

Learning as Transcendence:
The Solution to the Learner's Paradox in Plato and Merleau-Ponty

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Abstract

This thesis attempts to resolve the learner's paradox on the basis of Merleau-Ponty's insights in the *Phenomenology of Perception* by showing that the paradox is misleading in at least two important ways: it presumes that our "knowing" relation to the world operates in the form of explicit knowledge, whereas really we mainly operate on the basis of a pre-reflective familiarity with various things; and, it presumes that we are "in charge" of our learning, whereas really learning is part of the ongoing coupling of self and world. The first chapter offers a reading of Plato's *Meno* that argues that Plato implicitly offers a solution to the paradox that is compatible with Merleau-Ponty's. The second chapter explicates Merleau-Ponty's own version of the learner's paradox. The third chapter criticizes the learner's paradox from the *Meno* using Merleau-Ponty's insights. The conclusion offers a few ideas on what shape teaching should take, given the foregoing account of learning, that are drawn from John Locke's "Some Thoughts Concerning Education."

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Introduction

Meno: “And how will you inquire, Socrates, into that which you do not know?

What will you put forth as the subject of your inquiry? And if you find what you want, how will you ever know that this is the thing which you did not know?”

Soc: “I know, Meno, what you mean; but just see what a tiresome dispute you are introducing. You argue that a man cannot inquire either about that which he knows, or about that which he does not know for if he knows, he has no need to inquire; and if not, he cannot; for he does not know the very subject about which he is to inquire.”¹

The learner’s paradox, which most famously appears in Plato’s *Meno*, suggests that it is impossible to come to know anything new by moving from a position of ignorance to one of knowledge because the ignorant subject lacks the resources he would need to recognize something new.² Conversely, the subject who does know, who is able to recognize something, must have already known it, in which case no learning could have taken place.

Contrary to the presuppositions of the learner’s paradox, our experience tells us that we are perpetually engaged in learning from our birth until our death, which suggests that there is something wrong with the way that the paradox sets up its terms. This thesis will attempt to resolve the learner’s paradox by bringing a number of ideas from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* to bear on the way that the learner’s paradox assumes that learning works. The point of this exercise is not to nitpick at a paradox that is quite obviously

¹ Plato, *Meno*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), 80d-e.

² The learner’s paradox is also referred as the “learning paradox,” “Meno’s paradox,” and, in Jowett’s translation of the *Meno*, “the quibbler’s dilemma.”

misleading, but rather to explore what is intriguing about the learner's paradox: it succeeds at perplexing its hearer while denying that same hearer's experience; it shows us that we may tacitly share in its assumptions about learning; and, ultimately, its mistaken assumptions can lead us to a truer picture of how learning does happen.

The paradox itself need not be viewed simply as trickery; in asking how it is possible to recognize something new, the paradox points us in the direction of some genuine questions that lie behind it. How is it that we, ourselves, can provide the basis at any moment to become more than we are, to do more than we are capable of, to know more than we know, to say more than we know how to say? How can we, in our present limited being, be the agents behind making ourselves more than that? The basic reality with which the learner's paradox implicitly grapples is that human beings are constantly transcending themselves, outstripping the abilities and capacities that they have, outstripping the very being that they are. For those who accept the terms of the paradox, learning presents a problem because it appears to be a matter of transcending what we already have "under our belts" while drawing on only those resources—but in reality there may be more upon which the learner can draw. Thus the learner's paradox is not simply a tool of misdirection but identifies a certain problem that warrants our attention and sends us off in that direction to search for it. Ironically, Socrates states in the *Meno* that the learner's paradox is likely to make people sluggish and idle, to let them "off the hook" to seek out anything new, since the effort would be futile.

The vast majority of contemporary scholars who attempt to resolve the learner's paradox try to do so while accepting the terms of the paradox.³ Carl Bereiter, in an essay that provides an

³ Here I am thinking of Richard S. Pravat, "Dewey, Pierce, and the Learning Paradox," *American Educational Research Journal* 36, no. 1 (1999): 47-76; Michael Luntley, "Conceptual Development and the Paradox of Learning," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 42, no. 1 (2008): 1-14; and, the many scholars identified in Carl Bereiter, "Toward a Solution of the Learning Paradox," *Review of Educational Research* 55, no. 2 (1985): 201-226.

overview of contemporary attempts at resolving the paradox, characterizes the contemporary phrasing of the paradox as follows: “if one tries to account for learning by means of mental actions carried out by the learner, then it is necessary to attribute to the learner a prior cognitive structure that is as advanced or complex as the one to be acquired.”⁴ The scholars he describes believe that the problem to be solved is how learning is possible on the basis of an agent who carries out mental actions. To presume this kind of agent is the very problem that leads one to see learning as paradoxical. Such a vision of the subject in relation to its world misses what seems to make learning possible—namely, that there is no self prior to, or other than, a self engaged in the world.

Chapter One will explicate the learner’s paradox as it appears in Plato’s *Meno*. It will offer a reading of the *Meno* that brings various themes addressed in the dialogue into relation with the learner’s paradox. Of particular concern here is how Plato develops the theme that human beings often cannot give a rational account of their rational or higher-order abilities. This chapter will examine a number of vignettes from the dialogue that bear upon the question of how human beings outstrip themselves or their ability to give rational foundation to their abilities: in visual perception, the recognition of virtue, and speech and leadership. It will bring out the theme that Plato implicitly identifies: that these powers seem to come from outside the self. Finally, it will bring out the important distinction between knowledge and right opinion. By looking at how Plato expresses the learner’s paradox and how it is at work in the dialogue even as characters

Bereiter provides an overview of ten types of purported solutions to the paradox that he thinks are particularly promising, though generally neglected, although he does not believe that any of them succeed in resolving the paradox. Interestingly, Bereiter points out that of the ten types of accounts he finds promising, all of them identify a balance between activity and passivity. This balance between passivity and activity is a hallmark of Merleau-Ponty’s thinking. Other scholars identify the important role of the environment in overcoming the learner’s paradox. See Sami Paavola and Kai Hakkarainen, “Three Abductive Solutions to the Meno Paradox—with Instinct, Inference, and Distributed Cognition,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 24 (2005): 235–253.

⁴ Bereiter, 202.

work through other themes and questions, we will be better able to clarify what it is we are trying to resolve through Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.

Chapter Two will explicate Merleau-Ponty's re-phrasing of the learner's paradox in the introduction to the *Phenomenology*: "Empiricism does not see that we need to know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not go looking for it; intellectualism does not see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or again we would not go looking for it."⁵ This chapter will argue that there is a substantial connection between the learner's paradox as presented in the *Meno* and Merleau-Ponty's re-phrasing of it, in that Merleau-Ponty's criticism of the traditional accounts of perception and his own account of perception show that a meaningful "taking in" of the world is not possible unless perceptions immediately have sense for us prior to explicit interpretation. This chapter will explicate Merleau-Ponty's provisional solution to his learner's paradox, which identifies attention as a force that brings greater determinacy to initially indeterminate perceptions.

Chapter Three will criticize the learner's paradox on the basis of Merleau-Ponty's account of the body and, specifically, the body schema. It will make two main points. The first point will address the paradox's mistaken presumption that learning something new or recognizing something new is a *mental* function, dependent on intellectual knowledge that is explicit to the knower. Merleau-Ponty's account of the body and its ability to act through habit will show that we navigate our world primarily on the basis of non-explicit bodily "knowledge." Merleau-Ponty argues that, even in activities that seem to be extremely cerebral such as speaking and thinking mathematically, our actions are still primarily perceptual and expressive and carried

⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*. trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 30. Merleau-Ponty also indirectly quotes the learner's paradox from the *Meno* through a quotation by Pierre Lachièze-Rey on page 389.

out according to the pre-reflective knowledge that has been written into the body. It is our pre-reflective powers that support our fluency with the world and make learning possible.

The second point addresses the mistaken presumption of the paradox that learning is a problem because it involves a self that is separate from the world transcending itself towards that world. On Merleau-Ponty's account, the self exists as a body always already in the world and always transcending itself towards its world. On this basis, the self-transcendence that that learner's paradox identifies as a problem is not so much a problem as a normal state of affairs. To make this point I will draw on Merleau-Ponty's analyses of the certainty of vision, love, and pure ideas in the chapter called "The *Cogito*," in which he examines what kind of ideas the mind can give to itself. He concludes that even the things we might consider to be pure ideas in our minds that we possess with perfect clarity turn out to be lived on the outside—for example, desire is not the thought that I desire something but a change in my behaviour; the meaning of words is clear when I use them in the act of communication, but when I try to find their meanings they become foreign; mathematics turns out to be expressive and a matter of discovery rather than about pure eternal ideas. Merleau-Ponty finds that we are never in contact with ourselves in the way we might imagine, that there is no pure self "inside" of us who is the author of our existence, and that the self is created through our actual existence in the world as a body that is perceptive and expressive. Its fundamental coupling with the world gives rise to the self-transcendence that is behind learning and behind our very existence. My "inside" is a concretion of the outside world, and my "inside ideas," such as my thoughts and desires, are lived on the outside as behaviours, gestures, expressions, and speech. We open onto the world through perception, and through perception both we and the world emerge. In perception we are both flooded with the world and made aware that it is at a distance, and it is through this fundamental

coupling that meaning emerges and an ever-complexifying communion between self and world is initiated, one that will never cease. The “snowballing” of this fundamental coupling with the world is what we call “learning.”

The learner’s paradox assumes that the learner is in possession of all her thoughts and in complete control of her ability to search for new knowledge, a task she must plan and direct by calling into service already possessed knowledge—she must act as a kind of computer comparing already known identities. Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, allows us to see that the subject comes into being in commerce with the world and is in a sense a “project of” that world, for whom the world and her milieus draw things out of her. We are who we are on the basis of our insertion into the world; we are nothing but self-transcendence towards our world, and the agency we witness in self-transcendence is not all on the part of the subject.

To conclude the thesis, I will give some brief reflections about how these points about learning could be acknowledged and appropriated in teaching. To do this I will draw on some of John Locke’s recommendations in “Some Thoughts Concerning Education,” a text that I will show to be compatible, in an intriguing and perhaps unexpected way, with Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy.

Chapter One: The Learner's Paradox in Plato's *Meno*

At first glance, the learner's paradox might appear to be a minor concern in the *Meno*. Discussion of the paradox takes up only a few lines; Socrates' subsequent explanation of recollection and his demonstration of the slave's innate knowledge take up only a few more pages. The learner's paradox is not the stated question of the dialogue, which is whether or not virtue can be taught, and the characters pursue other themes, such as the "simile in multis"—that which is common across the set of particular worldly manifestations of something—with as much enthusiasm. However, there is an overall coherence to the themes that are discussed in the *Meno* that brings them all into dialogue with the learner's paradox: the *Meno* can be read as a dialogue about trying to give a rational account of higher human powers such as the ability to be or become virtuous, the ability to know what something is, the ability to recognize the "simile in multis," or the ability to learn. In each of the major themes dealt with in the dialogue we can see the interlocutors come up against the fact that although they have these rational powers they cannot penetrate them or lay them out clearly before themselves. I take this to be the central theme of the dialogue and an implicit answer to the challenge set up by the paradox.

This chapter will offer a reading of the *Meno* that focuses on the question of how our knowing relationship with the world comes about and operates. This will be accomplished by treating the dialogue as composed of three basic sections: the first third of the dialogue, prior to the appearance of the learner's paradox; the middle third, which features the learner's paradox, the notion of recollection, and the subsequent demonstration with the slave; and the final third, in which Socrates and Meno are able to reach some kind of a conclusion about virtue. The dialogue begins with Meno asking Socrates if virtue can be taught. Socrates immediately replies that he could not possibly answer a question about virtue when he does not even know what virtue is,

and, generally, all that Socrates says in the first third of the dialogue conveys that he wants to establish a firm ground behind the question before he pursues it. I will argue, however, that in contrast to Socrates' *stated* position, this first third of the dialogue in fact exhibits that Socrates and Meno's knowledge of the world exists as a kind of *fluency* with it, rather than as what Socrates would call "knowledge." Similarly, the last third of the dialogue also contains evidence that their investigation did not require a standpoint of perfect knowledge of what virtue is in order to get started, because, despite not knowing what virtue is before they begin, they *are* able to answer Meno's question about the acquisition of virtue. In the process of answering Meno's questions, they are also able to learn what kind of thing virtue is. They reach the conclusion that virtue is not knowledge, but rather right opinion, a presumably lesser form of "knowledge" that achieves more or less the same "good" but lacks a firm foundation that would make it teachable. The introduction of right opinion as a form of "knowledge" appears aimed to guide the reader to question if knowledge really is as we typically think of it. If knowledge operates in a different way than we imagine, then this will have consequences for the truth of the learner's paradox, which claims that we must already know something in order to recognize and therefore learn it.

Between the first and last thirds of the dialogue, in which conversation is oriented around virtue, there is a relatively short interlude in which Meno raises the learner's paradox, Socrates elucidates the notion of recollection, and Socrates calls out Meno's slave for a purported demonstration of the slave's innate ideas. I will argue that we should neither take the notion of recollection to be the point that Socrates is advancing, nor should we take the demonstration with the slave as evidence that our knowledge is fueled by innate ideas. On the contrary, through this section of the text, Socrates subtly advances the idea that we are not the agents behind the development of our own knowledge. Socrates introduces the importance of the fact that we are

capable of being moved from the outside, by the words of others—as Socrates demonstrates through his interaction with the slave—and through our personal formation according to our world.

Knowledge as Fluency with the World (70a-80c)

Although the learner’s paradox is not raised until the middle of the dialogue, it is with us from the very beginning in the form of Socrates’ denial that it is possible to answer Meno’s question directly, about whether or not virtue can be taught. Meno just wants his question answered, but Socrates insists upon the need to secure a perfectly clear starting point of knowledge before they will be adequate to the task. Socrates’ purported position is that if he does not know what virtue is, he could not possibly know this particular thing about virtue’s acquisition that Meno wants to know. They have trouble making any progress in their search, because Socrates puts this parameter on their conversation. But as they struggle to seize upon the knowledge that it seems they should have—for Meno, the knowledge of what virtue is, and for both of them the knowledge of what figure and colour are—they exhibit that knowledge might be a kind of fluency with the world, without the kind of firm foundations they strive to find.

Meno displays an everyday attitude towards knowledge. When he asks his question at the beginning of the dialogue, he has every confidence that he knows what virtue is. Virtue would have been a familiar word and concept, and a perennial, purported concern of philosophers and sophists alike. Not only that, but Meno says that he had seen Gorgias give speeches on virtue and had even given some fine speeches on the topic himself (80b).⁶ But when Socrates pushes Meno to define virtue and Meno tries to look hard at it, he experiences this once familiar idea slip

⁶ In this chapter I will use parenthetical citations to make reference to Plato’s *Meno*.

away. The lengthy section in which Socrates tries to get Meno to define virtue shows us the confounding gap between being able to recognize something as it shows up in the world and being able to seize upon it definitively as a whole. On the one hand, Meno knows what virtue is: he knows how to use the word, he has a “feel” for it, he thinks he knows virtue when he sees it, and, before reflecting on it, he believes he knows exactly what it is. On the other hand, as soon as he reflects on it, the identity of virtue escapes him.

