

# Requirements of Knowledge according to the *Meno*

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The *Meno* is one of the dialogues that introduce the principle that you can't know anything about a Form as long as you don't know its *essence*. One can call it the principle of *epistemic priority of the definition or essential clarification*.<sup>1</sup>

A<sub>1</sub>: As long as one does not know what the essence of a Form <F> is, one cannot know which properties are connected with <F>.

Interestingly, this principle gets connected in the *Meno* with the idea that definitional knowledge of an essence (*ousia*) is a kind of identifying knowledge which can – to a certain extent – be compared to identifying knowledge about a concrete object.

The aim of my paper is, first, to discuss a passage in *Meno* 71B as evidence for Plato's approach to definitional knowledge as a sort of identifying knowledge. In the second section I want to explain how Plato understands identifying knowledge in the case of concrete objects and why he takes it to be a prerequisite for all other knowledge about such objects. Thirdly, I shall indicate very briefly some of the implications of the analogy between identifying knowledge of concrete objects and of Forms for Plato's general conception of the knowledge of Forms.

## I

Let us have a closer look at the passage in *Meno* 71b. Its context is that Socrates pretends not to know if knowledge is teachable since he – like all the other Athenians – doesn't even know about virtue what it is. He goes on to say:

P-1 “(1) And if I do not know what something is, how could I know what that thing is like? (2) Or do you think it possible, if someone doesn't know who Meno is at all, that this person should know whether he's beautiful or rich, or whether he's well-born, or whether he's the opposite of all these?” (71b)<sup>2</sup>

The first sentence in this quotation suggests the general principle: You cannot *know* what something is like as long as you don't know what it is. The second sentence adds an

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<sup>1</sup> On this much discussed principle cf. Benson (2000), 112 *ff.*, who rightly defends its validity in Plato's early dialogues.

<sup>2</sup> For the translations I have used J. Day's English text (Day (1994)).

epagogic argument as support for this principle. But the example for primary knowledge given in sentence (2) is not a case of definitional knowledge. Whereas the "what"-phrase in sentence (1) can certainly be understood as a question referring to an essence, the question *who Meno is* doesn't ask what his essence is. For an essence would be a Form in Plato's view, and a Form can be participated by more than one object at a time. It couldn't be the exclusive property of an object like Meno.<sup>3</sup>

The 'is' in the who-question correlates with an identity relation. Hence, if the transition from the what-phrase (*ti esti*) to the who-phrase (*tis* or *hostis esti*) is not simply an obvious logical blunder on Plato's part – which I think is unlikely –, he must have an understanding of the what-phrase that allows him to see it too as a sort of identity question. Otherwise the example used in sentence (2) could not be an exemplary instance of the primary kind of knowledge which sentence (1) refers to in general terms.

Since the what-question, when applied to Forms, asks for a definition or essential clarification, the implication is that definitions are to be understood as identifying statements with regard to Forms.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, we have to rephrase the general principle expressed in passage P-1 as follows:

A<sub>2</sub>: As long as one does not have identifying knowledge of an entity E, one cannot know which (additional) properties are connected with E.

This principle is meant to apply equally in the cases of knowledge about Forms and of knowledge about concrete, perceptible objects. Principle A<sub>1</sub> is not falsified by it. It can be understood as a specification of A<sub>2</sub> for the case of knowledge about Forms.

