.

#### VII: What does 'teaching' mean?

Throughout the slave-boy episode Socrates clearly contrasts 'teaching' with 'recollecting'. At 82e, for instance, he says, "You see, Meno, that I am not teaching the boy anything, but all I do is question him." Then at 85c-d, we find the following exchange:

Socrates: What do you think, Meno? Has he, in his answers, expressed any opinion that was not his own?

Meno: No, they were all his own.

Socrates: And yet, as we said a short time ago, he did not know? – That is true.

Socrates: ...if he were repeatedly asked about these same things in various ways, you know that in the end his knowledge about these things would be as accurate as anyone's. – It is likely.

Socrates: And he will know it without having been taught but only questioned, and find the knowledge within himself? – Yes.

Socrates: And is not finding knowledge within oneself recollection? – Certainly.<sup>68</sup>

Indeed, at 81d, Socrates seems to identify learning with one and not the other, saying, "...searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection."

Plato also indicates the importance of this distinction in another way. At the beginning of the dialogue, when Socrates says at 71b-c that he cannot answer Meno's question because a) he does not know what virtue *is*, and b) he has never met anyone else who did know, Meno resists: "Did you not meet Gorgias when he was here? Did you then not think that he knew?"

Here Socrates basically lies outright. "I don't have a very good memory, Meno,

---

<sup>68</sup> translated by G.M.A. Grube

so I can't say at present what I thought about him then." <sup>69</sup> As Zwicky reminds us, "for details of what people have said (poets, other philosophers, teachers, interlocutors) [Socrates] has, in general, a mind like a steel trap."<sup>70</sup> At 76c, for instance, he accurately recalls Gorgias' views on Empedoklean natural philosophy; so the irony here must be thick.

Socrates continues, "But perhaps [Gorgias] does know, and you know what he said; so remind me what he said. Or if you like, speak for yourself; for I suppose you think the same as him." Meno replies, "Yes, I do." (71d1-3)

There is something very interesting going on here; Klein's commentary is illuminating and important:

As to the content and syntax of [this] second sentence, what seems to be common to the two subjects, "he" and "you," is *not* common to both, and it is the particle *te* which carries this ambiguity: Gorgias might well *know what arete is*, while Meno might merely *know what Gorgias said it is*. The difference seems crucial.

To "know" what somebody said about something, that is, to *remember* what was said, can, at best, produce an opinion about that something in the one who remembers. The parataxis of the second sentence opposes the possible *knowing* of Gorgias to the possible *opining* of Meno and, at the same time, tends to veil the difference between them. In the last sentence of Socrates' reply the difference seems to disappear completely, inasmuch as the sentence suggests that the similarity of *opinions* held by both Gorgias and Meno. In Socrates' reply as a whole the problems that "knowing," "opining," and "remembering" pose as well as the problems of their mutual relationships are, at any rate, conspicuously present.<sup>71</sup>

Plato, as Zwicky argues, is not only a philosopher but a literary artist – easily one of the best writers the world has ever known – and if these themes are already

---

<sup>69</sup> Klein notes that in addition to Socrates' irony, "in the texture (and sound) of the fuller phrase: [οὐ πάνυ εἰμι μνημων, ὦ Μενων], there seems to be embedded more than one pun and more than one pertinent connotation." The connotations that interest me the most are the following: a) "The name 'Meno,' by itself, could be associated with the stem of *menein* ('to stay as before,' 'to stay put' – generally not in a pejorative sense) and this association might be meaningful in the context of the dialogue," and b) "...the core of that jingle [...*mnêmôn, ô Menôn*] seems to be the combination of the letters *m* and *n*, the Indo-European stem of so many words related to out power of remembering and recollecting as in the words: *mnêmê, memini, mens, mind*." (p. 44)

<sup>70</sup> Zwicky, p. 7

<sup>71</sup> Klein, p. 45

present here it is certainly no accident. In fact, to use Schleiermacher's terms, I think there is good reason to regard this question about knowledge, teaching, and learning, as the 'primary investigation' of *Meno*. The investigation into the being and qualities of *arete*, by contrast, is the naturally grown skin that "hides from the inattentive reader, and only from him, the very thing which is meant to be observed or to be found, while the attentive reader's ability to perceive the intrinsic connection between the two investigations is sharpened and enhanced."<sup>72</sup>

However, just as Plato opposes the *knowing* of Gorgias to the *opining* of Meno and then veils the difference between them at 71d, he insists on the distinction between 'teaching' and 'recollecting' during the slave-boy episode and then, as Zwicky notes, blurs the boundary at 87c when he has Socrates say, "let it make no difference to us which term we use." Why? To understand this, it is imperative to recognize a) that the disavowal comes with the 'method of hypothesis' and b) that the distinction between 'teaching' and 'recollecting' rests on the one that we have been primarily concerned with throughout this chapter: the distinction between how a thing is *qualified* and what that thing *is*.

Recollection in *Meno*, as illustrated in the slave-boy episode, is a way of inquiring into the *being* of things. I have argued, following Gonzalez, that it is thereby a mode of inquiry that aims at nonpropositional insight. Teaching, as the term is used in contrast to 'recollection', is what Socrates insists he is *not* doing throughout the geometrical demonstration. What is that? Well, he is not *telling* the boy the answer. He is not simply saying, "The double square is built on the

---

<sup>72</sup> Schleiermacher, I, 1, p. 15-16 (cited by Klein)

diagonal,” and hoping that the slave will remember this piece of information. Rather, he steadfastly refuses to give the boy that piece of propositional knowledge until the boy has *seen for himself* what makes the proposition true.

Plato clearly communicates that to do otherwise would be to give the boy a true opinion (δοξα), but not knowledge (επιστημη) – and this makes sense given the interpretation of the ‘priority principle’ that I have defended above. Propositions must remain at the level of how a thing is *qualified* and cannot in themselves give us knowledge by “acquaintance,” the kind of experiential knowledge that Plato truly values. Moreover, to give the boy a true opinion by telling him the answer might have a seriously negative effect. By making him think that he knows that which he does not know, it may forestall any desire on his part to inquire honestly into the matter. It could rob him of the opportunity to think it out for himself and to actually *see* the truth of his opinion, which is the only thing that can “tie it down” and keep him from wavering.<sup>73</sup> This is the problem we encounter in the character of Meno himself, who has memorized and repeated at length what he has heard said by others, who has “made many speeches about virtue before large audiences,” but who does not hang out with virtuous people and is not virtuous himself, and who therefore displays no genuine understanding of what he talks about. It is also the problem we encounter in the character of Anytus, who holds an opinion about the sophists which is not really very different from Socrates’ own, yet who is “altogether without experience” of them (92c) and is therefore without *knowledge*.

---

<sup>73</sup> In fact, the suggestion seems to be that he needs to see it over and over again in order to become more and more familiar with it. This is why Socrates says that he should be “repeatedly asked about these same things in various ways”.

In turning to the 'method of hypothesis' Socrates laments, "[I]t looks as if we must consider *of what sort* something is (ποιον τι εστιν) when we don't yet know what it *is* (οτι εστιν)" (86e). This method, therefore, is not an inquiry into *being*. Indeed, it is precisely the confused sort of inquiry that Socrates would most like to avoid. So if Socrates suddenly glosses over the distinction between 'teaching' and 'recollecting' here, we need not be surprised. This distinction was only another way of drawing the primary distinction – if one goes, then so does the other.

At 87c Socrates asserts that 'teachable' will now cover both cases and proceeds to procure Meno's agreement that *if* excellence is some sort of knowledge, *then* it is teachable. But this is now highly ambiguous! As Zwicky says,

'Mere' επιστημη, in the sense of undigested data or the words that constitute the 1,023<sup>rd</sup> line of the *Iliad*, is teachable in the rote sense. 'Full' επιστημη, in the sense of recovered interior vision supported by a 'causal' generative account, is *also* teachable, in a Socratic fashion.<sup>74</sup>

That is, we can disregard talk of 'recollection' and say that Socrates is teaching the slave-boy, but we will nevertheless be required to recognize the distinction that has been drawn between two very different pedagogical techniques, one of which he clearly favours. Failure to do so can only lead to an apparent contradiction – the seemingly valid inference, given everything that has already been said, that virtue is *not* teachable after all.

As Zwicky points out, Plato emphasizes this point once more in the section from 95b-96a where, in speaking of the Sophists, the ambiguity of the word 'teaching' is explicitly discussed, although Meno characteristically misses the point.

Socrates: Well now, are they willing to offer themselves to the young as teachers? Do they agree they are teachers, and that virtue can be taught?

---

<sup>74</sup> Zwicky, p. 47

Meno: No, by Zeus, Socrates, but sometimes you would hear them say that it can be taught, at other times, that it cannot.

A little further on Socrates cites a poet:

Socrates: Do you know that not only you and the other public men at times think that it can be taught, at other times that it cannot, but that the poet Theognis says the same thing? – Where?

Socrates: In his elegiacs: “Eat and drink with these men, and keep their company. Please those whose power is great, for you will learn goodness from the good. If you mingle with bad men you will lose even what wit you possess.” You see that here he speaks as if virtue can be taught? – So it appears.

Socrates: Elsewhere, he changes somewhat: “If this could be done,” he says, “and intelligence could be instilled,” somehow those who could do this “would collect large and numerous fees,” and further: “Never would a bad son be born of a good father, for he would be persuaded by wise words, but you will never make a bad man good by teaching.” You realize that the poet is contradicting himself on the same subject? – He seems to be.

In spite of the fact that we can also read them as sophistical dodges, I am inclined to think that Plato has given us hints in Meno’s short responses. “So it *appears*.” “He *seems* to be.” For in fact, the poet is not contradicting himself on more than a superficial and grammatical level. Instead he should be interpreted according to the very distinction that Socrates has continuously drawn throughout the dialogue. The claim that “you will learn goodness from the good” is importantly different from the claim that “you will never make a bad man good by teaching”. The first emphasizes *learning* as something undertaken by the individual, i.e. keeping certain company, living with them, learning to see things a certain way. In short, it requires one to seek out experiences. The second refers to *teaching* as the activity of instilling intelligence with words, and it is acknowledged that this cannot actually be done, whatever illusions we may have to the contrary.

## Chapter 2: Plato and Wittgenstein

### I: Introduction

In his introduction to the *Philosophical Investigations* (in the series of Cambridge Introductions to Key Philosophical Texts) David G. Stern writes:

In 1944, when Wittgenstein was putting the first part of the *Philosophical Investigations* into its final form, he told a friend that he was reading Plato's *Theaetetus*, and that 'Plato in this dialogue is occupied with the same problems that I am writing about.' (Drury 1984, p.149) Wittgenstein owned a five-volume German translation of Plato by Preisendanz, and refers to passages in Plato quite frequently in his writings.<sup>75</sup>

Stern further notes that, "there are also deep affinities between Wittgenstein's and Plato's dialogues".<sup>76</sup> He emphasizes the dialogical character of the *Philosophical Investigations* and leaves the comparison at that, however. He does not pursue the fact that the *Theaetetus* is a dialogue famous for its discussion of knowledge (*episteme*) and what distinguishes it from mere belief (*doxa*) – let alone what this might tell us about Wittgenstein's own philosophical interests.

We know, in addition to what Stern tells us, that Wittgenstein read Plato extensively and that he used the dialogues to generate discussion in the classroom. And Norman Malcolm gives the astonishing report that "Wittgenstein once observed in a lecture that there was a similarity between his conception of philosophy... and the Socratic doctrine that knowledge is reminiscence."<sup>77</sup> Moreover, Ray Monk reports that "Desmond Lee, another member of Wittgenstein's undergraduate circle of friends, has likened Wittgenstein, in his preference for discussions with younger men, and in the often numbing effect he had on them, to Socrates."<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> Stern, p. 13

<sup>76</sup> *ibid*, p. 14

<sup>77</sup> Malcolm, p. 44

<sup>78</sup> Monk, p. 263

One might suppose that a fair amount of comparative analysis with respect to these philosophers has already been performed; however, in his 2007 paper entitled "Wittgenstein, Plato, and the Historical Socrates," M.W. Rowe laments:

The topic of Wittgenstein and Socrates seems to be seriously underexplored in the literature. I know of only a few helpful texts...