In contrast to the everyday kind of knowledge of virtue with which Meno is initially satisfied, Socrates purports to stand up for rigorous philosophical knowledge, which for him will be sufficiently achieved by them defining their terms before embarking on an intellectual investigation. Socrates has made it a requirement of their investigation that they be able to lay bare the sense of the word “virtue” because he cannot say what one part of virtue is—the means of acquiring it—without knowing the whole thing. In taking this stance, Socrates sets up perfect knowledge not just as the end goal, but also as the requirement of getting started. The level of rigour to which Socrates holds their conversation threatens to make investigation impossible, which is what ultimately prompts Meno to ask him if this is not just the learner’s paradox, or “quibbler’s dilemma,” so to speak, in which they have become stuck. When Meno raises the learner’s paradox, he is asking Socrates whether, if Socrates really holds this to be true, the task of investigation is in fact impossible.

The point that we should notice here is how strangely knowledge operates such that it is easier to recognize virtue, to use and understand the word, and even to cultivate virtue in oneself or others, than to be able to lay bare its sense. The fact that Meno seems to know what virtue is before the act of reflection makes it all the more intense that it slips away as he tries to reach for it. Virtue is a thing that he knows, and yet he suddenly seems not to know it at the very moment

at which his attention turns towards the problem. Again and again throughout the dialogue, the reader is presented with scenarios in which the characters are called to define the things around them or elucidate their essence, and time and time again they fail. And yet, they have no real problems dealing with various things in their world, pursuing philosophical enquiry, or communicating with each other. Meno knows virtue, more or less, to the extent that he can recognize it in the world around him. The question is, then, how does knowledge work such that knowledge at a certain level of everyday commerce with the world and with each other operates so well and so independently of the kind of penetrating knowledge involved in being able to give a definition? This pertains to the learner's paradox in that the paradox assumes that the key to recognition is clear knowledge possessed by the learner.

The strangeness of this lack of concurrence between functional knowledge and explicit knowledge is further developed in the first third of the dialogue as Socrates directs the conversation towards obtaining a definition of virtue by looking for the "simile in multis" (75a). Meno makes several attempts to define virtue and each time Socrates is dissatisfied with these definitions because they always speak to particular *virtues* rather than to *virtue* as such. Meno attempts to identify virtue by describing how people of different genders, ages, and positions in society exhibit virtue differently based on their station. "Ever and anon we are landed in particulars, but this is not what I want," exclaims Socrates, in mock exasperation (74d). Socrates points out the problem with Meno's definitions by comparing what he has done in describing virtues with being asked what colour is and replying "whiteness," or being asked what figure is and replying "round" (74d). This comparison makes clear that defining a concept by its expression in particulars fails to get at the "simile in multis."

In order to prepare for their task of defining virtue, Socrates decides that Meno should first practise by defining colour and figure. On the one hand, this seems like an easier task: colour and figure are more basic, more objective, and less elusive than virtue. On the other hand, it turns out to be extremely difficult to find the “simile in multis” of things that are so fundamental to our experience of the world. Meno does not even attempt the task, instead asking Socrates to do it. Socrates’ answer is that “figure is the only thing which always follows colour” (75b), and “that in which the solid ends, or more concisely, the limit of solid” (76a). Following Socrates’ insistence that they define their terms, Meno asks that Socrates additionally define colour, since the definition would mean nothing to a person who did not *know* what colour was. “Colour,” he responds, “is an effluence of form, commensurate with sight, and palpable to sense” (76d). These definitions are a somewhat questionable achievement in definition-making. As a pair, the two definitions mainly tell us that form and colour are not the same but they appear together. As definitions, they do not help us get a better hold on these aspects of our reality than we already have. However, they do identify something about our experience of figure and colour: it is clear to us where figure “stops” and colour “takes over,” but, beyond that, we simply experience objects as such—we do not grasp the raw data of our perceptions abstractly.⁷

What is remarkable, however, is that we *can* see the “simile in multis,” and we do so effortlessly, even though various figures are so different and colours so wide-ranging, and even though we would be at pains to say what colour or figure is. This ability is clearly not dependent on *knowing* in an explicit way what figure or colour is. What we can see in this exchange between Meno and Socrates is that they have a fluency with the world, in their ability to see colours and figures and in an everyday sense *know* colour and figure, that outstrips their capacity

⁷ Later we will see how Merleau-Ponty criticizes empiricism precisely for this reason—that, instead of reckoning with our capacity to see integrated wholes, it presumes that we see things such as colour and form abstractly from the figures in which they inhere.

to account for this ability. The learner's paradox assumes that in order to be able to find or recognize something, we must already know it. The suggestion is that explicit knowledge is necessary to be able to recognize something new and therefore be able to learn it—which in the end defeats the possibility of learning anything new. The superiority of our *ability* to recognize figures and colours over Socrates' erudite *definitions* of them shows that the ability to recognize colour and figure does not come from explicit knowledge—and suggests that the basis for our ability to recognize is not based in knowledge at all. The introduction that Socrates gives to his definition of colour—"and now, as Pindar says, 'read my meaning'"—could be read as pointing towards our actual relation to colour and figure (76d). We *read* the meaning of things rather than accessing their meaning through explicit knowledge; we read colour and figure without knowing what colour and figure are.

The Learner's Paradox, the Notion of Recollection, and the Demonstration with the Slave:
Learning and Forces from the Outside (80d-86b)

Finding themselves at an impasse in their investigation, Meno brings up the paradox and, when he does, it is as if Meno calls Socrates' bluff, because in the final third of the dialogue Socrates agrees to try to answer Meno's question about whether or not virtue can be taught. They jump into the task and curiously they have made some fruitful discoveries by the end of the dialogue, despite not having laid virtue out in front of them as a perfectly clear starting point. The difference between the first and the final third of the dialogue in which virtue is discussed is so marked that it is almost as if after "proving" his logical point in the first third—that they could not begin investigating how virtue was acquired without knowing what virtue was—Socrates

goes on to show that in practice it is not actually true. Socrates is clear that he does not believe the paradox. Human beings *are* capable of inquiry—inquiry is of the utmost importance to Socrates, after all—and so he must make sure that this bit of chicanery does not lead people to become idle and sluggish in their search for understanding. Socrates does this in two ways: first by imparting the notion of recollection and then by conducting a demonstration with one of Meno's slaves. In this section I will argue that the notion of recollection should not be taken literally, as an account that knowledge is born out of innate ideas, but rather that it begins to suggest that in learning we are moved from the outside. I will also identify a sense behind the structure of the dialogue, which supports my interpretation that the notion of recollection and the demonstration with the slave do not function in the dialogue in the same way as they are presented at face value.

The theory of recollection that Socrates recounts proposes that the powers of knowing that we have and yet cannot explain come from the fact that our souls are immortal and in their many lifetimes have seen all things before. Having existed for so long, the soul has learned all things, such that when in one lifetime the individual appears to be learning something new, in the sense of reaching forward towards some previously unknown thing, really what is happening is that she is going through the hard work of recollecting, or reaching back towards a previous knowledge. Socrates' explanation goes as follows:

Some of them were priests and priestesses, who had studied how they might be able to give a reason of their profession: there have been poets also, who spoke of these things by inspiration, like Pindar, and many others who were inspired. And they say—mark, now, and see whether their words are true—they say that the soul of man is immortal, and at one time has an end, which is termed dying, and at another time

is born again, but is never destroyed. And the moral is, that a man ought to live always in perfect holiness. “For in the ninth year Persephone sends the souls of those from whom she has received the penalty of ancient crime back again from beneath into the light of the sun above, and these are they who become noble kings and mighty men and great in wisdom and are called saintly heroes in after ages.” The soul, then, as being immortal, and having been born again many times, and having seen all things that exist, whether in this world or in the world below, has knowledge of them all; and it is no wonder that she should be able to call to remembrance all that she ever knew about virtue, and about everything; for as all nature is akin, and the soul has learned all things; there is no difficulty in her eliciting or as men say learning, out of a single recollection—all the rest, if a man is strenuous and does not faint; for all enquiry and all learning is but recollection. And therefore we ought not to listen to this sophistical argument about the impossibility of enquiry: for it will make us idle; and is sweet only to the sluggard; but the other saying will make us active and inquisitive. In that confiding, I will gladly enquire with you into the nature of virtue. (81a-e)

There are a number of reasons to doubt that Plato would like this account to be what readers take away from the dialogue. Socrates begins by making it clear that this is not *his* explanation but what has been said by some others; throughout this speech Socrates hedges and distances himself from the account: “And they say—mark, now, and see whether their words are true—they say that” (81b). He advocates for this account on the basis of what it will do for them—that is, make them “active and inquisitive” instead of “idle”—rather than because the account is true (81d).

Further, it is suspicious that after so unequivocally stating that he did not think that the learner's paradox was an elegant argument, he would present an explanation for learning that essentially recapitulates the problem with the learner's paradox. The learner's paradox makes learning impossible on the grounds that one must already know something in order find it out. But with the notion of recollection, Socrates essentially promotes an account of innate ideas, which only solves the problem of learning in that it endows the subject with the ideas she needs to have ahead of time in order to be able to encounter new things. Instead of trying to figure out how learning works such that we do not need to assume that we must know the thing in question already in order to recognize it, this account simply swaps out the word "learning" for "recollection," leaving the structure of the paradox intact. According to the theory of recollection, the knowing subject still needs to "know" the things to be learned ahead of time. Finally, the notion of recollection still does not provide any account for how things were learned in previous lives (or between lives, in the afterlife); it merely pushes back the need for an account of learning to a previous time. There is still no account given for how learning was possible in these previous lifetimes.⁸ The notion of recollection, taken literally, is devoid of any helpful explanation of how learning is possible. Therefore, it must be presented for other reasons.

While Socrates' speech does not offer us much of an explanation of how learning happens if we consider only his explicit "argument," the context that Socrates builds around this argument paints more of the picture of what might be happening in learning. Socrates claims that the explanation comes from priests and priestesses who wanted to give a rational account of their abilities, and also from poets. Here we see the recurrence of the theme of the search for rational foundations for abilities that seem to defy rational foundation, which we saw earlier when

⁸ Bernard Phillips, "The Significance of Meno's Paradox," in *Meno: Text and Criticism*, ed. Alexander Sesonske and B. N. Fleming (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Pub. Co, 1965), 82.

Socrates sought the definitions behind colour and figure.⁹ Priests and priestesses in their divining, and poets in their inspiration, are conduits for forces that seem to be *outside* of them, and this seems important in relation to the fact that the literal account of recollection clings to the notion that recognition, and by the same token learning, must be accomplished by subjects on the basis of what they have *inside* of them. We can “read” virtue, colour, and figure on the world, but when we look for the source of our ability to “read” these things, we find that we do not have it inside us. Thus what we get with the notion of recollection is not an explanation for how learning works, but, indirectly, an engagement with why the terms of the learner’s paradox seem wrong: learning may be accomplished by the subject, but the subject on her own does not appear to be the agent of knowledge. The subject appears to be “moved” by the outside.¹⁰

Just as there was reason to suspect that the notion of recollection was not advanced for the purpose that Socrates suggested, there is reason to suspect that the demonstration with the slave might not be meant to prove the notion of recollection. If one accepts that the notion of recollection is not meant to be taken literally, then there would be no reason for Socrates to try to convince Meno of it with the demonstration, or for Plato to try to convince his reader. Further, the dialogue seems to follow a structure that would suggest that the place that the demonstration holds is one in which we should expect to find a refutation of an unsatisfactory “logical” point. If the first half of the *Meno* represents Socrates’ “logical” point that inquiry requires a clear starting point of necessary background knowledge (let’s call this A), and the second half of the dialogue

⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer points out how strange it should seem to the reader that priests and priestesses would seek justification, and for that reason, that the reader should be suspicious that the notion of recollection should really be treated as a religious truth as Socrates introduces it. He writes, “But the authorities upon whom Socrates relies already sound odd. For here we find priests and priestesses who are able to give justification! In the context of Greek religion there is something absurd about that. For Greek religion was not a religion of scripture and orthodoxy but of individual awe and piety and of regular public honoring of the divine.” Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 53.

¹⁰ How the subject is moved from the outside will be addressed explicitly in the third chapter through the explication of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the “body schema.”

demonstrates that in practice the opposite is true (let's call this B), the same structure seems to appear, writ small, in the centre of the text in the form of the notion of recollection and the demonstration with the slave, giving the dialogue an A(AB)B structure. In the second A section, the notion of recollection provides a philosophical account of why learning is not possible, though it is only a superficial one—that is, Socrates makes a “logical” point on the surface, but it is an unsatisfactory one. In the first B section, Socrates presents the demonstration with the slave as evidence of the notion of recollection. However, because the demonstration occupies the B section of the A-B structure, we could expect that in fact the demonstration will give a real picture of learning, because it is in the B sections that Socrates seems to refute the “logical” points he has made, by instead employing practical demonstration. If it is the case that the dialogue indeed does follow this A(AB)B structure, then we should expect that the demonstration with the slave is not necessarily an elaboration of the notion of recollection but a refutation of it.

The demonstration comes about because Meno asks Socrates to *teach* him what he means that there is no such thing as learning, only recollection, to which Socrates retorts that Meno must be trying to entrap him into agreeing that really *there is* learning, since teaching would suggest complementary learning. As an alternative to teaching, Socrates elects to elaborate on his point by giving a demonstration. He asks Meno to call out one of his slaves and proceeds to ask the slave questions about geometry.

As Socrates narrates it, his demonstration with the slave is proof that what we call learning is really recollection. But it is possible to separate the mythical elements of the notion of recollection and see something much more recognizable in the slave's performance and in the interaction between him and Socrates. Socrates asks the slave a series of simple geometry

questions, and the assumption is that he should not know the answers to the questions, because geometry is the domain of educated people and the slave has not been educated. And yet he does manage to answer the questions, if not with perfect accuracy. Although the slave has never studied geometry, he is prepared to answer these questions for at least two reasons. First, he is prepared because he speaks Greek—a fact that Socrates draws attention to—and can therefore understand what is being asked of him. Second, the slave has experience with the world that supports his ability to draw conclusions about how to multiply lines and areas. The slave would have experience with physical objects that resemble the shapes he is asked to deal with, and, as Gadamer notes, the Greek language is already his linguistic milieu, which means that concepts like “doubling” are already at his fingertips, because they are concepts that are given rise to in the Greek language.¹¹ The slave does not need to have been taught geometry to begin to answer questions based in geometry; as Socrates states, in the imparting of the notion of recollection, “for as all nature is akin, and the soul has learned all things, there is no difficulty in her eliciting, or as men say ‘learning,’ out of a single recollection, all the rest, if a man is strenuous and does not faint” (81d). That is to say, the slave is able to draw his knowledge of geometry out of his previous experience, and in that sense he is engaged in a sort of reaching backwards into himself. Thus, there is a sense in which the notion of recollection could be considered to be advancing an idea of pre-knowing that is subtly but significantly different from what the learner’s paradox requires. If the ideas to be recollected are only available to the subject in a latent way, and therefore not readily available as clear knowledge to be put to work at any moment, then that

¹¹ Gadamer makes the point that the slave understands what Socrates means by doubling because he speaks Greek. See Gadamer, 55. Based on an engagement with Gadamer’s analysis, Clarence W. Joldersma further develops Gadamer’s insight. Joldersma notes that doubling would be an idea available to the slave because it is an idea available in the Greek language. He makes this observation in the midst of an interesting discussion of what the scene with Meno’s slave can say about the nature of truth. See Clarence W. Joldersma, “Radical Constructivism, Education, and Truth as Life-Giving Disclosure,” in *Truth Matters: Knowledge, Politics, Ethics, Religion*, ed. Lambert Zuidervaart et al. (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2013), 46-65.

suggests a different picture of learning than the paradox presents. In that case, learning would seem to involve activating these latent possibilities to mean more than they previously did for the subject, and indeed, Socrates seems to bring out such a notion of learning in his demonstration with Meno's slave.