The claim that definitions are identifying statements presupposes that Forms are entities that can become objects of reference. Already in some of the earlier dialogues Plato's Socrates tries to convince his interlocutors that a Form is in some way an object of a different kind and sustains its identity through the many items that have a share of it. The *Meno* contains some very good examples of this, one being the passage where Socrates draws a comparison with the different sorts of bees that share in one common essence. Applying this to the case of the different types of virtue, he goes on to say:

P-2 “Then it's the same with the virtues too: even if they are many and various, they must still all have one and the same form (*eidos*) which makes them *virtues*. Presumably it would be right to focus on this in one's answer and show the questioner what virtue actually *is*.” (72c)

Up to the *Meno*, Plato does not suggest a separate mode of existence for the Forms. They are described as something subsisting in and through the multitude of the particular types or tokens that participate in them. This is illustrated by P-3:

P-3 “Once again, though in a different way from last time, we've found many virtues while searching for one. But as for the one virtue which extends through all of these (*hē dia pantōn toutōn estin*), that we can't discover.” (74a)<sup>5</sup>

The reification of definable content results in an ontology of Forms. But it doesn't yet imply the claim that Forms, or some Forms, exist separately. Hence the interpretation of definitional statements as identifying statements about Forms, although compatible with it,

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<sup>3</sup> One could understand the question who Meno is also as asking who he *really* is – namely a soul, not a visible body. But that doesn't seem to be the relevant meaning in this context. The very same passage talks of Meno as being rich, beautiful and well-born, which is not a description of his transmigrating soul.

<sup>4</sup> Of course I take it for granted that the definitions Plato aims at are clarifications of essences supposed to be

<sup>5</sup> features of reality, not descriptions of merely conventional word meaning.

For a similar formulation see *Lach.* 192b-c.

does not presuppose the separate existence of the Forms – an idea strongly suggested in the *Phaedo*, the *Republic* and the *Timaeus*, but not yet in the *Meno*.

A definitional formula can serve as identification in the case of a Form, because the identity condition of a Form consists solely in a certain descriptive content, and the definitional formula should express this very content.<sup>6</sup> Is such a definition the only way to identify a Form? It seems that a Form can also be identified indirectly, i.e. by giving a description that is not definitional but still sufficient to single out the Form in question. We can take an example from the *Meno*: If it is actually true that all knowledge and only knowledge is teachable (87c), then knowledge could be identified as, say, "the state of the soul that can be brought about by the activity of a teacher". But this certainly does not formulate the essence of knowledge but rather something like an *idion*, as Aristotle was later to baptise it (*Top. I*, 102a18ff.).<sup>7</sup> So there can be identifying beliefs with regard to a Form that don't identify the Form through its essential content. But this doesn't threaten to invalidate the analogy of identifying cognition about concrete objects and about Forms. On the contrary, we will see that in the case of concrete objects one can similarly distinguish between – to give it some provisional label – "direct" and "indirect" ways of identification.<sup>8</sup>

## II

In the next part of my talk I want to discuss how Plato conceives identifying knowledge in the case of concrete objects.

"Identifying knowledge" is the sort of knowledge that enables one to single out an entity and distinguish it from other entities that are numerically different but could be mistaken for it. However, this sort of knowledge can be conceived in two different ways:

1) Somebody can be said to have identifying knowledge if s/he knows facts about the entity in question that single it out uniquely. For example: if we know – as we do – that Meno was a citizen of Larisa, a former student of Gorgias, took part in the expedition of the younger Cyrus against Artaxerxes, perished in the course of these historic events, and figures in the dialogue of Plato that bears his name, we have a description that doesn't fit any other person and hence singles him out uniquely.

2) Somebody can be said to have identifying knowledge because s/he is able to *recognise* this entity when encountering it. In this sense of identifying knowledge, *we* cannot be said to have such knowledge with regard to the person Meno since *we* wouldn't be able to recognise Meno if – *per impossibile* – we encountered him somewhere. We could not

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<sup>6</sup> The well-known method of *synopsis* and *diairesis*, as demonstrated and explained in some of his later dialogues (*Phdr.*, *Soph.*, *Polit.*, *Phil.*), can be understood as a method for obtaining such definitional identifications regarding Forms. It proceeds by first locating the Form in question in a broad genus and then adding differences until a description has been reached that uniquely singles out this Form. Although the *Meno* does not yet show any signs of Plato's awareness of this method, one can at least say that the exemplary definition of *schêma* in 76a displays the structure of genus-cum-specifying-difference.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. also the two definitions of *schêma* in *Men.* 75b and 76a: the former gives only an *idion*, not the essence.