Aside from the texts that Rowe recommends (and which he essentially summarizes)<sup>79</sup>, in my own research I have found that the comparison of Wittgenstein to Plato/Socrates, if and when it is made, is left largely implicit, mentioned only in a single paragraph, and often only in a couple of sentences or in a footnote. Yet I have also found it to be surprisingly widespread, and that it goes both ways. Commentators on Plato will give a brief nod to Wittgenstein<sup>80</sup> as often as Wittgenstein scholars will point out the importance of Plato<sup>81</sup>. This strongly suggests to me that there is something interesting here to be discussed, to be made explicit.

Rowe's essay goes a long way in this direction. He identifies a number of "profound affinities between Wittgenstein and the historical Socrates" at the level of personality, circumstances, philosophical development, reception, and philosophical method, which I will briefly recount here.

According to Rowe, Socrates and Wittgenstein both:

- a) Had an extraordinary passion for natural science in their youth.

---

<sup>79</sup> Richard A. Gilmore, *Philosophical Health: Wittgenstein's Method in 'Philosophical Investigations'* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 1999), pp. 123-161; Judith Genova, *Wittgenstein: A Way of Seeing* (London: Routledge, 1995), 6-8; Jane Heal, 'Wittgenstein and Dialogue' in Timothy Smiley (ed) *Philosophical Dialogues: Plato, Hume, Wittgenstein* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), 63-83; Peter Winch, XIII, in *Philosophical Investigations* 24, No. 2, April 2001, 180-184.

<sup>80</sup> Burnyeat, Gadamer, Gonzalez, Hadot, Kahn, Nussbaum, Szlezák and Zwicky come to mind.

<sup>81</sup> In addition to the authors already listed Creegan and Edwards are good examples.

- b) Reoriented themselves philosophically by adopting a new linguistic method concerned with ethics and human action (self-knowledge of our linguistic practices).
- c) Adopted a more sympathetic attitude toward religion.
- d) Had a strong artistic streak in their personality.
- e) Underwent a major period of conflict, which absorbed more than 30 years of each philosopher's life, was the background to their important work, and destroyed the societies of their youth.
- f) Became preoccupied with ethical life, but took no interest in politics.
- g) Stressed reminding, recalling, remembering (using what is already known)
- h) Used medical analogies for philosophy.
- i) Stressed the *activity* of understanding.
- j) Thought that philosophy serves to relieve a certain kind of cognitive dissonance.
- k) Felt ill at ease in academic institutions.
- l) Were war heroes and showed the same kind of courage on the battlefield.
- m) Disavowed the role of the unworldly, abstract academic contemplation of cosmology or metaphysics.  
  
And,
- n) Were homosexual.

Rowe's claim is that "many apparently chance similarities between the two men's lives and receptions can be explained by their shared conception of

philosophical method.”<sup>82</sup> In particular, Rowe perceives similarities between Wittgenstein and Socrates/Plato with respect to the doctrine of recollection and the critique of writing, and I would like to relate and expand upon these insights.

My idea is that the nonpropositional reading of Plato that I defended in the previous chapter makes better sense not only of the dialogues themselves, but also of this comparison to Wittgenstein (and Wittgenstein’s high regard for Plato). Following James C. Edwards and Ray Monk, I understand Wittgenstein’s mature philosophy as retaining and employing a distinction between what can be *said* and what must be *shown* (although perhaps not the very *same* distinction that is at play in the *Tractatus*). What strikes me is that this distinction bears a significant resemblance to the Platonic distinction between the τι ἐστὶ question and the ὅποιον τι question that was raised in *Meno* and the *Seventh Letter* (this being, in another guise, the distinction between ἐπιστήμη and δοχά). By setting up these distinctions (and the motivation for these distinctions) as objects of comparison, I hope to show more precisely how these philosophers are, as Wittgenstein put it, “occupied with the same problems” when it comes to knowledge, communication and ethics.

In the opening essay of *Dialogue and Dialectic*, Hans-Georg Gadamer writes: “It is not just at a particular hour in the history of Athens that the shadow of sophism accompanies philosophy, but always. In this fact, it seems to me, lies the most important reason that the Platonic dialogue, as opposed to every other philosophical text in our tradition, possesses and will always possess a relevance to the present.” Ultimately I think that Wittgenstein’s philosophy possesses and will

---

<sup>82</sup> Rowe, p.45

always possess relevance to the present for the same reason – that what he rejects (“language gone on holiday”) is nothing other than sophism, and that what he promotes is nothing less than the pursuit of wisdom: the harmony of *logos* and *ergon* – word and deed.

## II. Wittgenstein and *Anamnesis*

The idea that philosophical method uses the process of reminding is invoked in an early section of the *Investigations*. Wittgenstein is considering Augustine’s remark ‘Don’t ask me what time is and I know, ask me what time is and I don’t.’ He continues: ‘Something that we know when no one asks us, but no longer know when we are supposed to give an account of it, is something that we need to *remind* ourselves of. (And it is obviously something of which for some reason it is difficult to remind oneself.) [PI: 89]. The notion of a reminder is taken up at several later points in the book: ‘The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose’ [PI: 127]; ‘The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known.’ [PI: 109]<sup>83</sup>

A curious thing about the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP) and the *Philosophical Investigations* (PI) is that sometimes they look *more* alike, and sometimes they look *less* alike. It strikes me as a worthwhile exegetical exercise therefore, to begin by considering this remark of Augustine’s from the vantage point of Wittgenstein’s earlier philosophy.<sup>84</sup>

In the language of the TLP, if you know something but you can’t *say* it, then you are dealing with something *mystical, transcendental, a priori, and necessary*.

Logic and ethics, as traditional subjects of philosophy, both fall into this category. So

---

<sup>83</sup> Rowe, p. 61

<sup>84</sup> I agree, more or less, with the ‘New Reading’ of Wittgenstein made popular by Cora Diamond and James Conant, which sees basically the *same* philosophical project being carried out in the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*, albeit in different forms.

Preface to PI: “Four years ago I had occasion to re-read my first book (the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*) and to explain its ideas to someone. It suddenly seemed to me that I should publish those old thoughts and the new ones together: that the latter could be seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of my old way of thinking.”

Motto of PI: “The thing about progress is it always looks greater than it really is.”

too, I should think, does the metaphysical question of *time*. It is a condition of possibility for our experience, something that usually goes unnoticed. To notice such things, to pay attention to foundations, we might say, is just what it is to be philosophical.<sup>85</sup>

For Wittgenstein, the *mystical*, *transcendental*, *a priori*, and *necessary* things are better appreciated in silence, however – better left unsaid. “Propositions” that purport to deal with them are, technically speaking, *nonsense*. They are pseudo-propositions that do not represent objective (i.e. physical) states of affairs.

At 4.461 in the TLP, using the tautology and the contradiction as his baseline examples, Wittgenstein puts it this way:

The proposition shows what it says, the tautology and the contradiction show that they say nothing.

The tautology has no truth conditions, for it is true unconditionally; the contradiction is under no condition true.

Tautology and contradiction lack sense.

Yet, like ‘0’ (zero) in arithmetic, they have an important place in the symbolism. James C. Edwards thus convincingly suggests that language is not being used here *descriptively*, but *instrumentally* – that the kind of knowledge in question is not theoretical or representational, but *practical*. We show that we have understood what is *a priori* not in what we *say*, but in what we *do*.

Recognizing that ‘ $p \vee \neg p$ ’ is a tautology teaches one something about the structural relationships of ‘ $p$ ’ and ‘ $\neg p$ ’, i.e., it teaches one how one can combine propositional variables in series with the logical constants, and how one cannot. At 4.4611 Wittgenstein says that a tautology, while it says nothing, is not nonsensical, because it is a “part of the symbolism,” like the ‘0’ (zero) in mathematics. A tautology is part of the

---

<sup>85</sup> How similar is this to Husserl’s *lifeworld*? Garth Hallett cited in *Wittgenstein and Phenomenology*, p. : “Wittgenstein’s main interest was always the *a priori*,” PI, §126: “One might also give the name “philosophy” to what is possible *before* all new discoveries and inventions;” the omitted forward to *Philosophical Remarks*: “I am not interested in constructing a building, so much as in having a perspicuous view of the foundations of possible buildings.”

symbolism because by considering it one learns something of *how to operate with its constituent symbols*. And, since these symbols represent propositions, one at the same time learns something of how to operate in the world. That's what is meant at 6.12 when he says that logic mirrors the formal properties of the *world*, as well as those of language. A tautology does not depict the world of contingent states of affairs; yet it conveys knowledge of the formal structure of language and the world. The knowledge it communicates is practical knowledge; the tautology functions instrumentally by inculcating certain abilities in symbol – and proposition – manipulation. Here one sees something fundamental to the doctrine of showing in all its contexts – the use of language in an instrumental, rather than descriptive, capacity.<sup>86</sup>

Likewise, Wittgenstein's whole book is admittedly nonsense – but it "*points to something*"<sup>87</sup>.

6.54 My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

The meaning of this passage is quite plain: in philosophy, language is the means to the end but never the end itself.<sup>88</sup> "My propositions," says Wittgenstein, are to be "*used...– as steps – to climb up beyond them.*" What *matters* is entirely practical: it is our ability to get by or, as he would later say, to go on.

This is not the only place where Wittgenstein clearly indicates the nonpropositional nature of philosophy:

- 4.1 Propositions represent the existence and non-existence of states of affairs.
- 4.11 The totality of true propositions is the whole of natural science (or the whole corpus of the natural sciences).
- 4.111 Philosophy is not one of the natural sciences.  
(The word 'philosophy' must mean something whose place is above or below the natural sciences, not beside them.)
- 4.112 Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thoughts.  
Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity.

---

<sup>86</sup> Edwards, p. 55

<sup>87</sup> Waismann, 'Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein'

<sup>88</sup> Compare Gonzalez's analysis of dialectic (p. 256): "A distinction is emerging here between a defective propositional knowledge and the nondefective, nonpropositional knowledge to which it is subordinated as means to end. Because knowledge is the link between names, propositions, and images, on the one hand, and the thing itself, on the other, it exists in this tension between being defined in terms of the first three and somehow transcending them in knowledge of the 'fifth'."

A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations.  
 Philosophy does not result in 'philosophical propositions', but rather in the clarification of propositions.  
 Without philosophy thoughts are, as it were, cloudy and indistinct: its task is to make them clear and to give them sharp boundaries.

The central claim here, for our purposes, is that philosophy is an *activity*, indicating once more that practical knowledge – know-how as opposed to knowledge *that* – is the true goal of the philosopher.

The claims that “philosophy does not result in ‘philosophical propositions’” and that “philosophy is not a body of doctrine,” are echoed in the remarks:

6.13      Logic is not a body of doctrine, but a mirror-image of the world.  
             Logic is transcendental.

And,

6.421     It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words.  
             Ethics is transcendental.  
             (Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.)

The identity of aesthetics and ethics is a further clue, however, to what constitutes the proper end of philosophy according to Wittgenstein. We have suggested that it is a kind of know-how – but *what* is it that we must learn how to do? Aesthetics concerns itself with judgments about what is *beautiful*, ethics with judgments about what is *good*. What is similar about these judgments?

The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connexion between art and ethics.

The usual way of looking at things sees objects as it were from the midst of them, the view *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside.

In such a way that they have the whole world as background...

...Each thing modifies the whole logical world, the whole of logical space, so to speak.<sup>89</sup>

This is Spinoza's language, a philosopher who, not insignificantly, emphasized our ability to see a single thing (God and/or Nature – which

---

<sup>89</sup> *Notebooks 1914-1916* (NB), 7.10.16 (abridged)

Wittgenstein *also* refers to in the *Notebooks*) in two different *ways* or under two different *aspects*. Could Wittgenstein's fascination with aspect perception, which is typically taken to be characteristic of only his later thought, already be at work here? The fact that at 5.5423 in the TLP he introduces the Necker Cube and puzzles over the fact that "there are two possible ways of seeing the figure" suggests, at the very least, that he is already intrigued by the phenomenon of the *gestalt shift*.

Now consider some of his more explicit remarks about ethics from the TLP:

- 6.422 When an ethical law of the form, 'Thou shalt...', is laid down, one's first thought is, 'And what if I do not do it?' It is clear, however, that ethics has nothing to do with punishment and reward in the usual sense of the terms. So our questions about the *consequences* of an action must be unimportant. – At least those consequences should not be events. For there must be something right about the question we posed. There must indeed be some kind of ethical reward and ethical punishment, but they must reside in the action itself. (And it is also clear that the reward must be something pleasant and the punishment something unpleasant.)
- 6.43 If the good or bad exercise of the will does alter the world, it can alter only the limits of the world, not the facts – not what can be expressed by means of language.  
In short the effect must be that it becomes an altogether different world. It must, so to speak, wax and wane as a whole.  
The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man.