While we cannot take away anything from the theory of recollection treated as a logical explanation, we are pointed in the direction of something true if we treat it instead as a myth. When we encounter something new, we seem to be ready to receive it on the basis of other things we already know, some of which may be known only in a latent way—as the notion of recollection seems to capture—and which might be brought into clarity in the learning of the new thing. This pertains to the learner's paradox in that it suggests that the necessary foreknowledge that supports learning need not be foreknowledge of the exact thing to be learned, as the paradox assumes. Previous experience might support figuring out something new.

What we should notice in the scene involving Meno's slave is the extent to which the "teaching" Socrates is doing relies on bringing out things with which the slave already has experience by asking him questions, and not, as Meno would have it, by providing him answers.¹² Socrates asks many questions, questions that lead the slave to think in certain directions that he likely would not have without the interaction. To Meno's mind, teaching happens when a student asks a question and a teacher answers it, and knowledge is passed like information from one to the other; hence, he continually pesters Socrates to bestow upon him answers to his questions.¹³ We see in the final third of the dialogue that this is the received view

¹² For an excellent discussion of the existentially transformative nature of education as it is construed in Plato's work, see Kym Maclaren, "The Role of Emotion in an Existential Education: Insights from Hegel and Plato," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 48, no. 4, issue 192 (December 2008): 471-492. Maclaren writes: "Genuine education is an existential process—one that affects our very mode of existence by taking place most fundamentally at the level not of intellect but of our lived certainties" (472-473).

¹³ For a good discussion of the use and value of teaching the *Meno* (as well as of the cave analogy in the *Republic*) for helping students to shift their expectations of classroom-learning away from "knowledge

of what teaching is when Meno and Socrates discuss what sorts of things can be taught and specify that it is knowledge that can be taught; knowledge can be reliably passed from person to person unlike something like virtue, which, they surmise, is right opinion. When Meno asks Socrates his questions, he is not asking in order to open up a conversation that might help them develop the point they are investigating, but rather under the assumption that the answer already exists and that Socrates can give it to him. This is why he is incredulous at the beginning of the dialogue that Socrates would not know what virtue is—had he not ever heard Gorgias speak on the topic? If he had, then he ought to know what virtue is. When the question-asking is turned around, however, and it is the philosopher asking guiding questions of the uneducated slave, the meaning of the gesture is entirely different. The slave does not already know the answer; he has to figure it out.

Socrates' question-asking creates a situation in which the slave's process of discovery is made possible. It is unlikely that the slave would be able to figure out the answers to all of the geometry questions without Socrates' guidance, and even with Socrates' support the slave makes a number of errors before figuring out the right answers. But though Socrates is guiding the slave, he is not simply giving him the answers. In fact, the work that the slave is undertaking in order to answer the questions may more closely resemble the work of a real geometer making mathematical discoveries than a child being taught geometry in school, if the child is instructed based on the kind of delivery of knowledge that Meno favours.

By asking the slave all these questions, Socrates pulls the slave into Socrates' orbit, allowing the slave to see some of what Socrates can see. Socrates does this by drawing upon the knowledge or fluency with the world that the slave already has at his disposal. In this way,

banking," see Joe Blosser, "Turning from the Shadows: *Meno*, the Cave, and the Service-Learning Classroom," *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 20, no. 2 (2014): 79-89.

Socrates is able to help the slave to bring out certain aspects of his reality that are just on the horizons of his understanding, things that are available to him with a shift of perspective. Socrates begins by helping the slave make explicit to himself some of the things he already grasps implicitly. The slave knows what a square is, and when Socrates asks him, “And you know that a square figure has these four lines equal?,” he is making that fact, already grasped implicitly through perception, available to the slave so that he can reason with it (82c). When Socrates asks the slave to find the area of the two-by-two square, he leads the slave to see that he does not need to do arithmetic in order to figure out what the area is, but simply to recognize what the area of two one-by-one foot squares is and work from there. The slave figures out that the two-by-two square will have an area of four. Socrates asks him what a square with double the area would be and the slave answers with ease that it would have an area of eight (82d). Then Socrates asks him what the length of the side of a square of eight is and the slave starts to make errors. The slave proposes doubling the side in order to double the area of the square and this results in a square of four times the area, sixteen square feet. Socrates is being rather tricky here. If they had a calculator, they could figure out that a square with an area of eight feet has sides of 2.82842712 feet; the sides of a square with an area of eight are the square root of eight, and eight is not a perfect square. Socrates’ question exceeds what the slave’s perceptual resources can help him work out. But Socrates, by continuing to ask questions, allows the slave to see something new in the same diagram he has been puzzling over. Each question that Socrates asks calls only on the resources that the slave already has available to him, but in combination they bring an entirely new figure and a new geometrical possibility into being for the slave. Socrates leads the slave to see something new in the diagram by constructing lines on his square of area sixteen that divide it into four smaller squares. He then bisects each of the smaller squares on the diagonal,

leaving a “diamond”-oriented square inscribed inside the original square. Because each quadrant is cut in half by its diagonal, the inscribed square has an area of exactly half of the original square, eight square feet, just as the slave needed to make (85a).

“Were not all these answers given out of his own head?,” asks Socrates (85b). In truth, the answers were not recollected from his past lives; rather, what has happened is that Socrates was able to use speech and gestures, in the form of lines drawn in the sand, to get the slave to think according to Socrates’ thinking, to occupy Socrates’ perspective. The slave was able to see something entirely new to him on the basis of the things that he already understood. It would be easy to be incredulous of Socrates’ honesty here as he maintains that he is *just asking questions*, not teaching anything, and of course there is a element of sly humour at work here. But Socrates is also demonstrating something with the greatest of earnestness: communication demonstrates that it is possible to understand something beyond what we could have understood on our own. We are capable of being swept into the intentions of others to see as they see, and thus we are not limited to what we already know but in a perpetual process of understanding new meanings on the basis of old ones. This is precisely what the learner’s paradox denies and why this scene is a counter-demonstration of it; this is why we can recognize something that we have not yet encountered.

Reflecting on the slave’s missteps, Socrates remarks, “he who does not know may still have true notions of that which he does not know” as if they “have just been stirred up in him, as in a dream” (85c). This statement suggests that knowledge is not exclusively the kind of thing that you either have or do not have, as Meno thinks. In the case of the demonstration, it appears to be the conversation that stirs up true notions in the slave; the conversation gives a kind of external support for the slave’s discovery, not telling him the answers but drawing ways of

seeing out of him, helping him to see new facets of the diagrams. In the final third of the *Meno*, Socrates advances a clearer idea of what this other kind of “knowledge” might be.

Right Opinion as a Different Kind of Fluency with the World than Knowledge (86c-100c)

What we should notice about the final third of the *Meno* is that Socrates returns to and focuses on the idea that we have a fluency with the world that is lesser than or different from knowledge; he names this “right opinion.” This is most prominently brought out when he and Meno are able to determine that virtue is right opinion rather than knowledge. Socrates and Meno are able to surmise this by the following argument: Virtue is a guide of man, and the guides of man are knowledge and right opinion. Knowledge is that which can be taught. Because there are no teachers of virtue, virtue must not be knowledge, and therefore virtue must be right opinion (98e-99b).

The idea that our grasp on the world might not be fueled by what Socrates calls knowledge was introduced in the first third of the dialogue. There we saw that it is far easier to recognize virtue, to use and understand the word, than it is to get at the knowledge that seems as though it ought to lie behind these abilities by saying what its meaning is. Socrates and Meno’s effortless ability to recognize colour and figure presents the same issue to us as we see how difficult it is to give any kind of adequate definition of them. In the middle third of the dialogue we see Meno’s slave succeed at solving geometry problems despite never having been educated in geometry, and thus his power to solve the problems must have stemmed from some sources other than knowledge, such as his fluency with Greek and the world that that language opens up, his fluency with the physical world he deals with every day, and the power that Socrates exerted

on him to see something new in the diagrams. By the time that Socrates and Meno discover that virtue is right opinion, a form of “knowledge” secondary to real knowledge, it is the “last nail in the coffin” of their discoveries that it does not seem to be only or even primarily knowledge that allows us to take hold of our world in an informed way. The fact that something as elevated as virtue (or excellence) is not informed by knowledge but by the lesser right opinion suggests that the role that right opinion plays in our grasping of our world is worth further investigation.

As right opinion, virtue is a power absent of a firm rational ground.¹⁴ But despite the lack of a clear foundation, right opinion achieves more or less the same thing as knowledge. Socrates makes this point by comparing a guide who knows the way to Larissa because he has traveled there before and a guide who merely has right opinion. The guide with right opinion also knows the way, even though he has not traveled it and so does not know it first-hand. Nevertheless, a guide with right opinion is perfectly sufficient to help people to reach Larissa (97a). Virtue is not chance, but it is not born out of some clear knowledge possessed by the subject.

When Anytus says that he *knows* that he wants nothing to do with the sophists, even though he has had no dealings with them (and therefore could not know by first-hand knowledge), Socrates jokes that he must be a diviner to have such knowledge. Socrates makes the point more robustly in relation to politics. The great politicians were not guided by knowledge because if they were then they would have been able to teach their virtue to their successors. They were not able to and so the only possibility that remains is that they were

¹⁴ For a discussion of right opinion in the *Meno*, see Panagiotis Dimas, “True Belief in the *Meno*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 14 (1996): 1-32. It seems that I am in agreement with Dimas that the slave’s understanding of geometry is intuitive and pre-theoretical and therefore belongs in the category of right opinion (or true belief, depending on translation) (6). Dimas further notes that she is in disagreement with those scholars who see the demonstration with the slave as a demonstration of the theory of recollection, since, she points out, Socrates does not give any account of what recollection might mean. She argues that the only way that learning is “discussed” is through the exhibition of learning in the demonstration with the slave, which she takes to be a placing of emphasis on true belief rather than theoretical knowledge (3).

guided by right opinion, “which is in politics what divination is in religion; for diviners and also prophets say many things truly, but they know not what they say” (99c). This may not sound like a compliment, but Socrates goes on to develop it as such: “Then we shall also be right in calling divine those whom we were just now speaking of as diviners and prophets, including the whole tribe of poets. Yes, and statesmen above all may be said to be divine and illumined, being inspired and possessed of God, in which condition they say many grand things, not knowing what they say” (99d). Divining is really a pretty good metaphor for what it is like to enact these higher-order powers like virtue. We rarely *know* what the right thing to do in a difficult situation is; acting virtuously often involves acting “on the fly,” in situations as they unfold, and acting without all the information that would be needed to make a clear determination about what the right course of action is.

The *Meno* ends on the note that human beings have these incredible powers and that it is not our rational selves that are responsible for them.¹⁵ Like inspiration, these powers seem to work through us rather than being given by our own minds. Much of what we would have expected to be *knowledge* in Socrates’ strong sense of the word turns out to be a kind of knowledge the foundations of which we do not have access to. And yet we can act virtuously

¹⁵ For a good articulation of the relationship between right opinion and knowledge in the *Meno*, see Eli Diamond, “Parallel Trials: The Dramatic Structure of Plato’s *Euthypro*,” *The Classical Quarterly* 62, no.2 (2012): 529. Diamond writes:

Recall the *Meno*, when, at the end of the dialogue, Socrates takes up the image of Daedalus relative to this question of the mobility and stability of his interlocutor’s opinions. There he argues that from the perspective of practical activity, there is no difference between true opinion and true knowledge. But it is not for nothing that he seeks to destabilize opinion. These opinions, as long as they stay, are just as good as knowledge, but they can run away – if confronted by the questioning sophistic spirit from without or the influence of desires from within. Changing true opinion into true knowledge can ensure that it will not be lost when investigated or opposed by alternative views. According to this formulation, Socratic questioning is only a provisory destabilization of true customary opinions, for the ultimate sake of regrounding them upon rationally understood foundations. The goal of philosophical inquiry is the stabilization of true opinions and genuine wisdom already contained in ethical and religious customs as *θεία μοίρα παραγιγνομένη ἄνευ νοῦ* (‘obtained by divine lot without understanding’, *Meno* 99e6).

without knowing why; we can be great leaders without knowing with grasping clarity what actions we must take; we can recognize and communicate without knowing exactly what colour, figure, or virtue mean. We are powerful in ways that transcend our capacity to ground those powers. Something is supporting these incredible powers of self-transcendence and we do not yet know what.

In the *Meno*, Socrates presents us with a system of knowing that includes both knowledge that is clearly possessed by the subject as well as right opinion, a kind of “knowledge” that is useful in practice but can run away from its subject because it is not clearly possessed. The fact that there are two kinds of knowledge poses a significant problem for the learner’s paradox. The paradox suggests that in order to recognize something we must already know it, but, as the *Meno* shows, we do not always know what we are recognizing. We recognize colour and figure much better than we can know what they are. We can talk about virtue without knowing exactly what we are talking about. Since virtue is right opinion, the person who acts virtuously does not *know* exactly what he must do in a situation but presumably accomplishes it anyways, on the basis of something other than knowledge. Exactly how the virtuous person “feels” her way or is led through a situation is left vague by Socrates, but we will look at Merleau-Ponty’s account of the “body schema” in the third chapter in order to see his account of how this level of “knowledge” that sits below and supports clear knowledge functions.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that although the *Meno* may raise the esteem of right opinion there is still an important place for what Socrates calls knowledge. Socrates makes this point when he compares right opinion to statues of Daedalus, which supposedly have the unusual quality of walking away from their owners unless they are chained down. Knowledge is that which “pins down” right opinion; knowledge seems to be attained by wresting it out of right

opinion through philosophical conversation. We should be reminded here of Meno's experience of surprise when he tries to capture in a clear definition what he tacitly "knows" about virtue. When Meno tries to examine his own ideas of virtue, he finds that they have run away.