<sup>8</sup> The claim that definitional statements are identifying statements about Forms can have significant repercussions for the famous topic of the "self-predication" of Forms in Plato (cf. Vlastos (1973), 252 ff., 404 ff., e. a.) and for the connected question of the sense of "being" in the *auto ho estin*-formula (*Phd.* 75b1f., d1f.; cf. *Men.* 72c9-d1) which serves to indicate an exemplary mode of being. I think it points toward an interpretation of Plato's understanding of being that differs, at least in focus, from the results of Kahn's important enquiry on this issue (cf. Kahn (1981)). But note that I don't wish to suggest that for Plato the "is" simply *means* identity in definitional statements. – This topic can't be further developed in this paper.

recognise him because we have never seen him before. This sort of knowledge is, hence, a sort of knowledge by acquaintance.

How does Plato understand knowing-who-Meno-is?

*Prima facie* it seems to me more likely that he has in mind the ability to recognise. But is there evidence for it?

Passage P-1 is inconclusive in this regard. But in a later passage (*Meno* 96e-97c) we get an important hint as I will show instantly. This later passage also adds the point that the ability to identify does not need to be based on knowledge. It can be based on true opinion as well. The example he uses is the road to Larisa. – Please note that knowing the road to Larisa is a kind of identifying knowledge: One knows the road to Larisa if one knows which road out of Athens one has to take and which way one has to turn at each of the following intersections. In the process of walking down this road one is successively identifying this individual object >The road from Athens to Larisa<.

In passage P-4, Plato contrasts the two epistemic modes of being able to identify this object, but also points out that these two modes – knowledge and correct opinion – are equally useful in practical terms. In this connection he also gives us a hint about what the different cognitive foundations of identifying knowledge and identifying opinion are in the case of concrete objects.

P-4 “S.: ... If someone who knew the road to Larisa, or wherever else you like, went there and guided others, he'd guide them rightly and well, wouldn't he? / M.: Yes indeed. / S.: And what if someone who had a *right opinion* as to what the road was, *but had never been there and didn't know it*? Wouldn't he too guide aright? / M.: Yes indeed.” (97a-b)

This passage seems to imply that the knowing person is somebody who has already walked down this road, whereas the person with the opinion hasn't yet made this trip.<sup>9</sup> Hence, this passage can be understood as suggesting that this is the crucial difference between the two cases. The correct opinion may be derived from an exact description or a good map drawn by someone else. But s/he can't be said to know it as long as s/he hasn't seen it by herself. – Further evidence for the epistemic priority of having seen by oneself can be gathered from a passage in the *Theaetetus*, 201b-c, which does not talk about identifying knowledge regarding concrete objects (cf. *Tht.* 208aff. on that) but at least clearly states the epistemic priority of eye-witnessing in the case of concrete things or events. Because of constraints of space I can't dwell here on these passages.

These passages are evidence for my claim that Plato understands identifying *knowledge* about concrete objects as the ability to recognise the object based on visual acquaintance with this object.

Now, if this is the kind of identifying knowledge Plato has in mind in the case of concrete objects, principle A<sub>2</sub> will have the consequence that we can't know anything about objects of this kind as long as we are not visually acquainted with them. But isn't that view utterly implausible? Can't we know a lot of things about Meno even though we are not visually acquainted with him and wouldn't be able to recognise him if we encountered him? Don't we know, for example, that Meno was beautiful and rich – because Plato is telling us so and can be considered a trustworthy witness for this?<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The *kai* in the clause that I have put in italics would have to be read as an epexegetic *kai* (cf. Sharples (1985), 182 *ad loc.*).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Fine (1992), 226, n. 42; Kahn (1996), 159 *f.*