It is apparent that, for Wittgenstein, ethics is an *existential* affair.<sup>90</sup> It is not about punishment and reward, nor about the consequences of any particular action. It is certainly not about arriving at moral truths that can be written down like the Ten Commandments. It is a case of *seeing-as*. It is about good exercise of the will, which alters the world at its limits and thus changes the *whole* world in a flash. What

---

<sup>90</sup> NB 10.1.17: "If suicide is allowed then everything is allowed. If anything is not allowed then suicide is not allowed. This throws light on the nature of ethics, for suicide is, so to speak, the elementary sin." Compare the opening lines of Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "There is but one truly serious philosophical question, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy."

we have to learn how to do is to see the world (i.e. what can be represented) as the happy man sees it – as *meaningful*. Ethics is thus the cultivation of a certain attitude toward the facts.<sup>91</sup>

6.4321 The facts all contribute only to setting the problem, not to its solution.

6.44 It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists.

6.45 To view the world sub specie aeterni is to view it as a whole – a limited whole.  
Feeling the world as a limited whole – it is this that is mystical.

Feeling the world as a limited whole is to understand the way in which the world is limited by *oneself*<sup>92</sup> – by one's attitude. Philosophical knowledge is thus not knowledge of the world (in the scientific sense), but *self*-knowledge – an awareness of one's ability to entertain different attitudes, and to choose among them.<sup>93</sup>

Ethical "propositions", like tautologies, *say* nothing. This is not evident from truth tables of course, but nevertheless, they *feel* the same.

I keep on coming back to this! Simply the happy life is good, the unhappy bad. And if I *now* ask myself: But why should I live *happily*, then this of itself seems to me to be a tautological question; the happy life seems to be justified, of itself, it seems that it *is* the only right life...

...What is the objective mark of the happy, harmonious life? Here it is again clear that there cannot be any such mark, that can be *described*. This mark cannot be a physical one but only a metaphysical one, a transcendental one.<sup>94</sup>

To say that the mark of the happy life cannot be physical but only transcendental is just to say that it is the kind of thing that makes itself manifest – that it can be recognized in the behaviour of the happy man but that words can only

<sup>91</sup>NB 4.11.16: "The will is an attitude of the subject to the world."

<sup>92</sup>TLP 5.641: "...What brings the self into philosophy is the fact that 'the world is my world'. The philosophical self is not the human being, not the human body, or the human soul, with which psychology deals, but rather the metaphysical subject, the limit of the world – not a part of it."

<sup>93</sup>BT, §86: "Work on philosophy is – as work in architecture frequently is – actually more of a // a kind of // work on oneself. On one's own conception. *On the way one sees things*. (And what one demands of them.)" (my italics)

<sup>94</sup>NB 30.7.16

ever fail to do it justice. It is ineffable, something we can't pin down in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions even when we are *certain* that an individual exhibits it.

In our efforts to express such things we run up against the limits of our language – we talk nonsense. In the TLP, however, philosophical language is nonsense in both a good and a bad way. On the one hand, it is true that Wittgenstein thinks that whatever can be expressed in language only by nonsense is better left unsaid – so nonsense definitely transgresses a real limit. On the other hand, by being nonsense, philosophy is preserved from the encroachment of science. Everything really important, everything of value, everything normative, everything necessary, thinks Wittgenstein, transcends language. This means that it does not admit of scientific investigation; that even if we had a complete scientific picture of the world, the problems of *human* life would remain untouched (6.52). That they are not scientific problems is what makes them *aesthetic* problems. Their solution is not to be found in the world but in oneself, in a change of sensibility.

So 'nonsense' in the TLP, being non-representational, cannot communicate new information, yet it has a use. It can *remind* us to pay attention to something that is always already available to us (because it is a condition of our experience) and yet which is commonly forgotten. Thus, what Wittgenstein calls 'talking *nonsense*' in the TLP appears to be closely related, in one respect, to what he calls 'reminding' in the PI.

However, Wittgenstein uses the critical term 'nonsense' in the PI as well and we need to make sense of this. Since he abandons the picture-theory of the

proposition and the strictly representational view of language, he must also give up the Tractarian definition of 'nonsense'. In the later work this word must mean something different.

The underlying picture operating [in the *Tractatus*] is that there are objective canons of sense; some uttered combinations of words meet these canons and others do not... When, for example, one judges a particular philosophical position to be nonsensical, one means by this that any full statement of that position inevitably violates the canons of sense comprised in thought and language... Wittgenstein came to see how dangerous a picture is involved in believing that standards of sense are somehow "out there," somehow given in thought and language themselves. In sections 499-500 he is suggesting another picture as more appropriate: judging some utterance to be nonsense is much like saying "I cannot go along with you there." It is to heed or to erect a boundary; and as he reminds us, boundaries are drawn *by us*, and for quite different reasons. The canons of sense are not given once and for all; they vary at different times, for different persons, and for many reasons... the distinction between sense and nonsense acquires human size and features. No longer is the structure of thought an alien, rigid, determined system; sense is something *we* make (or fail to).<sup>95</sup>

In other words, judgments of sense and nonsense are no longer universal in the *Investigations*. *Language-games* are now the standard of sense and cannot be explained – they are the bedrock where "our spade is turned"<sup>96</sup>. To adopt a language-game is not merely to adopt a way of speaking, however; it is to adopt a *form of life*, a way of *being* in *community*. Nonsense, for any given individual then, is just the set of language-games that he does not know how or is not willing to play.

To judge some apparently assertive utterance to be philosophical nonsense is a judgment *of a sensibility*, made *out of* another sensibility, and aimed at an *alteration* in that first sensibility. The Wittgensteinian philosopher confronted with the utterances of traditional metaphysical philosophy is something like the traveller confronted with a radically foreign culture: he sees; he hears; he is even able to understand the sentences that are being uttered. But in a deep sense he does not understand the *people* who utter those sentences: he does not find himself in those men and women; his sensibility is utterly different.<sup>97</sup>

The early Wittgenstein's admitted recourse to what he called nonsensical statements in the TLP, combined with the theme that we must be silent about the

---

<sup>95</sup> Edwards, p.

<sup>96</sup> PI:217

<sup>97</sup> Edwards, p.145

things that he uses nonsense to communicate, implicates him, in the eyes of some philosophers, in a kind of performative contradiction. That is because he does not practice “the strictly correct method” that he outlines at section 6.53, which would be to state nothing but the facts and to let whatever *value* there might be to shine through them.

Although Wittgenstein goes so far in the TLP as to say that such a method would have recourse to nothing but the propositions of *science* this is only necessitated by the rigid representational framework of the TLP. We get a good idea of the kind of thing he is talking about, I think, by considering his 1917 correspondence with Engelmann, who sent him a poem by Uhland entitled ‘Count Eberhard’s Hawthorn’. The poem tells the story of a soldier who, while on crusade, cuts a spray from a hawthorn bush, which, when he returns home, he plants in his garden. In old age, he sits beneath the shade of the fully-grown hawthorn tree, which serves as a reminder of his youth. There is little embellishment and no explicit drawing of morals, and for this reason, both men agreed that it was a great success. “Almost all other poems,” Engelmann wrote to Wittgenstein, “attempt to express the inexpressible; here that is not attempted, and precisely because of that it is achieved.” Wittgenstein replied emphatically, “if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then *nothing* gets lost. But the unutterable will be – unutterably – *contained* in what has been uttered!”<sup>98</sup>

If Wittgenstein failed to fully accomplish this in the TLP, at least we know that he was sincerely aiming at it. In a letter to von Ficker he writes:

---

<sup>98</sup> letter cited in Monk, *How to Read: Wittgenstein* p. 25

...my work consists of two parts: of the one which is here, and of everything which I have *not* written. And precisely this second part is the important one. For the Ethical is delimited from within, as it were, by my book; and I'm convinced that, *strictly* speaking, it can *ONLY* be delimited in this way. In brief, I think: All of that which *many* are *babbling* today, I have defined in my book by remaining silent about it..

I believe that Monk is most likely correct when he suggests that Wittgenstein's later work be viewed as a further attempt to live up to this ideal of philosophical communication, and to overcome the shortcomings of the TLP. Whereas nonsense in the TLP could serve as reminder, he stays completely clear of philosophical (i.e. metaphysical) uses of language now. Instead, the process of reminding becomes the contrary one of bringing words "back from their metaphysical to their everyday use"<sup>99</sup>. The comparison of philosophical and ethical disputes to aesthetic ones remains central, however.

What Aesthetics tries to do, he said, is to give *reasons*. ...*Reasons*, he said, in Aesthetics, are "of the nature of further descriptions," e.g., you can make a person see what Brahms was driving at by showing him lots of pieces by Brahms, or by comparing him to a contemporary author; and all that Aesthetics does is "to draw your attention to a thing," to "place things side by side." He said that if, by giving "reasons" of this sort, you make the other person "see what you see" but it "still doesn't appeal to him," that is "an end" of the discussion; and that what he, Wittgenstein, had "at the back of his mind" was "the idea that aesthetic discussions were like discussions in a court of law," where you try to "clear up the circumstances" of the action which is being tried, hoping that in the end what you say will "appeal to the judge." And he said that the same sort of "reasons" were given, not only in Ethics, but also in Philosophy. (ML, p. 278)

When it comes to changing somebody's aesthetic judgment it is not enough to simply insist that Brahms is beautiful and that they *ought* to appreciate it. The only effective method is more indirect. We must draw the judgment out of the individual, who has to be left to grasp the value of the artwork *for himself*. Understanding cannot be foisted upon him from the outside. And if, in the end, he does not see things the way we see things, then that's that.

---

<sup>99</sup> PI: 116

The same goes in philosophy. The later Wittgenstein is concerned to develop a method for getting people to see aspects of things that they were previously blind to. He avowedly wants to change your “*way of looking*”<sup>100</sup> at things. This means, however, not a change of *belief*, but a change in *sensibility*.

The *Big Typescript*, sections 86-93 of which are collected in *Philosophical Occasions* under the heading ‘philosophy’, was Wittgenstein’s first attempt to put his new thoughts into writing after the publication of the *Tractatus*. There we find him repeating that the difficulty of philosophy is not the intellectual difficulty of the sciences, but the difficulty of a change of attitude – a change in *oneself*. “Resistances of the will must be overcome,” he says. Yet there is more; Wittgenstein has a better idea about his method, a refined conception of philosophy. “Philosophy shows the misleading analogies in the use of language.” “The method of philosophy: the perspicuous representation of grammatical//linguistic//facts. The goal: the transparency of arguments. Justice.”

Philosophy, to be sure, is still an activity of clarification and does not put forward doctrines. Like the *elenchus* of Socrates, it is purely critical: “Philosophizing is: rejecting false arguments.”<sup>101</sup> What is characteristic of Wittgenstein’s thinking is the *way* in which we are supposed to reject false arguments – *not* with a counter-argument, but with a rearrangement of the facts that renders the original argument, that way of speaking, senseless. This is what Wittgenstein calls the passage from

---

<sup>100</sup> PI: 144

<sup>101</sup> PO, p. 165

“disguised nonsense” to “patent nonsense”<sup>102</sup> – nonsense, in the later work, never being a good thing.

If I correct a philosophical mistake and say that this is the way it has always been conceived, but this is not the way it is, I always point to an analogy//I must always point to...//that was followed, and show that this analogy is incorrect.//...I must always point to an analogy according to which one had been thinking, but which one did not recognize as an analogy.//

The effect of a false analogy taken up into language: it means a constant battle and uneasiness (as it were, a constant stimulus).

In other words, the *grammatical picture* that underlies our formulation of a problem goes unnoticed and generates all of our difficulties. Philosophical problems arise when we take our metaphysical cues (what we are prepared to *say*) from the grammar of our language, even in the face of conflicting experience.

A simile that has been absorbed into the forms of our language produces a false appearance, and this disquiets us. “But *this* isn’t how it is!” – we say. “Yet *this* is how it has to *be!*” (PI: 112)

Philosophy is therapeutic. It relieves this cognitive dissonance by showing us that the *picture* according to which we have been thinking is not the only possible one and that a more perspicuous choice may be available. It encourages us to pay attention to *how things are* over how language *says* they are (“Don’t think. Look and see!”), and then to be more careful about how we speak.