Conclusion

This analysis of the *Meno* has identified that, despite the fact that the stated question of the dialogue is whether or not virtue can be taught, the dialogue develops an undercurrent of ideas about the nature of our knowing relationship to our world. In the first third of the dialogue, we see Socrates and Meno exhibiting that they have a basic fluency with various things, and that this ability exceeds their capacity to articulate what knowledge might be thought to lie behind the ability to recognize various things. This is conveyed in the scenes in which the two struggle to come up with definitions of colour, figure, and virtue. The challenge of coming up with a good definition for any of these things indicates that it is not knowledge, in Socrates' sense of the word, that is the first ingredient in a grasping relationship with the world. This is in opposition to Socrates' purported position in this first third of the dialogue, that he cannot answer Meno's question about whether or not virtue can be taught without first having clear knowledge of what virtue is. What is significant about this first third of the dialogue, with respect to the learner's paradox, is that, although Socrates' and Meno's struggles to come up with definitions reveal that they do not *know exactly* what the things they are trying to define are, they are confident that when they hit upon the right definition they will know it. This is precisely the sort of situation that the learner's paradox describes, and which it suggests is impossible. The paradox claims that learning is impossible because in order to learn something new one would have to already know

the thing in order to recognize it. In the first third of the dialogue we are presented with a model for how learning might actually work. Clear knowledge is not what comes first or what is necessary to recognize something; rather, clear knowledge can be achieved on the basis of an already given basic fluency with things. Socrates and Meno exhibit that they do not need explicit knowledge to ensure that things in their world are meaningful to them, because in fact their ability to “read” meaning on the world outstrips the rational foundation they can give for it.

In the middle third of the dialogue we see that the notion of recollection need not be taken literally as suggesting that we are endowed with all our ideas innately before our birth. Rather, Socrates’ imparting of the notion of recollection appears to be presented for other reasons. Socrates claims that the notion of recollection comes from priests and priestesses who wanted to give rational foundation for their abilities. Here Socrates gives us a clear image of something that was merely exhibited in the first third: the search for rational foundations for that which appears to be given to us through some other means. The people he chooses for this image—priests, priestesses, and poets—are people whose ability comes from the “outside,” through inspiration, which suggests that there is somewhere else that it might be fruitful to look for the roots of our abilities other than to the knowledge we might hold. The comparison between inspiration and knowledge suggests that we are not the agents behind our knowledge. If the power to know does not come strictly from inside us, then we are directed to look outside of us for the source of our powers, just as the poets, priests, and priestesses do. The fact that we are not agents of our own knowledge is something that Meno and Socrates exhibit in their search for definitions. It is also what Meno—perhaps unknowingly—identifies as a problem when he raises the learner’s paradox. The problem that the paradox identifies is that if we have to be the sole

agents behind our knowledge we would never be able to learn anything new because we would not already have that new thing in our clear, knowing grasp.

What the notion of recollection and the following scene involving the slave seem to point to is that we have a kind of latent knowledge that is not available to us in the way that the learner's paradox describes, but that can be brought into new relevance in the act of learning. We see in the demonstration with the slave the role that a teacher can play in helping the student to see things with which he is already familiar in a new way. Socrates' interaction with the slave brings out two main points about teaching: the importance of the past experience of the learner in his encounter of something new; and the capacity of human beings to turn others towards their way of seeing through communication. In these ways, the slave's learning seems to come, in a sense, from outside, rather than from within him. An important image of this activity on the outside appears in the form of the diagram that Socrates and the slave scratch in the sand.

I identified an A(AB)B structure to the *Meno* that gives sense to it, allowing us to see better where Socrates challenges the "logical" points he makes in the dialogue by disproving them in actual practice. Specifically, the "logical" point that Socrates makes in the first third of the dialogue, that he could not know how virtue was acquired without knowing virtue, is disproven in the final third, when he and Meno start to try to answer Meno's question about the acquisition of virtue and in the process answer both that question and Socrates' question about what kind of thing virtue is. Within the middle third of the dialogue, the notion of recollection is presented as a kind of "logical" solution to the learner's paradox, but it is then disproven in practice by the demonstration with the slave, which seems to show, instead, a kind of figuring out of things according to sense-experience and the perspective of others, rather than according to innate ideas or a previous education in geometry.

Finally, in the last third of the dialogue, Socrates names this basic fluency we have with the world as right opinion, in contrast to knowledge, and further develops the relationship he draws between right opinion and divination, which he implied in the context of the notion of recollection. In practical activity, right opinion and knowledge often accomplish the same thing. What makes knowledge stand above right opinion is that it is clearly seized upon by the subject, chained down like a statue of Daedalus, Socrates remarks, so that it cannot run away. What is remarkable is that the relationship between right opinion and knowledge in the *Meno* seems to map quite well onto Merleau-Ponty's position that we are connected to the world first and foremost in pre-reflective ways, and that our reflective understanding of the world is just a small portion of our "knowing" relation to it, which must be appropriated from the unreflective fund of our experience. The relationship between these two kinds of "knowing" will be crucial to offering a resolution to the learner's paradox in the third chapter of this thesis. In the second chapter, we will look at how the learner's paradox appears in the introduction to Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Chapter Two: How the Learner's Paradox Appears in the *Phenomenology of Perception*

In the introduction to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty borrows the form of the learner's paradox from the *Meno* in order to express the incapacity of both empiricism's and intellectualism's accounts of perception to be able to explain how attention could be informed by the life of consciousness, our ongoing experience of the world. By explicating what Merleau-Ponty is doing by invoking the learner's paradox, we will be able to see better how the terms of the paradox as it appears in the *Meno* map onto the terms of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Further, Merleau-Ponty's adoption of the form of the learner's paradox will allow us to see that paradox in a more systematic light, which will prepare us to resolve the paradox according to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, in Chapter Three.

Merleau-Ponty uses the term "empiricism" to refer to philosophical approaches that take the world to be filled with determinate entities that are subject to causality; consciousness is part of this world and subject to causality in the same way. He uses the term "intellectualism" to refer to philosophical approaches that hold that consciousness must be outside of the world, in a sense, because consciousness is not subject to causality; rather, it is free from the restraint of causality, and capable, through its capacity for rationality, to posit an order in things and impose an intelligibility upon the world.¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty criticizes both accounts, finding the subject of empiricism to be wholly without initiative to inquire perceptually about aspects of its world, and finding the subject of intellectualism to have no real reason to inquire about one thing over another. Neither account describes what seems to be really happening in perception, which is that aspects of the world intrigue us and call our attention to them—that is, their intelligibility is

¹⁶ Komarine Romdenh-Romluc, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 20-21.

neither completely given to us (as intellectualism suggests), nor are we indifferent to them (as empiricism suggests). Merleau-Ponty phrases this shortcoming in the terms of the learner's paradox:

What was lacking for empiricism was an internal connection between the object and the act it triggers. What intellectualism lacks is the contingency of the opportunities for thought. Consciousness is too poor in the first case and too rich in the second for any phenomenon to be able to solicit it. *Empiricism does not see that we need to know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not go looking for it; intellectualism does not see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or again we would not go looking for it.* They are in accord in that neither grasps consciousness *in the act of learning*, neither accounts for this "circumscribed ignorance," for this still "empty" though determinate intention that is attention itself. (30)¹⁷

Although Merleau-Ponty's paradox is about perception rather than inquiry, the point he makes is very similar to the point that Plato makes in the *Meno*. There, the learner's paradox is introduced in order to show that the account of inquiry put forward would actually make inquiry impossible. If in order to know a part of virtue we had to know the whole of virtue perfectly, we would never be able to get started with our inquiry into virtue because no part or vague idea could lead us to the whole of virtue; neither would there be any reason to inquire after any part of virtue (the means by which it is acquired, for example) if we already knew the whole of virtue, for that would make inquiry meaningless. The point that Merleau-Ponty makes is similar: consciousness is perpetually getting more out of its perceptions, seeing the world in new ways, becoming

¹⁷ In this chapter and the following one I will use parenthetical citations to make reference to Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*.

attuned to new things, but neither the empiricist nor the intellectualist account of perception can accommodate a perceptual consciousness that operates in an investigative mode. He finds that both make it impossible to explain consciousness's capacity to find something new, and neither allows for any degree of initiative on the part of the subject to direct her attention towards a perception that is presented as demanding further investigation. His own analysis shows that perceptions are always already imbued with meaning, that the perception solicits the perceiver's attention, and, at times, not only transforms under her gaze but also transforms her as a perceiver, as in the case of the development of colour vision.¹⁸

In this chapter, I will explicate how Merleau-Ponty arrives at the philosophical knot of his learner's paradox and how he begins to resolve it through a new account of attention that is linked to the life of consciousness. It will be important to see how learning functions at the most basic levels of perception because, according to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, reflective consciousness and intellectual learning are both accomplished on the basis of the pre-reflective fund of experience that is gained through perception. Perception is the base layer of commerce with the world that makes all forms of learning and enquiry possible, and that shows learning to be operative in the very fabric of perception that ties subjects to their world.

Why Empiricism Is Too Poor

According to Merleau-Ponty's paradox, the problem with empiricism's account of perceptual consciousness is that it is "too poor ... for any phenomenon to be able to solicit it. Empiricism does not see that we need to know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not

¹⁸ The example of colour vision will be explicated below in the subsection entitled "Attention According to Merleau-Ponty."

go looking for it” (30). This part of the paradox corresponds to the part of Meno’s paradox that asks how we would set out to find something if we did not know what we were looking for and how we would recognize it if we found it, that describes not being able to move from ignorance to knowledge or to marshal what one does know in order to be able to inquire when something solicits our attention. Merleau-Ponty finds the equivalent problem in empiricism’s account of perception. Empiricism reduces perception to sense data with two results: perception becomes limited to drawing on the perceptual accomplishments of the past, and it becomes impossible to account for how the perceiver finds new sense in the world.

Empiricism holds that perception is nothing more than sensation: sense data from the world being registered by the sense organs. In the case of vision, this amounts to a description of visual perception as punctual jolts of colour being received by the eye. As appealingly straightforward as this explanation sounds, Merleau-Ponty points out that nowhere in our experience can we actually call up an experience of perceiving areas of colour removed from all other structure and sense.¹⁹ On the contrary, what appear to us are things and spaces between things (16). Moreover, things do not appear as completely neutral, as the sensation theory suggests, but rather appear in relation to us as attractive, repulsive, dangerous, inviting, edible, to be sat on, to be grasped, and so on. The sensation theory ignores this level of structure and meaning, focusing on what it presumes must be the basic building blocks of perception, and in so doing it invents something that was never there. Our perceptions are always imbued with a sense, to the extent that if we really try to perform the experiment of imagining an experience of pure

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty’s insight that our perceptual experience never actually takes the form of areas of colour perhaps makes sense of Socrates’ definitions of form and colour as intrinsically integrated features of the objects of perception which, in a sense, do not have meaning in our experience independent of their integration with objects. See Plato, *Meno*, 75b, 76a, 76d.

sense impressions, we quickly find that it is impossible even to conjure up, so far is this from our actual experience of perception (4).

The achievement of perceptions that are more complex than points of colour immediately presents the empiricist with a problem. In order to account for even the simplest of figures, empiricism has to introduce structures with which to supplement its theory of sensation: namely, the association of ideas and projection of memories. Ultimately we will see that these fail to account for the emergence of meaning as well. No matter what supports are introduced, a theory of sensations neutralizes the sense that is actually at work in our perceptions and stands in the way of being able to account for how further sense could develop.

The ability of consciousness to recognize shapes is a problem for empiricism because empiricism holds that what is happening in perception is simply points of colour making impressions on consciousness. A shape is always more than the sum of its points of colour. If I perceive a white patch against a coloured background, then I am not simply sensing points of colour but also the contour of the border and the fact that the patch appears to overlay the background (15). These are not reducible to the placement of one point of colour next to another, and so empiricism is forced to adopt other explanatory possibilities—impressions of blocks of space, for example—but this would mean that there is a function at work other than mere sense impression (15). Thus empiricism adds that consciousness is able to perceive the patch through the association of ideas. I am not only impacted by sense impressions, presumably, but the sight of this red patch evokes past red patches and the contour evokes past similar contours, and these associations are made automatically (15). The association between them is always merely resemblance since, because of the privileging of sensation, there can never be anything of the order of understanding or identification of the two images as the same. The subject is never

meaningfully involved in these operations; past images flash up as automatically as present ones and the process unfolds without a meaningfully engaged subject at the helm but something more like a calculating machine that never grasps the differentiated objects with which it deals (16).

The problem with using association as an explanation for the sense that appears in things is that it presupposes itself (16). If a perceived image can evoke a past perceived image then there is already more in that current perception than pure sensations; the current perception must already be perceived as meaningful in order for the association to be made. The supposed points of colour must express more than just colour; they must be a kind of meaningful whole or assembly in order to call up similar assemblies. Something cannot take its unity from its resemblance to another thing unless it first presents itself in its unity in a certain way, such that the association is possible (17).

The projection of memories presents exactly the same problem when it is enlisted as a support for a theory of perception as sensation. If I can recognize my previous experiences in the scene currently in front of my eyes, then the scene already contains the sense that memory was supposed to lend it: "Thus, the appeal to memory presupposes what it is meant to explain, namely, the articulation of the givens, the imposing of a sense onto the sensible chaos. The evocation of memory becomes superfluous the moment that it is made possible, since the work that we expect from it has thus already been accomplished" (20). One could not call up these supplementary memories unless there were already sense enough in the scene to justify it. Perception itself, in the present, contains the sense that is attributed to the projection of memories, a power of recognition that does not need to be supported by memory as if by some outside agent (21).

The association of ideas and the projection of memories both suffer from another problem as well. Like the theory of recollection that Socrates gives in the *Meno*, they look into the past to try to ground the abilities of the subject in the present. Empiricism attempts to ground the recognition of forms in the perceptions of the past, but, just as we found in the literal interpretation of the notion of recollection, there is no sufficient explanation as to how the earliest recognitions or fully formed memories came about, and clearly these cannot be explained on the basis of the same principle. Requiring recognition to be firmly grounded in the past locks us squarely into the learner's paradox: if one recognizes a thing then it must have already been known, or, if one has no prior experience with it, then there can be no explanation for how one could come to recognize it. We do recognize new things, and, since an empiricist theory of perception cannot support this, it must be incorrect.

Why Intellectualism Is Too Rich

Intellectualism recognizes the limitations of empiricism's account of perception and tries to resolve them. Like empiricism, intellectualism also relies on a base layer of sensations to explain perception. But unlike empiricism, intellectualism recognizes that sensations alone could never explain that we perceive phenomena such as wholes and causality. Since we do perceive wholes and a world of causality, intellectualism reasons that whatever we get in perception that cannot be explained on the basis of sensation must be contributed by the mind. Intellectualism places a knowing subject at the centre of its operations, unlike empiricism, which envisions perception as a completely automated series of external connections.

Intellectualism's account of perception holds that this knowing subject is engaged in a two-step process of making meaningful perceptions. First, the subject takes in a base layer of sensations. Then, she performs judgments upon this layer of sensations that give meaning to the wholes that we see and the relations between things that we perceive. Merleau-Ponty uses the example of perceiving wax to explain why intellectualism sees its position as justified (29). Wax can be hard, soft, or molten, and it takes on different qualities in each state. To access wax through perception in any of these states is not truly to "get at" wax, since wax does not consist in any one set of its qualities. That is why intellectualism relies upon judgment to explain how it is that we are able to recognize identities like wax. The activity of recognizing wax depends on a mental power asserting itself in the world.