The suggestion that we can't have knowledge about perceptible objects as long as we are not perceptually acquainted with them is not so absurd as a philosophical viewpoint as it might seem at first sight. I take it that the general point of this theory is that knowing something, as opposed to merely believing something correctly, requires the right kind of evidence – namely direct evidence of the object itself. In the case of perceptible objects the direct evidence is through perception of the object, and through vision in particular. This sort of evidence is contrasted with indirect evidence, especially with those instances of "information" when we rely on what other people tell us. The opinions of others, even the knowledge of other people, can't be the foundation of our own knowledge but are only a source of *doxa*, because all genuine knowledge has to be self-acquired through the right kind of direct evidence.

In the case of concrete objects and events this means that only the eye-witnesses can know because they alone have seen it by themselves. But it is not enough to be in the presence of Meno in order to witness what he is like or what he is doing. One might be mistaken about his identity. Therefore one needs to be able to recognise him as Meno. Otherwise one couldn't be sure who it was one was looking at. And it doesn't suffice to identify him on the basis of correct opinion, since knowledge can't be derived from mere opinion.

To be sure, Plato is well aware of the fact that perceptual judgements can be erroneous, due either to unclear or deceptive perception or to unclear and unfounded concepts. The latter source of error should be removed by the efforts of dialectic. But the application of dialectical knowledge to concrete objects can deliver some sort of knowledge about these objects<sup>11</sup> only when they are present – which they are when they are being perceived.

### III

Let me conclude by indicating very briefly how all this relates to Plato's conception of the knowledge of Forms. – One point has already been argued for: that Plato takes definitional knowledge to be a kind of identifying knowledge and that such identifying knowledge is the prerequisite of all other knowledge that can be gathered about a Form. But how is this definitional knowledge to be acquired?

Somehow Plato wants to distinguish between direct and indirect access to truth and to restrict proper knowledge to what has been gained through "direct" access. The ability to identify the person Meno is based on "direct" cognitive access if one has met him before. Does Plato want to suggest to us that definitional knowledge of Forms also has to be gained through some sort of direct presence and acquaintance?

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<sup>11</sup> There are some central passages in Plato where he seems to deny the possibility of knowledge (*epistēmē*) about concrete material objects, e.g. in *Phd.* 83a-b, *Rep.* V, 476eff. and VI, 509dff. (the "Line", see also *Tim.* 37AB). I have suggested elsewhere (Szaif (1998), 183-324) that this has to do with a concept of object-cognition according to which a cognitive state is a state of knowledge (*epistēmē*) of its object only if it amounts to a cognitive grasp of this object which is complete, reasoned and lasting, and that Plato thinks that such a cognitive grasp can't be sustained in regard to concrete material objects because of their specific ontological nature. On the other hand, there are passages where Plato seems to allow for knowledge, as opposed to true opinion, regarding such concrete individuals (e.g. the passages in *Men.* 97A-C and *Tht.* 201A-C). In these contexts his conception of knowledge seems to be pretty much that of *true (propositional) belief justified in the right way or by the right sort of evidence*. The priority principle A1 / A2 seems to hold for both conceptions of knowledge.

One might believe – and many interpreters do believe – that he construes this kind of knowledge as a faithful equivalent to the visual presence of concrete objects, i.e. as a kind of pure mental vision.<sup>12</sup> But this might be a case of over-stretching an analogy. It is certain that Plato means to contrast knowledge and true belief gained from hearsay. Knowledge must always be self-acquired. – That is one of the things that Plato wants to tell us by his theory of learning as recollection. – In the case of perceptible objects self-acquired knowledge is knowledge acquired through the visual presence of the object. In the case of Forms, however, self-acquired knowledge cannot have the character of some pure mental vision disconnected from argumentative and discursive thinking. This is a point Plato drives home in a number of passages, not least in *Meno* 98A where he names the *aitias logismos* as the requirement of knowledge. Whatever the *aitias logismos* may be, it certainly isn't a pure act of mental vision disconnected from discursive enquiry.<sup>13</sup>

However, there remain serious problems. What does *aitias logismos* mean in the case of grasping the essential content of a Form, or what would be the equivalent of *aitias logismos* in this case? Does not every kind of reasoning presuppose conceptual understanding, and don't we therefore have to presuppose some sort of basic, intuitive conceptual grasp that cannot be reduced to propositional knowledge in a non-circular way?