(The choice of our words is so important, because the point is to hit upon the physiognomy of the thing exactly, because only the exactly aimed thought can lead to the correct track. The car must be placed on the tracks precisely so, so that it can keep rolling correctly.)<sup>103</sup>

At the same time, even if a more perspicuous choice of language is possible, the very possibility of another way of speaking opens our eyes to the

---

<sup>102</sup> PI: 464

<sup>103</sup> ‘Philosophy’ in *Philosophical Occasions*

fact (reminds us) that the pictures and analogies we use to speak about phenomena are not the phenomena themselves.

Nonsense in the TLP is a way of speaking about the *a priori*, what can only be shown. Such uses of language do not themselves *show*, but they gesture towards what makes *itself* manifest. The emphasis on reminding in Wittgenstein's later thought betrays the same concern to direct our attention toward what we already know: what is *presupposed*.

The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one's eyes.) The real foundations of his enquiry do not strike a man at all. Unless *that* fact has at some time struck him. – And this means: we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and most powerful. (PI: 129)

Experiencing *meanings*, according to Wittgenstein, is always a matter of *context* – a context that is usually supplied for us. When philosophers remove words and ideas from their actual contexts of usage and contemplate them in abstraction, they presume that they know the meanings of the terms they are using. They make believe that meaning is an *intellectual* affair instead of a matter of *practice*. Wittgenstein reminds us that experiencing the *meaning* of a word is a peculiar kind of experience, because it has as a necessary condition an ability or capacity to *do* something.

It is only if someone can do, has learnt, is master of, such-and-such, that it makes sense to say he has had *this* experience.<sup>104</sup>

David Seligman:

The 'mould of my mind' into which a concept fits is a context of an unusual sort; it is a context of abilities to make applications, the mastery of a technique. It is the 'fitting in' of the concept which gives us the peculiar feeling of 'experiencing a meaning.' It is the 'fitting in' to a context of a visual experience which gives rise to the 'experiencing of an aspect.' The 'fitting in' is nothing which I do. It is something which can only occur if I

---

<sup>104</sup> P.I., Part II, xi, 209

have already done certain things, learned certain concepts, acquired certain abilities. Could the cube be seen 'as if from below' or 'as if from above' if I had not ever seen anything from above or below? The ability which I must have is the ability to do what is *ordinarily done for me* when I see something or use a word. I must have the ability to provide a context.<sup>105</sup>

Language is nonsense for the later Wittgenstein when it is like an engine idling, i.e. when it is not doing any work. Not unlike William James (a philosopher he had some admiration for), Wittgenstein wants to do away with 'philosophical' disputes that do not revolve "around the axis of our real need".

There is...the queer case of a difference between what we say, when we actually try to see what happens, and what we say when we think about it (giving over the reigns to language).<sup>106</sup>

It is possible (indeed, too common) to 'give over the reigns to language' even when we are thinking about language itself. What is needed is to pay attention to how words are actually used, which means understanding what kind of role they have in a *language-game* – i.e. in a *form of life*. In the margin of the *Big Typescript* Wittgenstein scribbles: "Learning philosophy is really recollecting. We remember that we really used words in this way."

Now, does the similarity between Wittgenstein and Plato/Socrates end at the use of the terms *recollection*, *reminder*, and *remember*?<sup>107</sup> Or are there deeper, genuinely philosophical affinities between these thinkers which the use of these terms signals?

In the previous chapter I suggested, following Zwicky and Klein, that the "primary investigation" of *Meno* is about *learning* and *teaching*. My contention was that Plato's audience is meant to pick up on an ambiguity in these words, one that

---

<sup>105</sup> Seligman, p. 215

<sup>106</sup> PO, p. 202

<sup>107</sup> It is not clear, for instance, that Rowe goes any further than this.

Meno himself misses and which is therefore not made explicit. That is to say that there are *two* distinct activities that go by the name 'teaching' – teaching by *telling*, and teaching by *questioning*. The latter is what Socrates associates with recollection, as we know from the slave-boy episode where he insists that he has not taught the boy anything but only elicited his own opinions. Moreover, we saw that Plato thinks that only this method of questioning leads to knowledge (επιστημη), whereas telling can only impart belief or opinion (δοξα). This had to do with the fact that any statement about anything *qualifies* that thing and thus remains at the level of *opinion*. The *esti*, the *being* that is known, escapes language and needs to be directly experienced. It can never be apprehended through words or signs.

Wittgenstein also, implicitly, makes the distinction between two kinds of teaching: teaching by *saying* and teaching by *showing*. Consider the following remark from 'Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*':

We must begin with the mistake and transform it into what is true.  
That is, we must uncover the source of the error; otherwise hearing what is true won't help us.  
It cannot penetrate when something is taking its place.  
To convince someone of what is true, it is *not enough to state it*; we must find the road from error to truth.

In his inaugural address to the Aristotelian Society in 1987, Miles Burnyeat notes that both Plato and Augustine would happily agree with this comment of Wittgenstein's<sup>108</sup> – that all three philosophers have similar lessons to impart about learning and teaching.

---

<sup>108</sup> Burnyeat, p. 8

Specifically, Burnyeat draws our attention to the Platonic spirit of Augustine's dialogue, "The Teacher", where Augustine works his way through the following hypotheses:

- (a) Some teaching is effected through words or signs.
- (b) All teaching about words or signs is effected through words or signs.
- (c) All teaching whatsoever is through words or signs.
- (d) No teaching is effected through words or signs.

Burnyeat writes:

Augustine, like Plato often (and Wittgenstein), is determined not to tell us how to read his writing. I think that we can understand what is going on if we distinguish between teaching by telling and teaching by showing. In the first part of the discussion showing was gradually squeezed out in favour of telling. Indeed, if teaching is restricted to telling, (a), (b) and (c) are innocuously true. What is more, the dry and sensible semantic theory invoked to prove that all words are names can stand as an innocuous account of how one does tell things with words. In the second part of the discussion, by contrast, showing is privileged over telling. If teaching is restricted to showing, (d) is innocuously true, and in arguing for (d) Augustine does so restrict it:

"The utmost value I can attribute to words is this. They bid us look for things, but they do not show them to us so that we may know them. He alone teaches me anything who sets before my eyes, or one of my other bodily senses, or my mind, the things which I desire to know." (xi 36)<sup>109</sup>

"Words...bid us look for things, but they do not show them to us..." This recalls the way in which the *ti esti* question about the length of the line in the slave-boy episode is answered by *showing*, and how the word 'hypotenuse' *names* but does not *give* the length. Moreover, it brings to mind the way that nonsense (in the early Wittgenstein) *gestures* towards something that makes itself manifest. Elsewhere Augustine makes a similar point:

And when I said, 'What we know, therefore, we owe to reason, what we believe, to authority' (quod scimus igitur, debemus rationi, quod credimus, auctoritati), this is not to be taken in such a way as to make us frightened in more ordinary conversation of

---

<sup>109</sup> "Wittgenstein and Augustine *De Magistro*" p. 14

saying that we know what we believe on adequate testimony. It is true that when we speak properly (*proprie*), we say we know only that which we grasp by firm reasoning of the mind. But when we speak in language more suited to common use, as even the Holy Scripture speaks, we should not hesitate to say we know both what we perceive by our bodily senses and what we believe on the authority of trustworthy witnesses, while nevertheless understanding the distance between these and that. (*Retractationes* I xiv 3)

One way of speaking would be to say that Augustine is here introducing two alternative *meanings* of the word 'know', since he is pointing out two different *uses* of it. Indeed, Augustine seems here to abide by the Wittgensteinian dictum that: "Philosophy leaves everything as it is." He says, "we should not hesitate to say we know...what we believe on the authority of trustworthy witnesses," – so he does not want to change the way we speak.

The point, however, is certainly not that there are two different *concepts* of knowledge. Rather, Augustine is saying that in many contexts we use the word 'knowledge' *loosely*. He says, "*when we speak properly*, we say we know only that which we grasp by firm reasoning of the mind," (my emphasis) and insists that we "understand the distance between these and that." Although we should not change the way we speak, we should pay attention to phenomena themselves and not merely the words we use, because words have a tendency to mask very real differences.<sup>110</sup>

Moreover, Burnyeat points out that, for Augustine, knowledge (strictly speaking) is *not* justified true belief.

...[when we look back to the original statement in the *De Utilitate Credendi*], [w]e discover that the contrast between believing and knowing (*scire*) was presented there (UC xi 25) as a contrast between believing and understanding (*intelligere*). The original statement was, 'What we understand (*intelligimus*), we owe to reason'. If Augustine feels that it makes no odds whether he writes *scire* or *intelligere*, that implies that in his view the proper meaning of *scire* is *intelligere*. And that in turn explains why he thinks

---

<sup>110</sup> Words also, importantly, have the contrary capacity to create *unreal* differences.

it loose or improper to use 'knowing' (*scire*) in the ordinary way of what we believe on adequate testimony. *Intellegere* would not fit here at all. Adequate testimony is excellent justification for believing something, but it does not contribute an understanding of the thing believed. Firm reasoning of the mind, on the other hand, does both: it justifies a belief in such a manner as to enlighten it with understanding.<sup>111</sup>

Burnyeat adds correctly that: "This would have been a very traditional conception of knowledge, reflecting the continuing influence of Plato and Aristotle on the philosophical climate of the times." It is in fact a reiteration of the strict epistemological distinction drawn by Plato: whatever we receive from authority, whatever comes to us only through language and is retained by the memory, is *belief* (*δοξα*), not *knowledge* (*επιστημη*).<sup>112</sup>

Burnyeat writes:

Augustine, it turns out, is a firm believer in what Jonathan Barnes has called epistemic categories. He sorts all knowable truths into two classes: (1) truths such that if x knows that p, then x has perceived by sense that p, (2) truths such that if x knows that p, then x has perceived by the mind that p. If x has not perceived that p in either way, he can only believe that p, not know it.<sup>113</sup>

Burnyeat cites xii 39-40 of the *Confessions* to this effect, where Augustine claims that: "Even when I speak what is true and he sees what is true, it is not I who teach him." Using an image that echoes the *Seventh Letter's* description of knowledge as a flame kindled in the soul, Augustine emphasizes "inner light" and insists that if another person "comes to know what I say" it is not the "result of my words" by the "result of his own contemplation."

Burnyeat continues:

<sup>111</sup> "Wittgenstein and Augustine *De Magistro*" p. 7

<sup>112</sup> Gonzalez also argues that *episteme* and *doxa* have different objects, and that *επιστημη* is better translated as "understanding". Additionally Gwynneth Matthews argues convincingly that, according to Plato, true belief is *not* a necessary condition for knowledge – rather, she takes the irrationality (and hence inexpressibility) of the solution in the slave-boy episode to indicate that belief and knowledge are *incommensurable* with one another. See the Introduction to *Plato's Epistemology*.

<sup>113</sup> "Wittgenstein and Augustine *De Magistro*", p. 18

It is a direct consequence of this epistemological stance that there is no such thing as historical knowledge or knowledge transmitted by the word of another person. All knowledge has to come from first-hand learning, by the intellect or by my own sense-perception, just as Plato maintains in the *Meno* that mathematical knowledge has to come by reasoning and knowledge of the road to Larissa by actually travelling there, and in the *Theaetetus* that what happened at the scene of a crime can only be known by the eyewitness who saw it with his own eyes...

...What there is, in both Plato and Augustine, is the attempt to make the thesis persuasive to us by calling upon our sense of a great gap between the epistemic position of an eyewitness who watches an event with his own eyes and that of the jury later, or, in Augustine's example, the position of present day readers of the Book of Daniel. Plato and Augustine want to persuade us that this gap is the gap between knowledge and mere true belief.<sup>114</sup>

That Plato does not *argue* in favour of first-hand learning, but sets up as objects of comparison the epistemic position of the eye-witness and the jurors, is significantly of a piece with Wittgenstein's methodology. He does not seek to impart to us new facts; rather, he aims to remind us of a difference that is apparent to all who give the matter some reflection.