For intellectualism, everything in a perception that is not given by sensation must be contributed by judgment (34). Merleau-Ponty gives the example of seeing people walking on the street below one's window (35). When I look down from my window, all I can see are hats and coats, and yet, I do not simply perceive hats and coats but also people. Since I am not receiving sense data that clearly indicates that there are people there, my perception of people must be a judgment. He further notes that the very fact that I have two eyes but see one single view instead of two means, to the intellectualist, that judgment is at work (35). For intellectualism, any content to perception beyond mere floating qualities is a contribution of the mind.

Merleau-Ponty criticizes intellectualism, however, for giving judgment too great a role in perception. He argues that "judgment" implies taking a position, aiming to know something that is valid across my life and potentially for other minds as well (35-36). In contrast, sensing does not involve taking a position, but rather giving oneself "over to the appearance without seeking to possess it or know its truth" (36). Merleau-Ponty gives the example of seeing two cardboard

boxes, one larger than the other. Intellectualism says that if the larger one appears as though it would be heavier, that is the result of judgment. Merleau-Ponty claims that, prior to making a judgment, he actually “senses” in his hands that the larger one is heavier, even before lifting it (36). To “sense” that the larger box is heavier does not seem to require a full-fledged judgment; the “feeling” seems to be given by the mere appearance of the object and it is felt in the body—or, as he says, in the hands—rather than being interpreted by the mind. Further, Merleau-Ponty shows that judgment does not give us control over the meaning provided by perceptions, and gives the example of a line drawing of a cube. The cube can appear to be oriented in more than one direction, but despite judging this to be so it is not always easy to perceive the cube in whatever orientation we choose (36). This is true of many visual illusions. Even if one has seen the illusion in both of its forms, and judges both to be available in the image, judgment does not necessarily make it possible to perceive each at will. Merleau-Ponty uses these examples to disprove the idea that judgment is the only source of our perceptual grasp on the world.

The problem that intellectualism faces is very similar to that which empiricism faces: it presumes that there is a base layer of sensations that gives rise to perception. In his critique of empiricism, Merleau-Ponty finds that sensation is not rich enough to ever give rise to perceptions. Intellectualism adds judgment to try to solve this problem, but there is still not enough in sensation to be able to guide judgment. Intelligible forms could only be linked to visual cues if instead of seeing unrelated sense data we in fact saw things with qualities. The judgment has to come after the fact of meaningful perceptions. What the above examples show is that things—the larger box, the cube—appear meaningfully to us without the assistance of judgment. Just as we found with empiricism, a base layer of sensation is not sufficient to build up to meaningful perceptions, and it is an invention arrived at through reflection, rather than a

description of the actual experience of perception. Intellectualism imagines that, because there is not enough given in the base layer of sensation, a synthesis must be performed by the knowing subject in order to make things meaningful. But what experience attests to is that there *is* enough given in perception: it gives us the world already synthesized into meaningful wholes. We find in our experience a world that is immediately meaningful, and we find in perception not a two-step process but an immediate event.

Intellectualism's account is dissatisfactory in another way as well: there is no indication of how consciousness could obtain its ideas, since the base layer of sensation that intellectualism presumes could never contribute to the development of ideas. Thus consciousness must already be endowed with all the intelligible structures it will ever need. But if consciousness does not obtain anything through perception, if it is so rich that it already contains everything it ever will contain, then perception is rendered purposeless. If consciousness finds a circle in the shape of a plate, Merleau-Ponty points out, it is because consciousness put it there (29). In this way, intellectualism's account shares some ground with the notion of recollection that Socrates recounts in the *Meno*. In both we find a knowing subject who already contains everything she needs to know in order to do what appears to be learning, and no real account for how it is that that the subject came to have these intelligible structures.

Another symptom of the inadequacy of intellectualism is that it is difficult to account for why we ever have unclear or confused perceptions. For intellectualism, both the things in the world and the intelligible structures we lend to them are so fixed and clear that if we have a confused perception we must just be consenting to cover up a clear perception that we actually have. Because the sense data is there, we must really be seeing the thing, and because we already contain the intelligible structure to see it, we have all the resources to have a successful

perception of it. If our perception is confused, this is simply because we are not paying attention to the perceptions that we do indeed have, and the clear and correct perceptions can be revealed by paying attention. Merleau-Ponty argues that this does not explain what is happening when we have confused, imperfect, or not yet fully determined perceptions. On intellectualism's account, we already possess the intelligible structure of the thing that we are confused about, so the work of attention cannot inaugurate any new knowledge. Further, there seems to be nothing to draw attention to one thing over another because it possesses all of them equally; the revealing or disclosing activity that we usually mean when we speak of "paying attention" is rendered meaningless by the subject of intellectualism. This is what Merleau-Ponty means when he writes that for intellectualism, consciousness is too rich "for any phenomenon to be able to *solicit* it" (30).²⁰

The Role of Attention in Perception According to Empiricism and Intellectualism

Despite the differences between empiricism's and intellectualism's accounts of perception, Merleau-Ponty's points out that, with respect to attention, the two schools of thought hold the same position: that attention does not generate anything new but merely reveals what was already there (29). This perspective is born out of their shared commitment to the "constancy hypothesis," that sense impressions have an exact correspondence with the stimuli in the world. The problem is that there are many examples of perceptions that contradict the constancy hypothesis: a persistent and unchanging loud noise loses its intensity over time for the perceiver (8); the sun viewed at different points on the horizon or through a tube appears to be

²⁰ As Gary Brent Madison writes, "Empiricism thus renders perception impossible, while intellectualism makes it useless." Gary Brent Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981), 20.

different sizes (30); scenes change before our eyes, as in Merleau-Ponty's example of seeing the form of a boat appear on the beach, its masts at first camouflaged by a clump of trees (17-18). Whenever perception is limited or confused, empiricism and intellectualism conclude that the body is indeed accessing the correct impressions, but consciousness is not properly paying attention to them. For both, attention is merely a spotlight that shines its light on dark corners of consciousness without bringing about anything new.

The inadequacy of both accounts of perception is that they "strip perception of its essential function, which is to establish or to inaugurate knowledge" (17). They treat moments of inaccurate or indeterminate perceptions such as those described above as outliers, or not the real thing that is happening in perception. They assume an objective world of perfectly formed objects ready to be perceived, and thus a poorly formed perception is a deviation from what ought to be perceived. They envision the objects of consciousness to arrive on the scene fully formed ("pure, transparent, impersonal, and not imperfect" (31)). They ignore the ambiguity and indeterminacy in perceptions in favour of the clear and determined objects of perception, which are often the final products of a dynamic perceptual process, and they presume these to be the only contents of consciousness (70). The objects of perceptual consciousness are not so well defined, so perfect, so impersonal in relation to the perceiver, but neither empiricism nor intellectualism wishes to account for their ambiguity and indeterminacy.

For Merleau-Ponty, the transition from indeterminate perception to more determinate perception or from error to accuracy is the very nature of perception and the very thing for which we need an account. Such an account would put us on the path to explaining how it is we come to perceive something in a new way, not wholly on the basis of already achieved clear perceptions (as in empiricism) or already possessed intelligible structures (as in intellectualism).

Let us repurpose Merleau-Ponty's example of the boat hidden in the trees on the beach to see the limitations of each account of perception to explain how consciousness *can* perceive something new. By doing this, we will clarify Merleau-Ponty's articulation of the learner's paradox and see how his own account of attention begins to explain the capacity of human perception to inaugurate new perceptions and new knowledge.

Merleau-Ponty describes seeing a clump of trees off in the distance on a beach. From afar, what are really the masts of a boat blend in with the trees and the hull is not visible. But upon getting closer the trees appear strange, and the scene reorganizes to reveal the boat. Empiricism would explain the shift from a perception of trees to a perception of masts and a hull behind the trees by invoking the association of ideas, and would say that we recognize the trees because we can associate past perceptions of trees. When we recognize the masts moments later, we do so because we can associate their form with past perceptions of masts. But there is a problem here: there was nothing determinate in the scene that made what at one point looked like trees later look like masts. After I can see the masts I may retrospectively be able to see why they might have been hidden, but their emergence out of the scene is rather mysterious—if the objects are there, so too should the sense data be there for me. Empiricism holds that indeed the sensations *are* there for me, but through a lack of attention consciousness fails to take note of them.

This is the point that Merleau-Ponty makes when he gives his version of the learner's paradox: because empiricism's subject is nothing more than a calculating machine making external associations between images, there is no *knower* here who could apply attention to a particular scene that warranted further looking. The advantage of introducing attention into a theory of perception, Merleau-Ponty points out, is to allow the subject a degree of freedom in his

investigation of the world (29). But the subject of empiricism does not have any degree of freedom when it comes to where his attention will fall. There is no reason for the searchlight of attention to “shine its light” on one thing over another, nothing to relate it to the life of consciousness, nothing to entice it to look further, since perception operates completely automatically. Perception cannot be guided by that haze of indeterminacy hanging around the scene on the beach because it does not bring any such meaning to the process that would do the work of guiding attention. This is why Merleau-Ponty writes that empiricism is too impoverished to allow for any phenomena to solicit it; it would not go looking for anything, because it has no idea what it is looking for.

In contrast, intellectualism posits a *knowing* subject who can hone in on where attention might provide clarity. But since the subject holds the complete intelligible structure ahead of time, attention’s role here is rather self-referential. Instead of seeking to reveal something new about the object in the world, getting to the true identity of a thing is a matter of turning into oneself, since the complete structure is already contained within the subject. The outward-reaching aspect of perception is therefore unnecessary; it holds no real role in intellectualism’s account of perception. Here the second half of the paradox from the *Meno* is relevant: “You argue that a man cannot inquire ... about that which he knows, ... for if he knows, he has no need to inquire.”²¹ The subject of intellectualism can inquire only with himself, not with the world.

When Merleau-Ponty writes that “consciousness is too poor in the first case and too rich in the second for any phenomenon to be able to *solicit* it,” he is claiming that the accounts of perception given by empiricism and intellectualism, respectively, share the fundamental flaw of being unable to link the work of attention in perception to the life of consciousness, to a

²¹ Plato, *Meno*, 36.

meaningful sequence of events, or to any kind of initiative on behalf of the subject (30). No account is given for how meaning could develop through looking *into* the world. Neither empiricism nor intellectualism “grasps consciousness *in the act of learning*, neither accounts for this ‘circumscribed ignorance,’ for this still ‘empty’ though already determinate intention that is attention itself” (30).

For Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, attention accomplishes a transformation of the objects of perceptual consciousness. This is in contrast to the “spotlight” model of attention characteristic of empiricism and intellectualism—something that illuminates without changing anything. It is the transformational power of attention that will make all the difference for solving the learner’s paradox.

Attention According to Merleau-Ponty

At the heart of the learner’s paradox is the assumption that in order to know or to recognize something we must already be set up to be able to recognize it. This readiness for recognizing takes a number of forms. In the notion of recollection that Socrates recounts in the *Meno*, readiness is mythologized as the idea that we have seen everything already in a previous time. Both empiricism and intellectualism carry a flavour of this as well: empiricism in the sense that association and projection of memories are supposed to support perception, so having seen something in the past is what supports recognition in the present; intellectualism in the sense that recognition is supported by pre-given structures for recognition. All of these accounts envision readiness as something like a child’s shape-sorting set in which one already has a star-shaped hole into which a star-shaped block can be fit. This is the crux of the paradox: you would already have

to be perfectly ready to recognize or learn something new, but being so perfectly ready would mean already knowing it—and then it would not be learning.

While readiness and past experience are central to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the ways in which consciousness establishes or inaugurates new knowledge, the significance of his contribution in this area is that he describes a dynamic whereby spontaneous new understandings are possible on the basis of already attained structures. In interaction with the world, the subject is solicited by the world and can come to spontaneously transform the structures through which she sees the world. While attention sometimes merely clarifies, it is also capable of doing more than clarify; attention is capable of revealing a new structure of sense in the world.

Merleau-Ponty's key example of attention revealing a new structure of sense is the development of colour vision in infants. He reports that psychologists in his time wondered why it was that infants' sight began without the perception of colour, upon which they first developed the ability to differentiate between coloured and non-coloured things, then warm and cool colours, and finally the full range of precise colours associated with normal human vision. The psychologists hypothesized that not knowing the names of the colours was the obstacle to the infants' ability to sort out the precise colours. Like the empiricists, the psychologists' assumption was that "where *there is green*, the child must surely see green; he just failed to pay attention to it and to apprehend his own phenomena" (32). Again this sounds rather like needing the correctly shaped hole to sort the correctly shaped block into: one needs the word and the concept "green" in order to be receptive to green when it appears in the world. Rather than treating the early stages of colour vision as mere confusion or underdevelopment, Merleau-Ponty sees, in the transitions between the stages of colour perception, a move from indeterminate to more determinate that is not unlike the dynamic of many perceptions. He points out that psychologists

had assumed green to be an objective quality of the world, but did not consider the possibility that infants might see colour in an indeterminate way and gradually make themselves over into beings who are attuned to seeing this quality through their own perceptual behaviours. Infants are in fact able to create new structures of perception through their own acts of paying attention.

This form of attention makes a new object for itself by paying attention to what were previously indeterminate horizons and thematizing them. Rather than assuming that the more determinate figure exists in the world and that we must have the right mental structures to be able to assimilate it, Merleau-Ponty argues that indeterminate objects in the world *motivate* further engagement. Just as in the example of the boat on the beach, a new figure emerges before our eyes, one that could not have been predicted based on our previous perceptions. It is only in retrospect that we can see how those earlier perceptions led to this new figure.²² This is perhaps one of the reasons that a backwards-looking explanation of perception is attractive: after determining an object in a new way it seems as if we must have already known it.

Consciousness is able to create its own figures not by looking into the past or into itself but by looking into the world. Thus it is not the case that we need to know the thing already in order to be able to learn it, but rather that certain indeterminate horizons had to be there in a “background way” for the consciousness to be able to institute a new structure. The way we see things, the habits of looking that we have, thematize certain things and leave other things in the background as horizons, as potential sites for meaning. These horizons are “on our radar” in a certain way, but their content is not made explicit in our perceptions. Through attention, these horizons *can* be thematized and new figures revealed. The indeterminate colour that the infant thematizes and brings out as green, and the haze of indeterminacy around the clump of trees on the beach that breaks to reveal trees *and* masts, are two such examples. These horizons are

conditions for the possibility of a new structure rather than its cause, and it is this ongoing dynamic of the generation of spontaneous new structures and their sedimentation that brings us new horizons to further sustain the dynamic by which attention does its work.

Conclusion

This chapter has explicated Merleau-Ponty's own rephrasing of the learner's paradox in order to show that there is a substantial connection between it and the learner's paradox as it is interpreted in the *Meno*. Whereas the learner's paradox in the *Meno* was phrased in terms of inquiry, Merleau-Ponty's rephrasing of the paradox casts it in terms of perception. Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty's criticism of empiricism's and intellectualism's accounts of perception can help us to see better the point that is made in the *Meno*: that, in order for learning to be possible, we can neither fully possess the object we seek after (as in intellectualism), nor can we be completely unaware or it cut off from it (as in empiricism). Both empiricism and intellectualism take the world to be filled with fully determinate entities, but what experience attests to is that our perception tolerates ambiguity and indeterminacy. Our real relationship to the things in our world is both invested and imperfect, neither that of an uninterested calculating machine, as empiricism claims, nor an all-knowing subject, as intellectualism claims. The fact that we do not possess the world in a perfect, all-encompassing way through perception but are invested in what surrounds us, and the fact that we are thus endowed with the initiative to pay attention, means that new things can come forward to us.