Before embracing intuitionism, one needs to distinguish between (at least) two aspects of non-propositionality: Take the example of someone who suddenly understands a complicated argument after having pondered over it for a while. The mental event of understanding is not a proposition, and it does indeed invite metaphors of seeing and touching. But all the same it is not a case of non-propositional knowledge, because its intentional content is propositional, and the criterion for propositional knowledge is whether or not it is an instance of knowledge specified by a content that could be fully articulated in a propositional utterance. Now, one possible suggestion in favour of non-propositional knowledge relates to the case of elementary concepts, i.e. concepts that cannot be analysed in a non-circular way. If one were to suggest that such concepts can be known and understood only by way of an intuitive grasp, that would indeed be a type of non-propositional knowledge. Yet the knowledge of Forms whose content can be expressed in a definitional formula would be a type of propositional knowledge by this criterion.

As far as the *Meno* is concerned, Plato presupposes that Forms can be identified through definitional formulae. He also shows, however, that for knowledge to obtain it is not enough to believe something true. One needs to grasp some explanatory reason (*Men.* 98A) as well – at least in the case of that abstract and universal knowledge which is not dependent on perception but only on the soul's own rational resources. So definitional knowledge that identifies a Form would have to be belief about what this Form is, accompanied by the right kind of reasoning. In later dialogues he shows by what sort of reasoning definitions can be achieved. But he also indicates that not all Forms are definable (*Tht.* 201d<sub>ff.</sub>). But even in this context he doesn't seem to embrace pure mental vision as the source of knowledge but rather to hint at an epistemological conception according to which the full epistemic grasp of an elementary Form requires an understanding of the complete conceptual structure to which it

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<sup>12</sup> For a useful discussion that sympathizes with intuitionism, see Gonzales (1998). Intuitionist readings of Plato have been attacked e.g. by Sorabji (1983) and Fine (1990). Intuitionist approaches to Plato's epistemology usually rely heavily on the philosophical part of the 7th. Letter. But we have good reasons to doubt the authenticity not only of the philosophical (Tarrant (1983)) but even of the historical part of this letter, as has been shown by Trampedach (1994), 102 *ff.*, 255 *ff.*

<sup>13</sup> This is also indicated by the fact that Plato considers the ability to give an (argumentative) account (*logon didonai*) a necessary condition of knowledge about Forms, e.g. *Phd.* 76b5<sub>f.</sub>, *Rep.* 534b3<sub>ff.</sub>

belongs.<sup>14</sup> So even if an elementary Form is not identifiable through a definition, it is still indirectly identifiable through its position in the entire structure. I am saying: “indirectly identifiable”, because I don’t believe that for Plato the essence of an elementary Form could be reduced to its position in this conceptual structure. But that is a different issue that would lead us far beyond the *Meno*.

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<sup>14</sup> He develops this point by comparing knowledge of Forms to the cognitive state of knowing or understanding the system of phonetic values in one’s language (*Tht.* 207Aff., *Soph.* 252e-253e., *Pol.* 277e-278d, *Phil.* 18b-c); on the possible epistemological implications of these passages see e.g. Burnyeat (1990), 187 ff., D. Frede (1997), 146 ff.; on epistemological holism in Plato’s *Politeia* e.g. Szaif (2000); on the “holistic” meaning of *Men.* 81c9-d4 cf. Moravcsik (1994), 119 f.