I agree with Burnyeat when he says that the conclusion drawn by each of these thinkers is *not* "that information cannot be transmitted from one person to another," but that "the appreciation or understanding of any such information is a task that each person must work at for himself." Strictly speaking then, for each of these philosophers, it is impossible to bring another person to know something by telling him. That is because real learning is not only a matter of memory – it is a matter of knowing *how* to learn. That means it is a matter of taking up a certain *attitude* toward what you don't know, of *seeking* out knowledge, and of *practice*.

Practice is what it takes to achieve understanding in both mathematics and ethics, and this goes a long way, I think, toward explaining the analogy that is drawn

---

<sup>114</sup> "Wittgenstein and Augustine *De Magistro*", p. 19-20

between them by both Plato and Wittgenstein. In both cases, “no-one can achieve my understanding for me, not for the trivial reason that it is mine, but because to internalize the requisite connections is to go beyond what is presented on any occasion of so-called teaching”<sup>115</sup>. What is required is more than just agreement about definitions, as Wittgenstein says; it is agreement in judgments (PI: 242), the ability to *perform*.

When it comes to imparting practical knowledge, teaching by *showing* (i.e. reminding/recollection) is what is called for.

Is there such a thing as ‘expert judgment’ about the genuineness of expressions of feeling? – Even here there are those whose judgment is ‘better’ and those whose judgment is ‘worse’.

Correcter prognoses will generally issue from the judgment of those with better knowledge of mankind.

Can one learn this knowledge? Yes; some can. Not, however, by taking a course in it, but through ‘*experience*’. – Can someone else be a man’s teacher in this? Certainly. From time to time he gives him the right *tip*. – This is what ‘learning’ and ‘teaching’ are like here. – What one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgments. There are also rules, but they do not form a system, and only experienced people can apply them right...<sup>116</sup>

Elsewhere Wittgenstein notes, “An important fact here is that we learn certain things only through long experience and not from a course in school,”<sup>117</sup> and asks, “How, for instance, does one develop the eye of a connoisseur?” He observes, of the connoisseur’s judgment, that: “In most cases he was able to list his reasons for his judgment, but generally it wasn’t they that were convincing.” And he gives an implicit nod to Plato’s *Theaetetus* with the remark: “A *connoisseur* couldn’t make himself understood to a jury, for instance. That is, they would understand his

---

<sup>115</sup> Burnyeat, p. 23

<sup>116</sup> PI, Part II p.

<sup>117</sup> Compare this remark with one from the preface of the TLP where he says that his book “is not a textbook”.

statement, but not his reasons. He can give intimations to another connoisseur, and the latter will understand them.”

This is from Part II of the *Philosophical Investigations* where Wittgenstein is discussing the nature of judgments that are based upon “imponderable evidence” – evidence that is, as Monk puts it, “resistant to the general formulation characteristic of science, or even to the weighing up characteristic of legal evidence.”<sup>118</sup> Monk lists three features of this kind of evidence:

1. It can be *seen* as evidence for a particular judgment, but usually it cannot be described other than as evidence for that judgment (e.g., ‘How do you *know* your father dislikes your boyfriend?’ ‘I could tell by the way he looked at him’ ‘And how did he look at him?’ ‘Well,... as if he didn’t like him’)
2. The value of the evidence varies with experience and the knowledge of the person providing it, and this is more or less the *only* way of weighing such evidence, since
3. It cannot be evaluated, weighed, *pondered*, by appeal to any system of general principles or universal laws.<sup>119</sup>

To be able to *see* such evidence as evidence takes a certain kind of *perception*.

Is this not what Aristotle has in mind when he makes *phronesis* the cornerstone of his ethical vision? I think it is, but not only that; I also think that it is what Plato is driving at in *Meno*.<sup>120</sup>

Burnyeat writes: “It is eloquent testimony both to Augustine’s philosophical acumen and to the coherence of the Platonic epistemology that Augustine should have been able to reconstruct it, on the basis of a quite new set of arguments.” My aim, as you know, is just to point out the way in which Wittgenstein arrived at the

---

<sup>118</sup> Monk, p. 101

<sup>119</sup> Monk, p. 104

<sup>120</sup> In particular, there is an interesting moment toward the end of the dialogue where Plato trades *episteme* first for *phronesis* (98d11) and then once more for *sophia* (99b5) – knowledge for wisdom. To paraphrase Burnyeat’s comment about Augustine, I am inclined to say that if Plato feels that it makes no odds whether he writes *episteme* or *phronesis/sophia*, that implies that in his view (at least according to his purposes in this particular discussion) the proper meaning of *episteme* is *phronesis/sophia*.

same views by contemplating, like Plato and Augustine before him (and with their aid, perhaps) the limits of language and the nature of philosophical communication.<sup>121</sup>

### III. The Critique of Writing and the Importance of Literary Form

What Augustine refers to as “the distance between these and that” is the distance between what we know according to experience and/or reason (i.e. sensory *or* intellectual experience) and what we “know” from authority (i.e. what we have *heard or read*). It is the gulf between understanding and mere repetition, recollection and memory, and what Plato terms *episteme* and *doxa*. This issue, and roughly this distinction, is also what centrally concerns Wittgenstein when he says: “To convince someone of what is true, it is *not enough to state it*; we must find the road from error to truth.” Consistent with his earlier philosophy, Wittgenstein thinks that we ought to proceed as philosophers only by *showing*.

This is quite a strict epistemological and pedagogical distinction, which for Plato means that philosophical communication is no simple and straightforward matter. In particular, since this view emphasizes the idea that each individual must engage in the activity of understanding and frowns upon the brute memorization of texts and any kind of dogmatic reliance upon words, it renders any and all philosophical writing highly problematic.

Recall Plato’s claims from the *Seventh Letter* (341c): (1) “there neither is now nor ever will be a written work by me on [what I seriously study]”; and (2)

---

<sup>121</sup> An important difference between Augustine’s philosophy and Plato’s, of course, is the Christian element. For Augustine, Christ is man’s true teacher and no amount of individual human effort will suffice for the acquisition of *sophia* – divine illumination is required. I have merely wanted to emphasize the Platonic epistemological spirit in Augustine.

“What is truly written in the soul” is what Plato also refers to as τιμιωτερα (*timiotera*), the “more valuable things” that the philosopher possesses and which allow him to support his *logos*. The image of being ‘written’ in one’s soul is meant to invoke the proper air of permanence – the *timiotera* are also *episteme* which ‘ties down’ *doxa* (*Meno* 97e3-98a8).

With respect to what he “seriously studies,” Plato, in the *Seventh Letter*, tells us:

I do not...think the attempt to tell mankind of these matters a good thing, except in the case of some few who are capable of discovering the truth for themselves with a little guidance. [L7, 341e]

Because,

Acquaintance [with my philosophy] must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining. [L7, 341c-d]

Plato thinks of philosophy primarily as what Socrates engaged in – an oral activity – and his solution to the problem of putting this activity into writing was to write in dialogues. As Rowe points out:

Compared with living interlocutors and living speech, any form of philosophical writing must be frozen, calcified and inadequate, but it is evident that the dialogue – as a literary form – is slightly less inadequate than most other kinds of writing. It is by its nature social, and it is the form of writing that comes closest to spoken word. A dialogue can show how different interlocutors are to be treated and responded to; the interlocutor can demonstrate what intellectual sympathy is, and anticipate what readers would like to see explained or defended. Dialogue does not state its method but shows it; and the reader can learn by example. Also it does not merely present its conclusions and then run through the justifications; it develops the reader’s acuity by allowing him to witness a process of thought. It presents many poor arguments, wrong turnings, digressions, and the reader has to select amongst these what he will take away. Consequently truth will be something arrived at by the reader rather than something of which he is informed.<sup>122</sup>

This is another way of saying what Klein also stresses: that the dialogues require the *participation* of the reader. They are texts that are designed not to

---

<sup>122</sup> Rowe, p. 83

straightforwardly communicate information, but rather to give the reader a taste of an activity that she can, if so inspired, engage in herself. They are, in other words, *protreptic*.<sup>123</sup> That is because, for Plato (as for Wittgenstein) philosophy is not only a matter of knowing the correct thing to say. It is primarily about leading the right kind of life.

Becoming a philosopher entails experiencing a 'turning of the soul' (φυξης περιαγωγη, *Republic* 521c6; cf. 518d4) which alters one's whole life. What marks out the philosopher is a completely altered attitude to reality.<sup>124</sup>

Rowe informs us that:

Wittgenstein began reading Plato carefully in 1931, soon after he re-entered professional philosophy, and at the time when he was rethinking his entire philosophical approach. He owned several volumes of Plato, and there are quotations and references in his work to the *Philebus*, *Statesman*, *Sophist*, *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Parmenides*, *Phaedrus*, and – in particular – the *Theaetetus*.<sup>125</sup>

This re-thinking of philosophy on Wittgenstein's part is also a re-thinking of how philosophy can be written. This question, of course, was central to the conception of the TLP, which stressed a non-scientific approach to philosophy – already in writing that book Wittgenstein thought of himself as accomplishing something not only philosophical but artistic and *literary*. His intentions were widely misunderstood, however.

Many who knew Wittgenstein personally, such as Maurice Drury, eventually published notes of their conversations in order to correct the effect of what Drury called "well-meaning commentators" who "make it appear that [Wittgenstein's]

<sup>123</sup> I am thinking here of Aristotle's *Protrepticus*, Cicero's *Hortensius*, and other similar classical texts which are not bodies of doctrine but rather exhortations to the practice of philosophy.

<sup>124</sup> Szlezák, p.49

<sup>125</sup> Rowe, p.83

writings were now easily assimilable into the very intellectual milieu they were largely a warning against".<sup>126</sup>

In his autobiography, Rudolf Carnap attests to the spirit in which Wittgenstein really worked:

...there was a striking difference between Wittgenstein's attitude toward philosophical problems and that of Schlick and myself. Our attitude toward philosophical problems was not very different from that which scientists have toward their problems...  
 ...[Wittgenstein's] point of view and his attitude toward people and problems, even theoretical problems, were much more similar to those of a creative artist than to those of a scientist; one might almost say, similar to those of a religious prophet or a seer....<sup>127</sup>

In an early draft of the foreword to *Philosophical Remarks*, penned in 1930,

Wittgenstein reiterates this unchanging and fundamental attitude:

It is all one to me whether or not the typical western scientist understands or appreciates my work, since he will not in any case understand the spirit in which I write. Our civilization is characterized by the word 'progress'. Progress is its form rather than making progress being one of its features. Typically it constructs. It is occupied with building an ever more complicated structure. And even clarity is sought only as a means to this end, not as an end in itself. For me on the contrary clarity, perspicuity are valuable in themselves.

I am not interested in constructing a building, so much as in having a perspicuous view of the foundations of possible buildings. So I am not aiming at the same target as the scientists and my way of thinking is different from theirs.

If philosophy is not to be practiced on the model of the sciences, it is to be practiced on the model of the arts, as a *humanistic* discipline. Philosophy, according to Wittgenstein, has to do with the development of a sensibility that is responsive to imponderable evidence. The philosopher thus has more in common with great artists, musicians and novelists than with scientists; a belief of Wittgenstein's that is conveyed not only by the writers he held in highest esteem – Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky among them – but also by the great importance he placed on musical understanding.

<sup>126</sup> Monk, *How to Read: Wittgenstein*, p.96

<sup>127</sup> Fann (ed.), p. 34-35

This is why he writes:

People nowadays think that scientists exist to instruct them, poets, musicians, etc. to give them pleasure. The idea *that these have something to teach them* – that does not occur to them.<sup>128</sup>

And,

I think I summed up my attitude to philosophy when I said: philosophy ought really to be written only as a *poetic composition*.<sup>129</sup>

Yet, as certain as Wittgenstein is about this, he struggles (like any artist?) to put it into practice. He continues:

It must, as it seems to me, be possible to gather from this how far my thinking belongs to the present, future or past. For I was thereby revealing myself as someone who cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do.<sup>130</sup>

This feeling, of not having been able to do what he would like to have done, surely haunted him with respect to the TLP. At one time he had claimed that it had solved all the problems of philosophy, but his failure to communicate clearly, to generate understanding in others, was all too apparent. It could too easily and justifiably be claimed that he had solved nothing. Although he remained pessimistic, like Plato, about the very possibility of philosophical communication, he also could not rest content with the confusion that his work had generated. Therefore he sought to develop a new approach to philosophical writing.

As Rowe notes, what makes writing problematic for Wittgenstein is just what makes it problematic for Plato. First, there is the difficulty of ensuring a sympathetic readership, of addressing only those who have an affinity with the subject and of not addressing those who will misunderstand and abuse the words that have been used.