Where empiricism, intellectualism, and the notion of recollection raised in the *Meno* all require a firm ground for the assimilation of new structures, Merleau-Ponty gives us an

explanation based on a “soft” ground—rather akin to how Socrates at the end of the *Meno* concludes that virtue is not knowledge, but the less firmly grounded “right opinion.” Through the act of paying attention, Merleau-Ponty shows us a different dynamic, a twinned motion of grounding and self-transcending.²³ This self-transcending dynamic, he goes on to demonstrate, permeates most if not all aspects of human being. It is at work in the body in its capacity to absorb and integrate habitual motions into itself and to use these to give rise to new possible motions and meanings. It is perhaps most easily observable in speech, where the dynamic of the sedimentation of new meaning and the creation of spontaneous meaning is more plainly observable and our fluency with ambiguity most easily recognized. Investigating the learner’s paradox brings us up against a facet of what it is to be human, something that we can only imagine that Plato sensed as he wrote the *Meno*, and that Merleau-Ponty expresses when he writes that human beings have “a genius for ambiguity that might well serve to define man” (195). To understand our genius for ambiguity further, we shall turn to Merleau-Ponty’s ideas of habit and the body schema and his account of expression and speech, in order to see how our pre-reflective selves grasp the world and endow us with powers with which to meet it.

²³ For a good discussion of the place of the learner’s paradox in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, see Martin C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, 2nd ed, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 1-4 and 35-37. Dillon identifies the paradox of immanence and transcendence as central to Merleau-Ponty’s thinking and the paradox of the *Meno* as one way in which this theme is taken up in his work.

Chapter Three:

Criticism of the Learner's Paradox in Light of Merleau-Ponty's Account of the Body

In this chapter, I will use the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty to make two main criticisms of the terms of the learner's paradox. First, I will challenge the idea that learning works on the basis of mental representations, as the paradox presumes.²⁴ I will do this by explicating Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "body schema." Second, I will challenge the idea that the subject is in control or the agent of her own learning, which the paradox also presumes. I will do this by explicating the *Phenomenology's* "The *Cogito*"—specifically Merleau-Ponty's criticism of Descartes and of the notion of an inner self.

Body Schema

Merleau-Ponty accounts for the sense-giving nature of perception, and for our pre-reflective fluency with various things, by showing that our consciousness is a lived engagement with the world accomplished by our bodies. This is in opposition to how empiricism and intellectualism conceive of consciousness, as either a calculating machine for mental images or as the sole source of sense-giving, respectively. Merleau-Ponty radically shifts the notion of consciousness away from the mind, situating it in the body's perceptual relationship with the world. He argues that consciousness exists *as* the body, and this body-subject has its own way of "knowing" its world that is not the kind of explicit mental knowing that we often assume is an *addition* to what the body contributes.

²⁴ For a good discussion of Merleau-Ponty's challenge to mental representation, see Hubert L. Dreyfus, "Intelligence without Representation—Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Mental Representation," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 1 (2002): 367-383.

The key here is not to think of the body as an object, a “lump,” to which a knowing faculty has to be added. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is a very special kind of object on account of its power to perceive and its power to move itself. Through perception, the body transcends the borders of its “object-body” so that it is both where it is *and* over there with that thing it sees, hears, or smells. Through motricity, the body transcends not only where it is but what it might be at any moment; by using itself to change its situation, to gesture, communicate, and embody emotions and desires, the body transforms what it could mean. These features make the body quite different from any other kind of object, which would not be open to the world or direct itself toward the world in ways that were meaningful to it.

How meaning is grasped by the body, without the need to make meaning explicit through thought, will be explained by what Merleau-Ponty calls the “body schema.” This set of pre-reflective powers that our body writes into itself supports our fluency with the world and by extension our capacity to learn. The body schema is the unseen, unnoticed network of pre-established pathways to our environment and its objects on which the body relies to “automate” its dealings with the world. Because of it, the body does not need input from the reflective self to perform most of its operations—and we will see that even our most cognitive operations rely heavily on the body schema’s powers. Through the body schema, we come to fit over the parts of our world better, incorporating them into the system that makes up our conjoined reality of self and world. This is directly related to the possibility of learning, since learning something new requires fitting the new thing into a world that previously did not include it.

Most of what we do with our bodies we do not have to think through. When we have a question for someone in the next room, we do not have to find our feet and legs, assess the distance to be crossed, or tell our feet where to go to avoid bumping our shins into furniture on

the way. If we want to talk to someone in the next room, our intention to reach that person carries us there. Our feet, legs, and eyes contribute what they do to the operation without needing to be called into service in a direct way. We do not need to plot a route to the person; everything “just goes” without our explicitly reflective contribution. We do not even need to consciously plan what we will say to the person. An intention, our directness towards the person that is itself perhaps not entirely clear, this urge to regain equilibrium, carries us through speaking as well. In a lively conversation, the conversation spontaneously draws speech out of us without us needing to craft what we want to say ahead of time. Anyone who has ever been surprised at what “came out of his mouth” has experienced this. In our actions and speech, we do not, as a matter of course, have to first conceptually represent our intentions to ourselves in order to make things “go.”

If we were to ask how it is that we know how to walk into the next room or how we know what to say, we would be asking the wrong question. It is not that we *know* how but rather that we *can* do it. This is the distinction Merleau-Ponty identifies when he writes that “consciousness is originally not an ‘I think that,’ but rather an ‘I can’” (139). When we reach for an object, we do not need to know the location of the object in objective space and then calculate how far across each axis of motion we need to move, as a robot might. We meet up with the object of our aim without needing to represent it to ourselves or determine its place. We move across space that means something to our body and this meaning does not need to pass through thought. Merleau-Ponty writes: “Motricity is thus not, as it were, a servant of consciousness, transporting the body to the point of space that we imagine beforehand” (140). Representation of the space is not necessary; the space we move through seems to already be “known” by our bodies—as long

as we understand that in this case “knowing” is nothing like subsuming under a category of thought (130).

Speech works in much the same way, despite the fact that we commonly think of speech as being an outward translation of thought and therefore an activity of the mind. We may say that we *know* how to speak a language in which we are fluent, but if we examine our experience of speech and communication, speaking is something we can *do*, a power at our disposal. We do not know the sense of our speech “all the way down.” We do not have to consciously put one word after another or decode the speech of another. Communication is as immediately clear as perception (and at the same time, it can be just as obscure), and language makes up part of the world that we “fit our bodies over,” much like objects and spaces. If fluent communicators had to justify what each word they used meant, and why they assembled them in a certain order in a sentence, many of them would find themselves at a loss (408-409). Words exist for us as readily available tools with which to accomplish communication or seize upon our thoughts; they give us a power, but our relation to them is not primarily one of knowledge or clear self-possession of the meaning that they empower us to convey. This phenomenon is demonstrated in the *Meno* by Meno’s surprise at not being able to say what virtue was. Meno was much more capable at using the word “virtue” than defining it. The power to communicate using words is not dependent on conscious knowledge but on the body’s ability to “hold” words, which are modulations of the body (lungs, vocal chords, tongue, lips, teeth, etc.), around itself as potential tools for acting out its desires. It is the body schema that retains words as possible uses for our body.

The body schema is formed through the sedimentation of habits. Habit is neither an automatic reflex nor a form of knowledge (if by knowledge we mean something mental (145)), but rather a kind of pre-programming of potential powers. The sedimentation of habits into the

body schema allows the body-subject to act and respond in ways that are neither completely passive to an instinctual or reflexive response, nor completely active, requiring the conscious effort of the mind to deliberately navigate the situation. Significantly, habits are acquired through bodily activity—it is not the case that habits have to be instituted by a reflective consciousness before they become “automated.”

Merleau-Ponty gives a number of telling examples of how we live through a body schema or habit-body. A woman with a tall feather in her hat learns to bob as she passes under lower ceilings so that her feather does not become crumpled. She does not need to make a quick mental calculation of her height, plus the feather, minus the height of the ceiling, in order to adjust accordingly; rather, her accommodation of the lower ceiling is fluid, carried out without a thought (144). A car driver does not need to assess the width of the space that he has to maneuver compared to the width of the car (144). Our bodies move in space not like explorers that have been dropped into some alien world but as if they have internalized the spaces and the objects to which we attach ourselves (the hat with the feather, the car). Merleau-Ponty describes the experience of moving around his house as if 1000 coordinates have been written into his body (131). A blind person who uses a white cane is likewise able to extend his body’s sensitivity to its environment. The blind man does not need to think through or make explicit to himself what he needs to do with his body in order to avoid the obstacles that his cane identifies. The operation happens seamlessly, as if the cane were part of his body (144). In both perception and motricity, the body directs itself towards its world in a way that demonstrates power—power to navigate, to communicate, to make, to do—rather than knowledge. A very clear example of this that Merleau-Ponty gives is of a typist whose fingers “know” where to go with perfect accuracy when typing out sentences but who, when asked to identify where any particular letter

key is without looking, would be unable to do so (146). The typist's ability to type is not based on applying the cognitive knowledge of the location of each letter in rapid succession. Rather, he has incorporated the keyboard into his body schema at a pre-reflective level.

The habituation of motor habits is also closely related to the habituation of perceptual habits. The development of colour vision in infants involves a shift from a more general and indeterminate mode into a more determinate one, and shows that visual perception is not simply a function of an eye that is sensitive to light; the sensitivity of the eye is merely what first makes visual perception possible. Looking involves moving the muscles of the eye in certain ways, looking longer and focusing in on things that draw our attention. By looking, the infant orients herself to the world, becoming habituated into new ways of looking that support her developing perception. This example shows that this movement of self-transcendence, the body transcending its own powers and developing new ones, is operative at the most basic level of perception.²⁵ The development of precise colour vision does not require an infusion of cognitive knowledge; the body transcends itself through its own perception, fueled only by its relationship to the world and its milieu.

This dynamic of self-transcendence is easily observable in language. In the chapter entitled "The Body as Expression, and Speech," Merleau-Ponty advances an account of speech that undermines the distinction between thought and speech, a distinction based on the notion that there is a disembodied consciousness in charge of investing words with their meanings. Merleau-Ponty's understanding of speech follows from his understanding that we exist meaningfully as bodies, without a duality of mind and body. For Merleau-Ponty, the introduction of thought as the cause behind the meaning of speech is a needless doubling of phenomena, since

²⁵ For an excellent discussion of being-in-the-world in the *Phenomenology* as simultaneously circularity, transcendence, and rootedness, see Madison, 19-72.

there is no reason to think that speech is not meaningful on its own—speech presents itself as meaningful and nowhere in my experience can I locate a thought that was not accomplished by speech. He observes that we cannot access our thoughts prior to them being accomplished in speech, and, if the thought that is supposed to exist prior to speech is not accessible to the self who is speaking, it is unclear for whom it is supposed to exist. We certainly have the experience of feeling compelled to express something in speech, but this does not mean that there was a thought that preceded speech and gave speech its content (182-183). For Merleau-Ponty, the feeling of momentum towards expression is an intention much like any other that the body has: not pre-planned and calculated but existing as a desire for or a directness towards something, and accomplished by its own actions.

We use words without reflection just as we extend our bodies into the world through the habits that make it possible to accomplish our projects (186). And just as we “read” the sense of colours and objects without need for interpretation, words “give” their sense to us immediately. Speech is a particular set of meaningful gestures, not entirely of a different ilk than other gestures, but with the special feature that these gestures cohere into a set of available possibilities—what we call “language.” It is this sedimentation of acts of speech that allows us to “hold” words around us, as part of our body schema.

How the Body Schema Relates to the Learner’s Paradox

The learner’s paradox assumes that learning something new is a matter of explicit knowledge—knowing what we are looking for and how to look for it, and being able to compare it to already possessed knowledge when we find it. But Merleau-Ponty’s account of the body

schema shows that we recognize things not on the basis of explicit cognitive knowledge, but because our bodies have pre-reflectively absorbed certain ways of taking up our world. We interact with our world on the basis of a “lived logic” that is alive in the threads that connect us to our world, rather than on the basis of a mental logic of which we are explicitly aware and which we employ in our basic interactions with things in the world.²⁶ This has a direct bearing on the way that Meno voices the paradox: “And how will you inquire, Socrates, into that which you do not know? What will you put forth as the subject of your inquiry? And if you find what you want, how will you ever know that this is the thing which you did not know?”²⁷ We are now in a position to claim that we can inquire into things without knowing explicitly that after which we are inquiring; we can direct our attention towards something with which we have a pre-cognitive fluency. We witness this in Meno and Socrates’ conversation as they struggle to define colour, figure, and virtue, wresting knowledge out of their pre-cognitive familiarity with these features of their reality. Although they can name these things, the names themselves point toward an implicit meaning that is available for them at a bodily level—they “know” these things when they see them; they can point towards them in communication. It is because they “know” these things when they see them that they can assume that when they find a good definition they will be able to hold it up to the reality they already implicitly “know” and say with confidence that they have found the thing that they did not know.

Not only does learning not rely on already holding in advance the thing to be learned, but by its very definition it excludes it. There are many kinds of learning, and it may be helpful to

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty refers to a “lived logic” in the following passage: “Now as we have just seen, the perception of one's own body and external perception offer us the example of a *non-thetic* consciousness, that is, of a consciousness that does not possess the full determination of its objects, the example of a *lived logic* that does not give an account of itself, and the example of an *immanent signification* that is clear for itself and only knows itself through the experience of certain natural signs” (50-51).

²⁷ Plato, *Meno*, 80d.

see how knowing the thing in advance is antithetical to learning. I will discuss motor learning, perceptual learning, and learning through communication to show that it is our non-explicit relations to the world that sustain learning. I will then turn to the case of Schneider, whose pathology shows us an example of a person for whom the body schema no longer supports normal learning. I will argue that Schneider resembles the subject that the learner's paradox describes.

Merleau-Ponty scholarship is rich with analyses of the learning of motor skills.²⁸ The learning of a new motor skill may at first appear to disprove the idea that we do not need to first know explicitly what we are seeking, especially if we are receiving instruction to learn the new skill. If a pupil is learning how to type or ride a bicycle, the instructor will explain exactly what he thinks his pupil should do with her body to achieve the new skill. While the instructions may be explicit, the skill to be learned is not gained simply through hearing the instructions. The pupil must “fit her body” over the new activity and only then will the skill have been learned. The instruction, while in one sense explicit, is a pale version of the actual thing to be learned. Further, the pupil will know that she has learned what she sought to learn when suddenly the activity “just works,” rather than when her motions come to match the instructions that were given. While the instructions guide the pupil to be able to re-tool her body to the new activity, the motor skill that is learned is not something that could be known in advance. Like Socrates and Meno finding a satisfactory definition, we know that we have learned the new skill because suddenly it “clicks” or matches with our world. One could never know a motor skill explicitly in advance

²⁸ See Maria Talero, “Merleau-Ponty and the Bodily Subject of Learning.” *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 46, no 2 (2006): 191-203; Øyvind F. Standal, and Vegard F. Moe, “Merleau-Ponty Meets Kretchmar: Sweet Tensions of Embodied Learning,” *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 5, no. 3 (2011): 256-269; Edward S. Casey, “The Ghost of Embodiment” in *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Donn Welton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 207–26; David Morris, *The Sense of Space* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 53-106; and Dreyfus, 368-372.

because a motor skill is known most intimately from inside our bodies; despite the guidance of the instructor, the learning of a new motor skill is a kind of spontaneous revelation for the learner. Further, it only really makes sense to talk about “knowing” a motor skill explicitly in the struggle to acquire it. As Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of motor habit shows us, once they are acquired, motor habits recede from our awareness. Along with perceptual habits, they are the fabric that sustains our pre-conceptual coping with the world.

One might want to speak of certain perceptual achievements as a kind of learning. For example, one could call the child’s development of the capacity to see colour “learning” to see colour, though some might object that this is simply a natural development rather than learning. Nevertheless, as was discussed in Chapter Two, the child’s ability to become a being that perceives green is not dependent on knowing ahead of time the concept “green.” Merleau-Ponty argues that the achievement of seeing green is one that is born out of an indeterminate grasp on colour that spontaneously becomes more determinate. The process here is analogous to what we can see in Meno and Socrates’ struggles to secure a definition of “virtue”: out of an inexplicit grasp on a reality that is shot through by indeterminacy, directed attention can bring forward a new and more determinate figure from our horizons. In Chapter One, we discussed how Socrates’ questions guided Meno’s slave to see new features of the geometric diagram on which they were working. Through his speech, Socrates helped the slave to make his various implicit understandings about shapes explicit, and to see new possibilities within the figures that gave rise to new meanings for slave: most notably, when Socrates shows him that he can construct diagonals across the four quadrants of the large square in order to create the square of half its area that he needs. Certainly the slave did not need to know this fact ahead of time in order to learn it, but he did need to have an implicit grasp on certain things in order for Socrates’ words to

even be meaningful, and for the slave to be able perceive this new potential dimension of the same square with which he was familiar. As was discussed in Chapter One, the slave's ability to see the square anew, with Socrates' help, was possible only on the basis of a multitude of pre-conceptual or pre-cognitive fluencies, including a fluency with space and with the Greek language, in addition to his awareness of squares. The slave's body schema empowered him to be able to make a new aspect of the diagram explicit to himself on the basis of all these implicit supports of his fluency with the world. The fact that the slave was uneducated and yet could still answer questions about geometry supports the reading that learning is not dependent on explicit mental knowledge, such as one might obtain (or think that one obtains) from formal education.

It could be tempting to think that Socrates' role in teaching the slave—asking him a series of leading questions—constitutes the kind of explicit mental representation that the learner's paradox assumes is necessary for learning. Such a perspective would hold that the slave is only able to see the new feature because first he is told what to see, so that he already knows exactly what he is looking for when he looks to find it. But in fact, as we shall see, communication is an excellent example of how new meaning is created on the basis of our body schema without explicit mental representations. As such, communication itself constitutes a kind of learning.

The presumption of the learner's paradox, that one has to already know something in order to recognize it, closely resembles intellectualism's account of how speech is meaningful. Intellectualism holds that speech has no sense of its own, but that a certain thought is encoded into speech, so that when speech reaches me, I have to translate the sense out of the other's speech and into my thoughts. If this account were true, however, my thoughts would be limited to the thoughts I already have; the other's speech could never really reach me because I would

only be able to reconstruct his thoughts out of my own already existent thoughts (184). If this account were true, then Meno's slave really would have to rely on recollection in order to "pull" anything "new" out of himself. But it is not the case; I am able to access new meaning from the speech of the other. Merleau-Ponty's account of how real communication is possible works on the basis of the fact that speech and communication are accessed perceptually rather than through the positing of ideas.

The meanings of words and speech acts are accessible to us through a twinned dynamic of spontaneous meaning-making and sedimentation. We would never be able to communicate in any kind of reliable way if every gesture were new and spontaneous; however, we would never be able to say anything new if the sense of our words were entirely given through a coding of thoughts into them. Consequently, there would be no source for sedimented or coded aspects of our language. For Merleau-Ponty, speech operates on the basis of both spontaneity and sedimentation. New, spontaneous gestures of speech sometimes "catch on" and become reliable tools of communication, and it is this wealth of instituted resources that we draw on in order to communicate. However, the way in which we use words with already sedimented meanings to construct speech acts can and frequently does change their meaning. Merleau-Ponty calls speech acts that use existing words to create a new sense "authentic" or "first-order" speech. Second-order speech, on the other hand, refers to the use of language in its already instituted meanings.

The way that spontaneous new meaning can be received through first-order speech acts is analogous to Merleau-Ponty's example of seeing the masts emerge from the clump of trees on the beach. Merleau-Ponty describes a haze of indeterminacy that hangs over the clump of trees. At one point the perceiver sees only trees and then, without apparent cause, the masts appear within the clump of trees. There are times when an authentic, new speech act works the same

way. We may hear or read a speech act and sense that we do not understand the full import. One can read lines of poetry or philosophy over and over again for years and all of a sudden realize new meaning in the author's words—and, of course, this is a process that can go on forever. Perhaps most poignantly, because speech accomplishes thought, I am capable of saying more than I know. It is through my own speech that I come to know my thoughts, and thus speaking and writing transcend what I know before I try to make my positions or understandings explicit. My speech constitutes a new opportunity to experience myself, to make my intentions momentarily clear. Because our thoughts are not realized except in speech, even if we are “thinking” silently, which is to say, speaking “in our heads,” we are crystallizing thoughts that were only there as vague feelings before. In communication there is always some degree of indeterminacy because the meaning of the speech is not fully defined by the instituted uses of the words. Merleau-Ponty explains: “In understanding others, the problem is always indeterminate because only the solution to the problem will make the givens retrospectively appear as convergent, and only the central motive of a philosophy, once understood, gives the philosopher's texts the value of adequate signs” (184). Just as when we finally see the masts we can only speculate about what may have gone into our shift in perception, when the words finally break and reveal the new meaning, it is the result of any number of imperceptible changes in the reader that lead the words to “mean” differently.

Above I cited Merleau-Ponty's point that motricity is not the servant of consciousness (140). His account of speech shows us that in a sense reflective consciousness is dependent on the body, or, more precisely, the reflective consciousness with which we turn explicitly to ideas is only a small part of our embodied consciousness and fully dependent on our embodiment. Socrates' terms “knowledge” and “right opinion,” as presented in the *Meno*, seem to point

towards the same reality. What Socrates calls “knowledge” makes up a tiny portion of what the subject “knows” about the world. It is right opinion that seems to carry the subject through much of life and to provide the basis upon which knowledge can be obtained. If it were not for Meno and Socrates’ pre-existing familiarity with colour, figure, and virtue, they truly would not be able to recognize a correct definition when they found it. It is not reflective consciousness that is in the lead when it comes to learning; rather, reflective consciousness is supported and made possible by the body schema.

Merleau-Ponty gives us an example of what a person with a malfunctioning body schema is like in his examination of the case of Schneider, a veteran of the First World War whose brain injury left him with a strange pathology. I will briefly discuss Schneider since his limitations cause him to resemble the subject of the learner’s paradox, and thus show how foreign to normal experience is the subject that the learner’s paradox describes. Schneider’s body schema works haltingly for him. He can perform certain tasks with ease, particularly ones in which he is led by the concrete factors of a situation to do a familiar action, such as lighting a lamp when it gets dark or combing his hair when it needs combing. But other tasks that normal subjects do effortlessly, Schneider must approach very differently. Whereas normal subjects recognize pens of every shape and size effortlessly, despite the difference in their appearance, for Schneider the task of recognition is slow and methodical. When his doctors show him a pen with the clip hidden, Schneider describes first seeing an oblong dark shape. Looking closer he can see more detail: it looks like a stick, then an instrument, then finally an instrument for writing. He must make each step in his process of discovery explicit to himself through language (132). Merleau-Ponty describes him as akin to a scientist of his own experience (133). Likewise, Schneider cannot simply look at a model of a shape, grasp its features, and be able to reproduce it in

drawing. He must palpate the shape all over and translate the physiognomy of the shape into instructions for himself; only then can he draw the shape freehand according to his description (134). Schneider must actively and deliberately coordinate his own experience for himself; it is as if he has to explicitly tell himself what he is finding in the world, rather than taking up the things he finds in an immediate, fluid way.

Schneider's ability to understand analogies is as stilted as his ability to capture the sense of a shape and redraw it. He must make the connection between the parts of the analogy explicit for himself through language in order to make sense of the analogy. This is in contrast to normal subjects, who mostly understand analogies immediately, and for whom it is easier to understand than to make explicit the connection between the two things being compared. Merleau-Ponty notes that normal subjects are so good at understanding analogies that, even when they cannot explain an analogy, researchers cannot be sure that they do not in fact understand (129-130). Schneider, however, must try to decode first-order speech; spontaneous new uses of language do not "meet him" with their sense. In order to find the new meaning operative in an analogy, Schneider must "hold up" before his mind its pieces and solve for the remaining meaning as if the analogy were an equation. Like the subject that the learner's paradox describes, Schneider can only encounter something new on the basis of clear mental representations.

Merleau-Ponty describes Schneider as living in a world that has congealed: it is not a place that lends itself to being seen in new ways or revealing new meaning (115). In an experiment, the psychologists ask Schneider to construct a square out of four isosceles right triangles. Curiously, this experiment requires Schneider to experience virtually the same gestalt shift as Meno's slave during the geometry demonstration. Schneider replies that he can make two squares out of four triangles but that making just one square is impossible. The psychologist

shows him that every square can be bisected along its diagonals to produce four isosceles right triangles, but Schneider replies that this is only because *these* particular triangles were created *from* a square—he cannot see that this fact would be true of right isosceles triangles in general. Schneider lacks the plasticity to see this aspect of triangles that, while new to him, must always have been true, but that he could not “read” from the triangles.

Schneider’s body schema works only haltingly for him; it does not provide the same rich network of threads to the world that a normal subject’s does. It is these pre-cognitive, meaning-making intentions that in the normal subject support learning without the need for that subject to mastermind the act of seeing things anew. In Schneider’s case it seems that he must use his reflective consciousness to make up for the insufficiencies of his body schema. He is unable to transcend his current understandings, able to recognize only that which he can hold up to an already possessed understanding for comparison. Schneider has none of the fluidity with his world and its possibilities that we would expect a normal subject to have. Like the subject of the learner’s paradox, he is stuck with the meanings he had, presumably from the time of his injury.

Learning as Our Form of Existence

So far we have looked at how the meaning-giving power of the body schema resolves one aspect of the learner’s paradox—its presumption that one must both explicitly know and not know the thing to be learned. I now want to make a very closely related point that will address another aspect of the learner’s paradox. Because the paradox presumes that learning must work on the basis of mental representations, it also seems to presume that learning requires a subject who is “in charge” of the operation. In voicing the paradox, Meno seems to be asking how the

self could be “in charge,” fueled by the kind of clarity to self that Socrates demanded in the first half of the dialogue, while remaining open to the new. If the subject is “in charge” of learning, then the subject must be self-possessed, in control of its agency and its knowledge. But in the act of learning something new, the subject comes into contact with something that it does not possess. This creates the deadlock of the paradox. The point that I want to make, which is closely related to that made above in relation to the body schema, is that if we accept Merleau-Ponty’s account of the relation of self and world then there is no reason to consider learning to be a problem. The self-transcendence that we observe in learning is in fact the very motion of existence, on Merleau-Ponty’s account.²⁹

I am not first and foremost a knowing being prior to my inquiring, investigative, desirous relationship with the world. Both my self and my world come into being on the basis that I exist as a body that opens onto the world through perception, and all knowledge I possess is ultimately born of that relationship. The paradox, however, makes it sound as though the self can rest comfortably within itself with the knowledge it already has, while the task of learning requires making a conscious and deliberate effort to cross over into the world in order to find something out. The self it describes is certain of its knowledge and uncertain about the outside world, stuck in itself and separate from the outside world. In this sense, the self of the learner’s paradox bears some resemblance to the self of Descartes’ *cogito*, a topic with which Merleau-Ponty concerns himself at length in a chapter of the *Phenomenology* entitled “The *Cogito*.” I will explicate Merleau-Ponty’s analyses of vision, love, and pure thought, in order to show that we live our lives entirely “on the outside.” By showing this, we will see that the learner’s paradox

²⁹ Here it seems I am in agreement with Talero, who writes: “Even in adult life, it is difficult to draw a solid line of separation between being alive and learning, for it seems that even at a very basic level, our everyday experiences are always tutoring us, developing what we know and causing us to learn, in small ways and large. Meaning develops itself under our eyes: what this means is that what we know is not a determinate content within experience; we always somehow remain open, incomplete, and ready to grow.” See Talero, 191.

misdiagnoses learning as something that must be orchestrated by a self whose mind has to enter the world in order to learn. In reality, we are capable of learning because we are never separate from a world that has formed us.

Merleau-Ponty on Descartes' Cogito: Vision, Love, and Pure Ideas

For Descartes, the *cogito* is the ultimate first step: a pure domain of thought that is not contingent on anything else. It is thought insulated from the outside world and therefore from the interference of potential sources of deception. The *cogito* is supposed to be thought touching itself, but Merleau-Ponty shows that in fact, even in the *cogito*, consciousness never ceases to be what it is in perception.³⁰ Merleau-Ponty's central observation here is that Descartes' *cogito* is not in fact insulated from the outside world because it exists in the form of speech, which is a worldly phenomenon given in perception and motricity. Merleau-Ponty discovers in the *cogito* not a self directly in contact with itself but "the profound movement of transcendence that is my very being, the simultaneous contact with my being and with the being of the world" (396). By testing a number of cases in which it seems that the self must be giving ideas to itself, and therefore operating in an inner sphere of thought apart from the world, Merleau-Ponty finds that the self is itself only through its contact with the world. Looking at these cases will help to show that the self-transcending situation that the learner's paradox casts as problematic is in fact the perpetual circumstance of our existence.

By retreating backwards to a point of certainty, Descartes' *cogito* makes the "thinking self" the bedrock of the self, but Merleau-Ponty argues that a thinking self is achieved on the

³⁰ For a good discussion of Merleau-Ponty's engagement with Descartes' *cogito*, see John D. Glenn Jr., "Merleau-Ponty and the *Cogito*," *Philosophy Today* 23, no. 4 (1979): 310-320.

basis of something more foundational: how the self perpetually throws itself into its world. It is not only created through this activity but must be continually sustained by it—that is, even in thinking, the self must open its thoughts up again through expression. Merleau-Ponty first examines the example of the certainty of seeing, then love, and then pure thought through the example of geometry, in order to show that there is no realm in which the self is in contact with itself without being in contact with the world.