---

<sup>128</sup> CV, 36e

<sup>129</sup> CV, 24e

<sup>130</sup> *ibid*

If I say that my book is meant for only a small circle of people (if that can be called a circle) I do not mean to say that this circle is in my view the elite of mankind but it is the circle to which I turn (not because they are better or worse than the others but) because they form my cultural circle, as it were my fellow countrymen in contrast to the others who are *foreign* to me.<sup>131</sup>

Second, there is the difficulty of ensuring that even those readers who have an affinity with philosophy will put the requisite amount of *time* into it.

I really want my copious punctuation marks to slow down the speed of reading. Because I should like to be read slowly. (As I myself read.)

To read slowly is to take the time to think about what one is reading, to read *critically*. This is important because Wittgenstein does not presume to dole out ready-made answers to life's problems that can be neatly memorized. On the contrary, he says:

I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own.<sup>132</sup>

Anything the reader can do for himself, leave it to the reader.<sup>133</sup>

I must be nothing more than the mirror in which my reader sees his own thinking with all its deformities & with this assistance can set it in order.<sup>134</sup>

We can say that *showing* remains important for the later Wittgenstein because he retains this basic idea from the TLP: that philosophy is an *activity* and not a body of doctrine. The difficulty of writing philosophy, in both the early and the later phases of his career, is the difficulty of being true to that activity, just as it is for Plato.

Rowe can therefore write that, "it was not [Wittgenstein's] intellectual vices that prevented him from finishing books, but his intellectual virtues, particularly his

---

<sup>131</sup> CV, 12-13

<sup>132</sup> PI, Preface

<sup>133</sup> CV,

<sup>134</sup> CV

virtues as a teacher." In 1937 Wittgenstein wrote: "The remarks which I write enable me to teach philosophy well, but not to write a book."<sup>135</sup>

Wittgenstein's written remarks, like Plato's dialogues, are thus *images* of an oral activity that takes place ideally between two individuals. Just as Socrates insists that the dialectician must be responsive to the particular soul that he is dealing with, Wittgenstein suggests that the philosopher does not solve *general* problems but the problems encountered and/or created by particular *individuals*. The success of the *Philosophical Investigations*, therefore, depends upon the participation of the reader, just like Plato's dialogues. As Edwards puts it:

...Wittgenstein must, in the process of the *Philosophical Investigations* itself, initiate the philosopher into the new form of life and thought he covets for him. He must get the philosopher playing the new game, so that its standards become – at least provisionally – the operative ones. Then the particular remarks he makes will have their proper force and significance; then, perhaps, the particular terms of criticism he employs will assume their proper weight, not being assimilated to the traditional "scientific" model of philosophy. Therefore the real point of the *Philosophical Investigations* is the way it's written, the kind of activity it produces in the attentive reader (and thus the kind it also prevents).<sup>136</sup>

#### IV. Philosophy and Sophism

It is worthwhile to remind ourselves that Wittgenstein himself claimed that his practice of philosophy was *revolutionary*. In his Cambridge lecture of 1932-33 (recorded by G.E. Moore and published in Moore's *Philosophical Papers*) Wittgenstein said that what he was doing was a "new subject" and not a stage in a "continuous development." ...According to Wittgenstein (via Moore), there was now, in philosophy, "a 'kink' in the development of human thought,' comparable to that which occurred when Galileo and his contemporaries invented dynamics..." This revolutionary development was the discovery of a "new method" like that when "chemistry was developed out of alchemy."<sup>137</sup>

How new is Wittgenstein's "new method"? From one perspective, perhaps, it is very new – it certainly struck many of his contemporaries as quite novel. He seems to be proposing, not unlike Heidegger, that philosophers engage in an

<sup>135</sup> Nachlass 1937; PH:193-94 (cited by Rowe)

<sup>136</sup> Edwards, p.158

<sup>137</sup> Edwards. P. 128

altogether different activity from the metaphysical/epistemological one that has occupied them these last three or four hundred years.

...it should be noticed that the "new method" of philosophy does not consist in or depend upon the discovery of any new facts; it deals with "trivial" things – "things we all know already." Philosophy can remove our "intellectual discomfort" only by a "synopsis" of these trivialities. Moore adds, "As regards to his own work, [Wittgenstein] said it did not matter whether his results were true or not; what mattered was that a 'method had been found'."<sup>138</sup>

The emphasis on method is an emphasis on *practical knowledge*; the irrelevance of judgments of truth and falsity a sign that what the philosopher is interested in is *nonpropositional*. Edwards notes that for Wittgenstein, "the proper end of philosophy is...an alteration of perception-sensibility, not a change in belief,"<sup>139</sup> and that "a sensibility is constituted by those basic images and ideals that order experience and give it sense, including the sense of being either true or false."<sup>140</sup> Therefore, "it is improper to judge a sensibility itself as either true or false; it is out of a particular sensibility that judgments of truth or falsity proceed."<sup>141</sup>

Once this is conceded the comparison that Wittgenstein draws between his way of proceeding and the scientific revolutions of the past becomes clear. He is not making arguments from within the contemporary worldview; he is encouraging us to adopt a different one. Yet the alternative vision of philosophy that he promotes is not altogether new. Rather, in many ways it is a return to the Socratic conception of philosophy that inspired the philosophical schools of antiquity and which, I would argue, makes *ethics* first philosophy.

---

<sup>138</sup> Edwards, p. 128

<sup>139</sup> Edwards, p.144

<sup>140</sup> Edwards, p.145

<sup>141</sup> Edwards, p.145

Gonzalez insists that from the dialogues and the *Seventh Letter* we can surmise that “...dialectic as Plato understands it...is guided by the following three presuppositions”:

1. Names, propositions, and images are incapable of expressing what a thing truly is (*ti esti*) and consequently are always open to refutation.
2. Names, propositions, and images are nevertheless indispensable as means of attaining knowledge of what a thing truly is.
3. One can use these three means in such a way as to obtain an insight that transcends them, that is, an insight into that nature which they themselves presuppose but cannot express.<sup>142</sup>

Allow me to cite Gonzalez at length here as he goes into detail on each of these three points. I will compare Gonzalez’s remarks on each with relevant passages of Wittgenstein’s in turn.

The first presupposition explains why dialectic does not attempt to distance itself from everyday experience. The conventionality of the symbols used in ordinary language, the ambiguities of propositions used in ordinary discourse, and the deceptiveness of the concrete images that guide our daily *praxis* are the results of a weakness inherent in our means of relating to the truth. The dialectician, therefore, does not fool himself into thinking that the flaws of ordinary experience can be overcome through the construction of an ideal language or the systematization of a formal logic. In our everyday use of words, propositions, and images, the true natures of things already stand revealed to us, however darkly (*doxa*). The task of the dialectician is not to abstract these three means from the concrete context that alone gives them meaning, but rather to use them to bring out the truth that already lies within this context. Because of their necessary weaknesses, words, propositions, and images cannot in themselves tell us anything about a thing’s true nature; dialectic must therefore avoid opposing them to experience by abstracting and systematizing them.<sup>143</sup>

Neither does Wittgenstein wish to distance himself from everyday experience.

In the TLP he writes:

- 5.5563 In fact, all the propositions of our everyday language, just as they stand, are in perfect logical order. – That utterly simple thing, which we have to formulate here, is not a likeness of the truth, but the truth itself in its entirety.  
(Our problems are not abstract, but perhaps the most concrete there are.)

In the *Philosophical Investigations* he recognizes the same “weakness inherent in our means of relating to the truth” and has given up his ambitions for an ideal

---

<sup>142</sup> Gonzalez, p. 271

<sup>143</sup> Gonzalez, p. 271

language, including the phenomenological language that he briefly entertained upon his return to philosophy.

Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it.

For it cannot give it any foundation either.

It leaves everything as it is.<sup>144</sup>

The task is to pay attention to how words are *actually* used and to perceive the way in which their meaning is thoroughly context dependent. It is also, at the same time, to acknowledge the limits of language.

Say what you choose, so long as it does not prevent you from seeing the facts. (And when you see them there is a good deal that you will not say.)<sup>145</sup>

This in no way renders language completely irrelevant, however.

The second presupposition is important in showing that, while the ultimate goal of dialectic is nonpropositional insight, the only means of attaining (and I would add, *sustaining*) this insight is a form of *discursive* reasoning. A criticism sometimes levelled against the *Seventh Letter* is that its negative characterization of discursive thought shows it to be the work of a mystic and mystagogue. Edelstein (1966, 106) explains and defends this criticism as follows: "For if anything has been characteristic of mysticism in all ages and among all people, it is 'the temporary shattering of our ordinary spatial and temporal consciousness and of discursive intellect,' the extinction of thought, the renunciation of the word." Yet while the letter describes the attainment of knowledge as involving refutation of the means of discursive thought, it does not advocate abandoning these means. In dealing dialectically with words, propositions and images, we *just barely* (μoyις) get beyond them; even once we have attained some knowledge, we still remain vulnerable to their weaknesses. The insight that transcends words cannot be attained except by means of words; what cannot be spoken becomes manifest in the very process of speaking. Thus what we have in dialectic as Plato understands it is the wedding of discursive and nondiscursive thought. Only through the process of examining and refuting propositions – a thoroughly discursive process – can we just barely obtain knowledge that is nonpropositional. It is precisely because dialectic has this character that it is so closely related to the method that confines itself to discursive thought, that is, the method of hypothesis. The difference is nevertheless unbridgeable: the knowledge obtained through dialectic is superior, and totally unlike the kind of understanding obtained through the method of hypothesis. Yet it is also the case that what dialectic *uses* in awakening nonpropositional insight into a thing's nature is precisely the discursive reasoning cultivated by the hypothetical method.<sup>146</sup>

---

<sup>144</sup> Pl: 124

<sup>145</sup> Pl: 79

<sup>146</sup> Gonzalez, p. 272

“Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language,” says Wittgenstein<sup>147</sup> – and it is meaningfully ambiguous. He means both that language has bewitched us and that we must wage our battle against confusion by means of language. Like Plato, the end of philosophy for Wittgenstein is the adoption of a *form of life* and not simply a set of true sentences, yet philosophy is essentially and inescapably conversational. We must use language in order to point others (and to keep ourselves pointed) in the right direction, even if the language we use in the process is only provisional and must ultimately be transcended.

While dialectic uses “the discursive reasoning cultivated by the hypothetical method” its *aim* is fundamentally different. The dialectician is not content to show that a number of propositions are *coherent*. The philosopher, according to Plato, seeks to reach what is ‘non-hypothetical’ (ανυποθετον) by engaging in the ‘destruction of hypotheses’ (τας υποθεσεις αναιρουσα; *Republic* 533c8).

Similarly, Wittgenstein writes in the *Philosophical Investigations*: “There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place.”<sup>148</sup>

And so it is the third presupposition, the uniting of our defective tools of expression with knowledge that transcends them, which is the heart and core of dialectic. Such a union or mediation can take place only in the actual process of using these tools. Only in use can the defects of words, propositions, and images be just barely overcome. Thus in previous chapters, the notion of “use” (χρησις) has shown itself again and again to be central to dialectic. Dialectic, the primary object of which is the good, is essentially a “know-how.” It is this identification of dialectic with *knowledge of use* that prevents it from being *solely* “knowledge by acquaintance” (direct, unmediated intuition) or *solely* propositional knowledge and makes it instead that process in which insight and discourse are reconciled.<sup>149</sup>

---

<sup>147</sup> PI: 109

<sup>148</sup> PI: 109

<sup>149</sup> Gonzalez, p. 272-273

The notion of *use* is, of course, central to all of Wittgenstein's thought and does not only constitute his later 'theory' of meaning. In the TLP, for instance, he writes:

- 3.326 In order to recognize a symbol by its sign we must observe how it is used with a sense.
- 3.327 A sign does not determine a logical form unless it is taken together with its logico-syntactical employment.
- 3.328 If a sign is *useless*, it is meaningless. That is the point of Occam's maxim. (If everything behaves as if a sign had meaning, then it does have meaning.)

Remember, language can be used *descriptively* or *instrumentally*. The tautologies of logic and mathematics fall into the latter category – they show us how to operate with a given symbolism, how to play a certain game. So what is in question when it comes to logic and mathematics, as well as ethics (i.e. everything that the early Wittgenstein calls *transcendental*) is *practical* knowledge.