Merleau-Ponty begins by criticizing Descartes' position that he can be uncertain about the content of his vision—that is, that he can be skeptical that his eyes deceive him about the world—while being certain of the experience of the vision that he is having, the “thought” of seeing. Merleau-Ponty's position seems to be that what Descartes splits into two parts is just one thing: perceptual consciousness. Merleau-Ponty argues that in some sense vision is the “thought” that I am seeing, in the sense that I must be aware of what I am seeing for it to constitute vision, but, in general, vision is not a thought but an act through which I lose myself in the contents of my vision. Consciousness is the taking in of the world, and in perceptual consciousness the “thought” or awareness that I am seeing is one and the same with the act of seeing (395).

Merleau-Ponty writes:

Vision is an action ... that holds more than it promised, that always goes beyond its premises, and that is only inwardly prepared for by my primordial opening to a field of transcendences, or again through an ecstasy. Vision is accomplished and fulfilled in the thing seen. Vision must surely grasp itself—for if it did not, it would not be a vision of anything at all—but it must grasp itself in a sort of ambiguity and a sort of obscurity, since it does not possess itself and rather escapes into the thing that is seen.” (395-396)

What certainty I have through seeing comes simply from this act of transcending myself, not from a relation of self to self, but through my contact with the world (396).

Merleau-Ponty anticipates the criticism that, because vision is a form of perception and perception is nothing other than an opening onto the world, this analysis of vision may not be enough to establish that the self is never alone with itself prior to its engagement with the world. There may still be instances other than perception in which the self is perfectly in contact with itself without passing through the world. Merleau-Ponty examines a series of cases—the cases of love and desire, and pure thought—in which it seems that consciousness gives something to itself of which it is in complete possession, and in each case it turns out that this “idea” consciousness gives to itself is in fact an act that transcends it. Thus, this criticism does not stand. Let us explore these cases.

Love and desire at first appear to be intentions we give to ourselves rather than things out in the world (396). Love seems to be “the consciousness of an object as loveable,” and desire the consciousness of an object as desirable (396). If I feel that I love something, then there seems to be no question that indeed I love it; my feelings seem to constitute a “sphere of absolute certainty” (397). But it turns out that even in my feelings there are different degrees of reality. It can turn out that feelings are false or illusory: I can believe that I love someone or something and later realize that this was false, that I was tricking myself (397). We can also live out love or desire without being conscious of it, or be conscious of our love and later realize that we were lying to ourselves. We are capable of authentically loving without realizing it. Thus, even in the sphere of emotions, which can seem to be wholly our own and not given to us by the outside world, our experience is still marked by ambiguity and self-transcendence. I am not completely transparent to myself, and I am capable of deluding myself. Merleau-Ponty explains: “The love

that worked its dialectic out through me and that I have just discovered is not from the outset a hidden thing in my consciousness, nor is it for that matter an object in front of my consciousness; rather, it is the movement by which I am turned toward someone, the conversion of my thoughts and of my behaviours ... this love was lived, not known” (400). Like vision, love and desire turn out to be acts in which the self throws itself towards the world in such a way that it outstrips its grasp on its own being. The self realizes itself in its orientation towards the objects of its affection.

The learner’s paradox seems to presume that there is a self that, prior to the act of learning, is at rest within itself. Learning is posed as a special kind of situation in which the subject must transcend its clear, self-possessed knowledge as if for the first time. But in fact, we are perpetually transcending ourselves; it is the very essence of our existence. I realize what I see in the act of seeing; I realize whom or what I love in time, as I recognize the truth of my behaviour towards someone or something. We see and we love only in and through the world that surrounds us. Vision and desire are examples of orientations towards the world that are particularly appropriate to discuss in relation to learning. It is our openness to the world through perception, of which vision is a major component, that makes learning and self-transcendence possible in the first place, and that gives us the reality that makes us want to learn. Desire factors into learning in that learning happens in the context of the fact that our world matters to us, and aspects of it draw us in. This is precisely what is happening in attention, and why Merleau-Ponty’s notion of attention unravels the learner’s paradox by showing that our perceptions compel us to look further at certain things.

In a final attempt to find something that the self gives itself without being in contact with the world, Merleau-Ponty turns his attention to the realm of pure ideas. Using mathematics as an

example, he shows that even in the realm of pure ideas our thoughts are not given to us prior to our bodily engagement in the world. He uses the example of a geometer trying to figure out the sum of the internal angles of a triangle (403). There is nothing about the triangle, its definition or its physiognomy, that could reveal this information on its own. In order to uncover this aspect of the triangle, the geometer must construct lines on the diagram, and thus his discovery is not born out of the direct contact of self with self but through acts in the world. The geometer's lines are gestures and, like the expressions found in speech, they are capable of giving more meaning than their author put into them; the triangle is not closed to future meaning, but rather bursting with "indefinite possibilities," like everything else in the world (406). Although mathematical ideas are supposed to have a special status outside of the material world, the geometer interacts with the triangle much as she would interact with any object in the world. Her lines pass through, by, and across the parts of the triangle because these relations have been borrowed from the physical world. The geometer's discovery is not made on the basis that she can think her pure ideas outside of the world, but rather on the basis of motricity: "The project to move is an act, and it traces out the spatio-temporal distance by crossing it. Thus, to the extent that the geometer's thought necessarily relies upon this act, it does not coincide with itself: it is transcendence itself" (407). In mathematics, as in vision, love, and desire, we live on the terms of our relation to the outside, in contact with the world.

The learner's paradox portrays our knowing transcendence towards the world as a problem, while the knowledge the subject already possesses is not considered a problem but thought to be possessed with perfect clarity. But according to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, every part of that statement is incorrect. We are always transcending ourselves towards the world; our transcendence towards the world is the only reason we have so-called objects of consciousness.

We never grasp the objects of our consciousness completely; we tend toward them rather than encompassing them (388). Even our thoughts can only come into being and become known to us through speech, which is an expression, a movement, and a creation. Thus, in accessing our own thoughts, we transcend ourselves. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “my life continually throws itself into transcendent things; it happens entirely on the outside” (388).

Conclusion

By explicating Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the “body schema,” we resolved the issue that the learner’s paradox raises in asking how the learner could both recognize and yet not know ahead of time what the thing to be learned is. This was resolved by recognizing the way in which the body schema allows us to grasp our world in a pre-reflective and inexplicit way, such that learning involves moving from a less determinate to a more determinate grasp.

By following Merleau-Ponty’s insights about the body schema and perception to their natural end, we saw that learning ceases to be a paradox if one accepts that from the very beginning, and without ever ceasing, our being transcends itself through perception. By looking at Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the certainty of vision, love, and pure ideas we saw that we are not selves with inner mental realms, but that our existence is as bodies finding and giving meaning on the outside. Our whole lives are a matter of transcending ourselves towards the world and our selves are created out of this movement. Learning, it seems, is what we call the most poignant moments in this ongoing coupling of self and world.

Conclusion

That learning depends on self-transcendence wrought in the medium of the body gives us pause to consider how we could better approach teaching. Meno's idea of teaching—that the teacher should tell the student what he needs to learn—would be natural if learning were a matter of abstract ideas being imparted to reflective consciousness. However, as we have seen, it is not primarily through abstract ideas that we come to know our world. By way of a conclusion, I will identify a few of Locke's insights into teaching in "Some Thoughts Concerning Education," which are parallel to the insights into learning that we have gleaned from Plato and Merleau-Ponty.

In "Some Thoughts," Locke advocates for a style of teaching that deemphasizes "telling" in favour of more indirect ways of teaching.³¹ Locke is perhaps most vocal in this text about the priority of habit over rules. The problem with learning by the rules, Locke argues, is that a pupil can learn the rule without becoming a person who is shaped by that rule. The true conversion of learning, he argues, can only really be achieved through habit; otherwise, the rule remains merely a thing to be recalled and abstractly applied. Locke develops this idea in some detail with respect to Latin language instruction, which was taught through the learning of grammar rules. Locke argues that one need not understand the system of a language in order to take up that system; he cites as evidence both the manner in which children learn their first language and the conversational approach by which daughters are taught French (§165).³² Locke argues that while

³¹ Locke writes: "And here give me leave to take notice of one thing I think a fault in the ordinary method of education; and that is the charging of children's memories, upon all occasions, with *rules* and precepts, which they often do not understand and constantly as soon forget as given." John Locke, "Some Thoughts Concerning Education" in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education and Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, Ed. Ruth W. Grant and Nathan Tarcov (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1996), §64.

³² In this conclusion I will use parenthetical citations to make reference to John Locke's "Some Thoughts Concerning Education."

memorization is crucial to language-learning, the purpose should not be to memorize the grammar of the language, but to make words and phrases available without need for reflection or recollection—in other words, to make new words and phrases a matter or habit (§167). Further, rather than having pupils memorize words abstracted from their use, he advocates for teaching Latin while simultaneously teaching about “minerals, plants, animals, and particularly timber and fruit trees, their parts and propagation, wherein a great deal will be taught a child which will not be useless to the man. But more especially geography, astronomy, and anatomy" (§169, cf §166). Locke’s model for Latin teaching is extremely compatible with Merleau-Ponty’s insights about language: words are treated as ways of reaching the world and others that must become ingrained in the body, not simply the intellect, in order to have living significance.³³

Locke’s pedagogy is infused with a sort of implicit understanding of how we take up systems unreflectively. Further, some of his assertions about learning are very compatible with Merleau-Ponty’s insight that we come to see things anew when we pay attention to something that was previously an unthematized horizon, thereby bringing into focus for ourselves an entirely new figure. Locke identifies the same dynamic in his discussion of how to teach children about God. The challenge of teaching children about God is that the topic is by its very nature “the incomprehensible nature of that infinite Being” (§136). Any description of God is likely to result in false understandings. Instead of trying to explain God, then, Locke advocates for cultivating a kind of horizon from which an idea of God could later be thematized. He suggests

³³ While Locke’s criticism of teaching by the rules is quite incisive, it is possible that his polemical stance misses an aspect of why rules can be important in teaching. A well-placed rule can *effect* a conversion in the student to be able to see things anew, by being drawn into the how the teacher sees things. While it is true that we operate largely at a pre-reflective level, it is not the case that we should be limited to our unthinking relation to our world, nor that everyone takes up, for example, the system of their first language perfectly. A grammar rule can reveal a new dimension to language that a student did not register through their natural use of it. I take this to be Socrates’ point in establishing the distinction between knowledge and right opinion: we are both capable of dealing with the world on a pre-reflective level and capable of reflecting on what we are seeing and doing. Sometimes the teacher’s job should be to help chain down the statues of Daedalus.

saying just a few basic things about one's relation to God; allowing the child to cultivate space in his world for spiritual entities by having him read Bible stories in which non-physical entities feature in the world; and having him adopt a simple practice of prayer. This, he reasons, is far more productive for children "than to distract their thoughts with curious inquiries into his inscrutable essence" (§136). Through practice and habit the child develops certain horizons that allow for future critical reflection, where leaping straight to an abstract intellectual explanation would be ineffective.

The point of educating a child, Locke asserts, is to produce an adult endowed with "virtue, wisdom, breeding and learning" (§134). However, only breeding and learning, the least important two according to Locke, can be directly effected by the tutor. This should immediately put us in mind of the stated question of the *Meno* and the cloud of doubt around whether virtue can be taught. Locke's position is that virtue and wisdom are endowments of adults, and thus the tutor can only help to instill them in the pupil in indirect ways. However, the tutor *can* have an effect. Breeding and virtue, and learning and wisdom, each form a pair in which the first term is teachable and a matter of convention, while the second is unteachable and describes a way of creatively navigating through a situation in which not all the terms can be known—this structure closely resembles that of Merleau-Ponty's second-order and first-order speech, respectively. No rule or convention will ever suffice to make one's way through a real ethical dilemma. However, it is only through the good habits gained through breeding and the sensitivities to other people learned through trying to be good-natured towards others that the individual has the "vocabulary" to creatively negotiate new situations. Breeding and learning provide the background for the adult to take wise and virtuous action—to "fit" her body over a situation--but things already learned will never be enough to constitute virtue or wisdom. Locke's insight here

perhaps makes sense of why the acquisition of virtue serves as the backdrop for Plato's inquiry into learning: to act virtuously is yet another example of how human beings must transcend themselves. One cannot know ahead of time, or even really in the moment, how to act wisely and virtuously. To do so requires a kind of leap of faith on the basis of things learned, but also importantly a preparedness, through habit, to navigate the open situations of life.

The *Meno*, then, has for its central theme our pre-reflective fluency with the world—in both the material on virtue *and* the material on learning—and this serves as an implicit solution to the learner's paradox. That is, if we examine our experience, our “knowing” or competent grasp on the world is not first and foremost based on clear knowledge. Rather, we find ourselves already competent in dealing with the world without being able to lay bare why. Thus it does not seem that the cause or foundation of our competence is given by our own intellect. Instead, as Socrates intimates through the metaphors of poetic inspiration and divination, it is as though in grasping the world something is working through us. To borrow the phrase Merleau-Ponty uses to describe love, in my grasp of the world, it is as though something is working its dialectic out through me.

That which works itself out through me is a fundamental union between self and world that begins in perception, which is the ultimate fund of all experience. Merleau-Ponty's own rephrasing of the paradox in terms of the accounts of perception of empiricism and intellectualism exposes that we would not be able to grasp our world if we encountered it either in a completely neutral, ungrasping, and disinvested way, as empiricism claims, or in an already perfectly clear and knowing way as intellectualism claims. Our capacity to see something anew rests upon the fact that we tend towards the objects of our consciousness, rather than fully and

clearly encompassing them. Merleau-Ponty further shows us that it is through our bodies, rather than our intellects, that our “knowing” grasp on the world develops.

Through Merleau-Ponty’s account of the body, especially the body schema, we were able to clarify how our pre-reflective fluency with the world is possible. Merleau-Ponty’s insight is that the body is our form of existence in the world and that it has the distinctive features of perpetually transcending itself—throwing itself beyond its borders through perception and motricity—and sedimenting and automating its ways of reaching into the world through habit. Through habit, we come to hold objects, spaces, and words around ourselves as if they were extensions of our body and by consequence, our powers. It is this twinned dynamic of grounding and self-transcending that is emblematic of our existence and of learning.

In both the *Meno* and the *Phenomenology*, the solution to the learner’s paradox is the recognition that our consciousness does not primarily take the form of ideas or mental representations. The *Meno* identifies “knowledge” as a special accomplishment, compared to the more commonplace right opinion, which, for the most part, leads us through life. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty identifies reflective consciousness as secondary to the pre-reflective lived engagement of the body in the world; reflective consciousness is carried along and sustained by the body schema, and ultimately, even our most abstract ideas are still forged of expression and perception, which are the fruits of the body. We are able to see something anew and “read” its meaning because the world is not a foreign language. Through perception and expression we are entangled with the world: the world floods into us through perception; we hold its objects around ourselves through our body schema; and even our most inward thoughts come into being through speech, which is a form of our bodily enmeshment in the world. We are ourselves on the basis that we transcend ourselves towards the world; this is what makes learning possible.

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