- 6.211 Indeed in real life a mathematical proposition is never what we want. Rather, we make use of mathematical propositions *only* in inferences from propositions that do not belong to mathematics to others that likewise do not belong to mathematics. (In philosophy the question, 'What do we actually use this word or this proposition for?' repeatedly leads to valuable insights.)

The theme of *use* is, of course, emphasized even more famously in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

Recall what Edwards wrote: that "the real point of the *Philosophical Investigations* is the way it's written, the kind of activity it produces in the attentive reader (and thus the kind it also prevents)."<sup>150</sup> The activity it produces, or is meant to produce, has been shown to be similar in many important respects (if not

---

<sup>150</sup> Edwards, p.158

identical) to the activity that Plato calls 'dialectic'. What about the activity that it prevents, or is meant to prevent?

Gonzalez suggests that in Plato's dialogues dialectic is contrasted with the method of hypothesis. The philosopher, in other words, is the person who recognizes and respects the epistemic priority principle that Socrates puts forward in those works, as opposed to the person who reverses the proper order of inquiry and remains at the level of *doxa*.

Hans-Georg Gadamer suggests another way we might characterize the goal of philosophy according to Plato, namely: "the Doric harmony of *logos* and *ergon*, word and deed," which "no one could be said to have achieved more fully than the Platonic Socrates himself."<sup>151</sup>

Allow me to cite Gadamer at length:

Socrates says to Laches that their discussion could be found wanting in this harmony because Laches does not know and cannot say what courage is (*Laches*, 193de). To be sure, his inability to say what it is, is a common incapacity of which one becomes conscious only when Socrates demands that one account for what one is saying (*λογον διδοναι*). For that is a demand which cannot easily be shunted aside. Must one not know what courage actually is when everyone is constantly speaking of it as the quintessence of virtue (*arete*)?

It was however, not some dispute stemming from a deficiency in knowledge but an opposite deficiency in actual deed which occasioned the Athenian's appeal to the taciturn and indefatigable Spartans and their Doric harmony. Thus in a joking and ironic manner, Socrates invents the saying which Laches, quite in accordance with the Spartan ideal, had just cited. Laches means his Spartan principle sincerely (188 c-e). The latest mode of speech-making and arguing which had captivated the spirited and oratorically gifted youth of Athens at the beginning of the fifth century B.C. seemed wanting in precisely that Doric harmony of *logos* and *ergon*. When the students of the new art enter into conversation with Socrates and submit to his examination, they are at first full of tidy new answers to the question of what courage, justice, temperance, and peity are. And when their claim to know is confounded, the advocates of the new knowledge are refuted not only in a battle of words, but in deed, in their existence proper. Their presumed but ultimately useless knowledge lacks the weight of the *ergon*.

Thus it comes to pass that in Plato's ingenious fictional dialogues a good and truly Socratic answer which someone gives in response to Socrates is nevertheless

---

<sup>151</sup> Gadamer, p. 1-2

overturned by the latter with the most questionable means of sophistic dialectic, for instance in the *Charmides*, where Critias himself advances Socratic self-knowledge as an answer to the question posed. Of course Critias was known to every reader in Attica at that time as one of the Thirty Tyrants, who formed a government at the end of the war and whose arbitrary rule made earlier times seem idyllic to Plato in comparison. That this very same Critias advocates sophrosyne and self-knowledge starkly illuminates how sharp the conflict was between logos and ergon in Plato's Athens.<sup>152</sup>

"Their presumed but ultimately useless knowledge lacks the weight of the ergon." The translator's footnote to this sentence runs:

There is a sort of Wittgensteinian insight here. Sophistic talk in which words separate from deeds or actions, is in a certain sense, at least, "language on a holiday."

Certainly this brings to mind one of Wittgenstein's favourite sayings: "In the beginning was the deed." Elsewhere, Gadamer notes:

...That the mathematician cannot content himself with the picture or image he uses, but instead only with the true "self," was made clear above. Thus for a mathematician it is bad upbringing when he does not insist upon holding to the fifth item in the list, i.e., the thing itself, with appropriate noetic rigor. The same thing also holds, however, in the sphere of our moral life. He who does not content himself in this realm with the image of *arete* proffered, with what is passed around as bona fide in the world of moral maxims and social conventions, or, as Plato would put it, he who does not content himself with *doxai* but insists instead upon what is truly just and unjust – such a man differs indeed from the *polloi* by virtue of his upbringing.

My contention is that if we content ourselves with *doxai* and do not hold to the thing itself with "appropriate noetic rigor," we are, in Wittgenstein's words, "giving over the reigns to language". So the kind of 'philosophy' that Wittgenstein despises is precisely what Plato loathes – what Gadamer refers to as *sophism*, i.e. empty talk.

It is often said that for the later Wittgenstein the goal of philosophy is to eliminate itself, but this conflates two senses of the word 'philosophy' in his writing. To be sure, he says:

...the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear.

---

<sup>152</sup> *ibid*

The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to.<sup>153</sup>

Elsewhere, however, he states:

Unrest in philosophy comes from philosophers looking at, seeing, philosophy all wrong, i.e., cut up into (infinite) vertical strips, as it were, rather than (finite) horizontal strips. This reordering of understanding creates the greatest difficulty. They want to grasp the infinite strip, as it were, and complain that it //this// is not possible piece by piece. Of course it isn't, if by 'a piece' one understands an endless vertical strip. But it is, if one sees a horizontal strip as a piece//a whole, definite piece//. – But then we'll never get finished with our work! Of course//certainly//not, because it doesn't have an end.<sup>154</sup>

Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy, the proper activity of the philosopher, is "the calm noting of linguistic facts". It serves to eliminate the confusions that arise when language is like an engine idling, or when we let language do our thinking. Many philosophers are guilty of removing words from their actual context of use and creating puzzles that, resolved one way or the other, do not really touch upon our lives. This should be stopped. Stopping it, however – which is what Wittgenstein's kind of philosophy aims to do – should not be stopped. It should be learned.

---

<sup>153</sup> PI: 133

<sup>154</sup> PO, p. 195

## Conclusion

We have seen how Wittgenstein emphasizes the importance of context and action when it comes to *meaning*, drawing our attention to the *use* of words in both his early and later work. Confusion is generated when philosophers take words out of context and think about them in the abstract. Their tendency is to allow a certain picture of meaning – as something additional to the word that is ‘in the head’ (a picture that has its genesis in the forms of our everyday language) – to blind them to the actual features of the phenomenon. Analogously to Meno, such philosophers assume that they already know how words mean (they *represent*, obviously!) - an attitude that tragically extinguishes the desire to know and the will to ‘look and see’. As a result, they are tormented by a kind of cognitive dissonance, unable to achieve a ‘perspicuous presentation’ of the facts.

A related point, it seems to me, is expressed by W.K.C. Guthrie when he states that there are “certain important differences between the Greek ways of thought and our own, which tend to be obscured when (for example) Greek atomic science or Plato’s theory of the State are uprooted from their natural soil in the earlier and contemporary Greek world and regarded in isolation as the forerunners of modern atomic physics or political theory.”<sup>155</sup>

Similarly, F.M. Cornford writes:

Many key-words, such as ‘music’, ‘gymnastic’, ‘virtue’, ‘philosophy’, have shifted their meaning or acquired false associations for English ears. One who opened Jowett’s version at random and lighted on the statement (at 549b) that the best guardian for a man’s ‘virtue’ is ‘philosophy tempered with music’, might run away with the idea that, in order to avoid irregular relations with women, he had better play the violin in the intervals of studying metaphysics. There may be some truth in this; but only after reading widely in other parts of the book would he discover that it was not quite what

---

<sup>155</sup> *The Greek Philosophers: From Thales to Aristotle*, p. 3

Plato meant by describing *logos*, combined with *musike*, as the only sure safeguard of *arete*.<sup>156</sup>

I think that *episteme* is also one of these key words; that the distinction between *doxa* and *episteme* in Plato's dialogues is not properly understood if we assume that it is just the distinction that we were taught to draw in school between belief and knowledge, where the latter is understood in terms of the former.<sup>157</sup> Rather, I have tried to show that Plato's distinction is more closely related to Wittgenstein's distinction between *saying* and *showing*.<sup>158</sup>

Epistemologists take for granted the idea that knowledge *is* (justified true) belief; but for Plato *doxa* and *episteme*, while not unrelated, are clearly incommensurable with one another<sup>159</sup>, as are *saying* and *showing* for Wittgenstein. Moreover, remaining mindful of the distance between *doxa* and *episteme* is the philosopher's central preoccupation for Plato, just as Wittgenstein thinks that observing the difference between what can be *said* and what can only be *shown* is "the cardinal problem of philosophy."

Furthermore, for Plato *episteme* is ultimately concerned with *intelligible* objects, namely the *forms* or *ideas*. Plato's holy trinity of forms, however, is the Just, the Beautiful and the Good – i.e. *moral* ideas. *Episteme* is thus deliberately conflated in the *Meno* with *sophia* and *phronesis* (wisdom), and Socrates famously identifies it

---

<sup>156</sup> Preface, *The Republic of Plato*.

<sup>157</sup> I have read a number of philosophers who claim that knowledge as 'justified true belief' is recommended by Plato in the *Theaetetus*. However, even if we can say that the notion is entertained in the same sense as in modern epistemology, it is in no way clear to me that Plato endorses this definition. On the contrary, at the end of the dialogue Socrates says, "knowledge is neither perception nor true judgment, nor an account added to true judgment." (210b)

<sup>158</sup> I agree with Gonzalez and others who think that *episteme* in Plato is better translated as *understanding*. Moreover, I agree with epistemologists like Linda Zagzebski and Wayne Riggs who think that the notion of 'understanding' should play a much larger role in the contemporary discussion of knowledge.

<sup>159</sup> *Episteme* and *doxa* are said to have different objects in the *Republic* V. 477

with virtue (*arete*). Likewise, the doctrine of *showing* in Wittgenstein is ethically motivated and is a way of preserving not only the validity, but the *primacy* of non-propositional practical knowledge in the face of a nihilistic cultural tendency toward reductive, materialistic explanations.

Wittgenstein boldly proclaims that philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an *activity* in the *Tractatus* – an attitude that, in my opinion, defines his entire philosophical career. Similarly for Plato, the philosopher is not, in his essence, a writer (not a maker of sentences), although he *may* be (and is often) a writer. This is clearly stated at 278c-278e in the *Phaedrus*:

Socrates: ...If any one of you has composed these things with a knowledge of the truth, if you can defend your writing when you are challenged, and if you can yourself make the argument that your writing is of little worth, then you must be called by a name derived not from these writings but rather from those things that you are seriously pursuing.

Phaedrus: What name, then, would you give such a man?

Soc: To call him wise, Phaedrus, seems to me too much, and proper only for a god. To call him wisdom's lover – a philosopher – or something similar would fit him better and be more seemly.

Ph.: That would be quite appropriate.

Soc: On the other hand, if a man has nothing more valuable than what he has composed or written, spending long hours twisting it around, pasting parts together and taking them apart – wouldn't you be right to call him a poet or a speech writer or an author of laws?

Ph.: Of course.

The dialogue form is thus Plato's literary solution to a fundamental problem about philosophical communication. What the teacher must do, according to Plato, is not merely to give the student a number of true opinions (*doxai*) that must be memorized. Rather he must help the student to cultivate the proper *attitude* towards seeking out knowledge for herself, and demonstrate the dialectical skills and techniques that will allow her to do so. As in mathematics, so in ethics: what we

want to impart to the student is not just the solution to *this* particular problem, but the *ability* to apply her past problem-solving experience creatively and effectively to problems she has never encountered before. This requires teaching by *showing* – the technique of questioning aimed at recollection that we encounter in *Meno* – as opposed to teaching by *saying*. Only the former, according to Plato, leads to *episteme* or *understanding*. This is why Plato often has Socrates deliberately withhold a verbal formulation of his own beliefs. It is because he recognizes, as does Wittgenstein, that to do otherwise would be contrary to the successful act of communication, which must leave to the student as great a share of the work as possible.

What understanding requires is more than just agreement about definitions. As Wittgenstein says, it is agreement in judgments (PI: 242), or the ability to *perform*. Likewise, for Socrates it is how one *acts* that truly demonstrates one's philosophical understanding or lack thereof.<sup>160</sup> Plato's dialogues, therefore, are not meant to tell us what to say – they do not seek to *inform*. Rather, without straightforwardly committing Plato to any of the opinions that are voiced by his characters, the dialogues *display* the activity of philosophical conversation and constitute a kind of initiation into that activity. They thereby suggest a way of *being*. They aim to *transform* us.

This is not to say that by reading the dialogues we cannot get a good idea about what Plato really thought (we *must* be able to do so, to some extent); but it is

---

<sup>160</sup> A good example, although it is not Plato's, is in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* (IV, 4, 5), where the sophist Hippias demands that Socrates give his opinion on justice, saying: "You have been making fun of others long enough, by always questioning and refuting them, without ever wanting to explain yourself to anybody or to set forth your opinion." Socrates replies: "I never stop showing what I think is just. If not in words, I show it by my actions."

perhaps to say that what Plato really thought is not as important as using the dialogues to figure out what *we* really think, or more precisely, to fine tune the bond between *our* words and *our* deeds. That is, we are meant to be inspired and to throw ourselves into the never-ending activity of self-understanding – to *engage* in philosophy – not merely to remember Socrates' catch phrases. On this view therefore, what Plato means is *shown* by the dialogues, and not (at least not with complete clarity) *said* within them.

Likewise Wittgenstein claims that he does not want to save us the trouble of thinking. On the contrary, he wants to inspire us to think for ourselves; but thinking is not a purely intellectual affair. Philosophy, on Wittgenstein's view, requires us to change our life. I have suggested, following Rowe, that Wittgenstein's own attention to literary form is a reaction to the same fundamental issue of philosophical communication – that writing is problematic for him for the same reasons it is problematic for Plato, and that his solution is very similar insofar as he opts for a *protreptic* style. Wittgenstein, in other words, shares Plato's conception of philosophy as a *form of life*, and also wants to initiate us into a new way of being and perceiving in the world. His writing (especially the *Philosophical Investigations*) does not seek, therefore, to communicate universal truths in the form of propositions, but rather to demonstrate a therapeutic activity that can be taken up by the reader and *practiced*.

To emphasize the importance of this kind of non-propositional, practical knowledge for Plato and Wittgenstein is not to say, however, that philosophy is not, after all, a discursive activity. As Pierre Hadot has shown, philosophy in antiquity is

“at the same time and indissolubly, a discourse *and* a way of life which tend toward wisdom without ever achieving it.”<sup>161</sup> On the relation between philosophical discourse and philosophical living, he writes:

The lived experience...of coherence with oneself and with nature, is of a wholly different order from the discourse which prescribes or describes it from the outside. Such experiences are not of the order of discourse and propositions.

They are thus incommensurable – but also inseparable. There is no discourse which deserves to be called philosophical if it is separated from the philosophical life, and there is no philosophical life unless it is directly linked to philosophical discourse.<sup>162</sup>

Wittgenstein, like the ancient philosophers, is not saying that the philosopher has no use for words – he is saying that words are a means to, and not themselves, the end of philosophy. He attacks “philosophers” who think that discourse alone (*theory*) is sufficient and who do not concern themselves with living a philosophical life.

Hadot notes:

Traditionally, people who developed an apparently philosophical discourse without trying to live their lives in accordance with their discourse, and without their discourse emanating from their life experience, were called “Sophists”.<sup>163</sup>

And Gadamer reminds us: “It is not just at a particular hour in the history of Athens that the shadow of sophism accompanies philosophy, but always.”

It seems to me, therefore, that Wittgenstein should be understood as having been engaged in pretty much the same philosophical enterprise as Plato (something he readily admits a couple of times) – that the difference between *saying* and *showing* is the difference between the *ti esti* question and the *poion ti* question, between *doxa* and *episteme*, and therefore between sophism and philosophy.

---

<sup>161</sup> Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy*, p. 4

<sup>162</sup> Hadot, p. 174

<sup>163</sup> Hadot, p. 174

I think that those who read both of these philosophers carefully will be able to appreciate this point. Those who have been told, on the other hand, that Wittgenstein is as about as anti-realist, anti-essentialist, and anti-Platonic as you can get will no doubt find it surprising. In conclusion, then, allow me to briefly touch upon this issue, using Richard Rorty as something of a foil.

Rorty is a fan of philosophers like Nietzsche, Dewey, Kierkegaard and the later Heidegger because:

These writers have kept alive the suggestion that, even when we have justified true belief about everything we want to know, we may have no more than conformity to the norms of the day. They have kept alive the historicist sense that this century's "superstition" was the last century's triumph of reason, as well as the relativist sense that the latest vocabulary, borrowed from the latest scientific achievement, may not express privileged representations of essences, but be just another of the potential infinity of vocabularies in which the world can be described.<sup>164</sup>

Rorty takes the lack of "privileged representations of essences" to mean that there *are* no essences. His position is anti-realist because he agrees with Nelson Goodman that:

There are very many different equally true descriptions of the world, and their truth is the only standard of their faithfulness. And when we say of them that they all involve *conventionalizations*, we are saying that no one of these different descriptions is *exclusively* true, since the others are also true. None of them tells us *the* way the world is, but each of them tells us *a* way the world is.<sup>165</sup>

Rorty takes Wittgenstein's position to be paradigmatically anti-realist, however, precisely because he contrasts it with Socrates' demand for definitions<sup>166</sup>, and assumes that Socrates believes such definitions can be given. The purpose of the first chapter was to question this assumption and to suggest an alternative motive for Socrates' behaviour: that he "wants to

---

<sup>164</sup> *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 367

<sup>165</sup> Goodman, *Problems and Projects*, p. 30-31

<sup>166</sup> This is the contrast that Wittgenstein draws himself in the *Blue Book*.

undermine the conceit of interlocutors who themselves claim to know  $x$  so well and so completely that they can say exactly what it is", and moreover that he believes "the process itself of examining and refuting definitions of  $x$  can lead to a knowledge of  $x$  that transcends all definitions."<sup>167</sup>

On this reading Plato's Socrates is a *realist*: he thinks that the Just, the Beautiful, and the Good are *real* and that we can have knowledge of them. Yet, as we gathered from the *Seventh Letter*, Plato follows Socrates in thinking that this kind of understanding (*episteme*) is *not* expressible in words.

The inexpressibility of it all, however, is what leads Rorty and Goodman to call their position anti-realist. It seems to me, therefore, that they do not fully appreciate the significance of non-propositional knowledge. That is, when Rorty interprets the doctrines of Quine and Sellars and says that, "no 'account of the nature of knowledge' can rely on a theory of representations which stand in privileged relations to reality," it is not Plato's conception of *episteme* that he casts aside, in spite what he says. Instead, Rorty is just reiterating Plato's own point about *doxa*.

Perhaps the following passage of Wittgenstein's could be used by Rorty in order to claim that he is an anti-essentialist thinker:

What does it mean to know what a game is? What does it mean, to know it and not be able to say it? Is this knowledge somehow equivalent to an unformulated definition? So that if it were formulated I should be able to recognize it as the expression of my knowledge? Isn't my knowledge, my concept of a game, completely expressed in the explanations that I could give? That is, in my describing examples of various kinds of game; shewing how all sorts of other games can be constructed on the analogy of these; saying that I should scarcely include this or this among games; and so on.<sup>168</sup>

---

<sup>167</sup> Gonzalez, "Nonpropositional Knowledge in Plato"

<sup>168</sup> PI: 75

There is no single feature that all games share in common – in that sense there is no *essence*; it cannot be *stated*. Rorty seems to agree with Sellars that knowledge begins with the ability to justify, the capacity to use words. I take Wittgenstein's question, "What does it mean, to know it and not be able to say it?" on the other hand, to mean that Wittgenstein takes seriously the idea of non-propositional knowledge. We *know* what a game is, regardless of the fact that there is no single feature they all share. It's just that what a game *is* cannot be *said* – it can only be *shown*.

Wittgenstein clarifies this with an analogy:

...imagine having to sketch a sharply defined picture 'corresponding' to a blurred one. In the latter there is a blurred red rectangle: for it you put down a sharply defined one. Of course – several such sharply defined rectangles can be drawn to correspond to the indefinite one.<sup>169</sup>

But just because several sharply defined rectangles can be drawn to 'correspond' to the original, it does not mean that the blurred rectangle does not exist or that it cannot be known! Just as in the *Tractatus* there *are* things that cannot be put into words, so in the *Investigations* there is a kind of *knowing* that does not admit of *saying*.

Where Rorty puts down Plato and holds up Wittgenstein, I have tried to bring to light the way in which Wittgenstein traces Plato's thoughts and to suggest a way in which we can profitably understand each in terms of the other. Having arrived at the end of this project I am all too painfully aware of its deficiencies and of the work that remains to be done in this direction. I will most likely continue to work in this

---

<sup>169</sup> PI: 77

direction, however, as it does not seem possible for me to shake the basic insight that there is a fundamental and illuminating kinship between these thinkers.

## Bibliography

- Benson, H.H. "Meno, the Slave-boy, and the Elenchus", *Phronesis* XXXV.2 (1960), pp. 128-158.
- Bouwsma, O.K. *Wittgenstein: Conversations 1949-1951*. Indianapolis, Ind. : Hackett Pub. Co., 1986.
- Brown, Malcolm. "Plato disapproves of the slave-boy's answer", *Plato's Meno*. Malcolm Brown, ed. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc., 1971.
- Burnyeat, M.F. "Wittgenstein and Augustine *De Magistro*". *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Suppl. 61:1-24, 1987.
- Cornford, F.M. *The Republic of Plato*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945.
- Creegan, Charles L. *Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard*. London; New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Edwards, James C. *Ethics Without Philosophy: Wittgenstein and the Moral Life*. Tampa: University Presses of Florida, 1982.
- Fann, K.T. ed. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Man and His Philosophy*. New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1978.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*. New Haven, CT : Yale University Press, 1980.
- Genova, Judith. *Wittgenstein: A Way of Seeing*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Gier, Nicholas F. *Wittgenstein and Phenomenology*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1981.
- Gilmore, Richard A. *Philosophical Health: Wittgenstein's Method in 'Philosophical Investigations'*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 1999. pp. 123-161
- Gonzalez, Francisco J. ed. *The Third Way: New Directions in Platonic Studies*. Lanham, Md. : Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1995.
- , *Dialectic and Dialogue : Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry*. Evanston, Ill. : Northwestern University Press, 1998.
- , "Nonpropositional Knowledge in Plato", *Apeiron* XXXI.3, 1998, pp. 235-284.
- Guthrie, W.K.C. *The Greek Philosophers: From Thales to Aristotle*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.

- Sharples, R.W. *Plato: Meno*. Chicago: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1984.
- Shiner, Roger A. "Showing, Saying and Jumping", *Dialogue*, Vol. XXI, No. 4, December 1982.
- Stern, David G. *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Szlezák, Thomas. *Reading Plato*. London ; New York : Routledge, 1999.
- Waismann, Friedrich. "II: Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein". *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 74, No. 1. January, 1965, pp. 12-16.
- Winch, Peter. "On Wittgenstein: XIII". in *Philosophical Investigations* Vol. 24, No. 2, April 2001, 180-184.
- "Im Anfang War die Tat", in Irving Block's anthology, *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*. MIT, 1982.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (transl), New York: Routledge Classics, 2001.
- *Philosophical Investigations*. G.E.M. Anscombe (transl), Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001.
- *Notebooks 1914-1916*. Oxford : Blackwell, 1961.
- *Culture and Value*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- "A Lecture on Ethics", *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*, J. Klagge & A. Nordmann (eds.), Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993.
- "Wittgenstein's Lectures in 1930-33", *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*, J. Klagge & A. Nordmann (eds.), Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993.
- "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*", *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*, J. Klagge & A. Nordmann (eds.), Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993.
- "Philosophy", *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*, J. Klagge & A. Nordmann (eds.), Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993.
- Wolfsdorf, David. "The Method εἰς ἀποθέσεως at Meno 86e1-87d8" *Phronesis*. 58 (2008)p. 35-64.
- Zwicky, Jan. *Lyric Philosophy*. Toronto ; Buffalo : University of Toronto Press, 1992.
- *Wisdom and Metaphor*. Kentville, N.S. : Gaspereau Press, 2003.
- "Wittgenstein and the Logic of Inference". *Dialogue*, Vol. XXI, No. 4, December 1982, pp. 671-692.
- *Plato as Artist*. Kentville, N.S.: Gaspereau Press (forthcoming)