

# RECOLLECTION AND EXPERIENCE

*Plato's theory of learning and its successors*

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Socrates thought that an awareness of our own ignorance should create a desire for the knowledge that eludes us. Plato agreed with him, but went on to ask how such knowledge, which had managed to elude even Socrates, could ever be acquired. He found his answer in the theory of recollection, one of his most notorious philosophical legacies. What we now call learning, he claimed in the *Meno*, is in fact the recollection of knowledge had in a prenatal existence. None of his successors, Aristotle, Epicurus or the Stoics, found this suggestion convincing, but all of them were sufficiently impressed by the importance of the questions that he was trying to answer to go to considerable lengths to present their own alternatives, their rivals to recollection. Aristotle, in obvious reaction to Plato, placed great emphasis upon perception and experience both in scientific and ethical learning. Epicurus and the Stoics also developed sophisticated accounts of the role of experience in learning and, in addition, showed an increasing interest in distinguishing between those elements of our thinking that arise naturally and those that derive from cultural influences. Seen in this light, Plato's theory of recollection acted as the catalyst for what was to be a long-running philosophical debate about the origins of knowledge.

Precisely because Plato's successors acknowledged the importance of his questions but replaced his answers with their own, we have the opportunity to compare these different theories diachronically, to see how a certain theme develops over the course of ancient philosophy. Such a project, if it were to do justice to all the issues involved over so large a span of time, would result in the compilation of a modest encyclopaedia. This book has no such ambitions; its focus will be more selective, concentrating on three issues to do with learning and discovery.

The first concerns the well known distinction between innatist and empiricist theories of learning. To give a preliminary characterisation, this is a distinction between theories that appeal to the mind's internal resources to explain many of its cognitive achievements and those that explain them from the external input of sense perception. The debate between these positions has been prominent in post-Renaissance philosophy, especially in the seventeenth century when it involved Descartes, Locke and Leibniz, among many others. It has also reappeared on the agenda very recently, helped in large part by Chomsky's espousal of innateness in a linguistic context.

A version of this debate took place in antiquity and one concern of this study will be to determine what positions the major figures of this period took on the issue. In Plato's case we shall be able to answer the question without much difficulty, but with the other philosophers the task becomes more problematic. The difficulties here do not simply arise from the state of the texts themselves, but also from the fact that the terms innatism and empiricism are not transparently clear and hence should only be applied to the ancient philosophers with caution. In particular, exactly what do we mean by saying something is innate to the mind? No one is trying to claim that, from the very moment of birth, babies are in conscious possession of certain beliefs or concepts. Do we mean then that such beliefs or concepts are merely latent in the mind from birth? Or do we mean instead that the person has an inborn predisposition to form certain beliefs, in the same way that someone might have a congenital tendency towards catching a particular disease? But how exactly is this different from the claim that we have the capacity to form beliefs and concepts, which is presumably what empiricism amounts to? The issue here is complex, and when trying to determine which of the many available positions were adopted in the ancient period it is in some cases not enough simply to scrutinise the texts; we also need to clarify the different meanings of the terms 'innate' and 'empirical' and the various distinctions implied by them.

That we should be discussing the innateness question needs little explanation. Determining where the ancient philosophers stood on this issue is essential for any work that purports to talk about their theories of learning. But there are two further issues which will give this book its special focus. Throughout the course of the

innateness debate, the learning of all manner of different things has been discussed: mathematical theorems, the existence of God, the relation of cause and effect, principles of morality, rules of grammar, logical laws and so on. But in addition to differences of subject matter there is another way of distinguishing theories of learning from one another. This concerns the level of learning to be explained and it provides the second focus for this book. All the ancient philosophers included in this study made some distinction between different levels of thinking: the philosophical or technical and the mundane or pre-philosophical. In his earlier dialogues, Plato portrays Socrates as being prepared to talk to anyone, whether young or old, citizen or foreigner (*Apology* 30a2–3). But in the course of such encounters, a gulf typically emerges between the interlocutors' somewhat unreflective responses and the level of philosophical rigour that Socrates demands of them. In the *Republic* this distinction is hardened into a political divide between the philosopher-rulers and the other classes in the state. Aristotle not only accepted a distinction between two levels of cognitive achievement, he invented terminology for it as well: 'the more familiar to us' and 'the more familiar in nature'. Often, he used these terms to contrast the perspective that we have of the world prior to scientific or philosophical investigation with the way the world is understood as a result of that investigation, the way the world is in itself, as seen from a God's-eye view. When applied to ethics, the distinction was one between the pre-philosophical intuitions of ordinary people and a sophisticated theory. Similarly, the Hellenistic philosophers sharply distinguished the more technical achievements of philosophy or science from the concepts and beliefs that constitute the very faculty of human reason itself.

Corresponding to these two different levels of cognitive achievement will be two quite distinct explanations one can expect from a theory of learning. One is concerned with the process by which we reach the more familiar to us and so attempt to explain concept formation and the acquisition of language. I shall refer to this, for want of a better expression, as 'ordinary learning'. The other attempts to explain the movement from the more familiar to us to the more familiar in nature, the discovery of scientific, moral and, more generally, philosophical knowledge. There was undoubtedly a strong interest on the part of all the ancient philosophers in these later phases of learning. Plato's theory of recollection

was clearly intended to explain how we can attain philosophical understanding, and when his successors attempted to formulate their rivals to recollection, they were concerned with the same problem. But it is less clear whether they were also interested in explaining the earlier stages of learning. Determining the extent to which the ancient philosophers were interested in ordinary learning as well as more advanced forms of discovery will be the second concern of this book.

The third arises from the distinction between these two cognitive levels. Whatever we decide to think about their interest in ordinary learning, the ancient philosophers were certainly concerned with the question of higher learning or, to use Aristotle's terminology once again, the movement from the more familiar to us to the more familiar in nature. But how did they conceive of the relationship or, better, the distance, between these two perspectives? When someone makes a scientific discovery, do they find their previous perspective utterly transformed, or is the new scientific perspective recognisably similar to their earlier perceptual perspective, only more clearly understood? In the case of ethical discovery there is an analogous question. Is the philosophical journey from received opinion and pre-reflective intuition a transformation to a perspective that may seem perhaps shockingly different as one first approaches it, or is it more akin to the refinement and distillation of one's earlier intuitions?

A philosopher who thinks that there is a considerable gap between the two perspectives is likely to take a pessimistic attitude towards the cognitive achievements of ordinary people, the amount of work that lies ahead of them and their chances of achieving any success. The nature of discovery, if it does take place, will be seen as revisionary and disorientating. There is a discontinuity between perception or common sense on the one hand and science or philosophy on the other. Very importantly, this affects the way one sees the role of philosophy itself. It begins to be seen as having an essentially critical function.

At the other extreme, a philosopher who thinks that the gap between the two perspectives is much narrower will show greater optimism about the more familiar to us, in particular about its ability to prompt us to ask the right questions and guide us in the right direction. The path between the two perspectives will be a continuous one, a gradual articulation of our starting-points; the

end result will be recognisably similar to our initial expectations or presuppositions. Refinement replaces rejection as the dominant attitude towards appearance and intuition, so that, again, the way one sees the nature of philosophy is affected. It now plays out the role of developing the widely held beliefs of the time.

This shows how, in both science and ethics, we can mark out two extreme positions about the relationship between the perspectives. And now, in between these two positions, pessimistic and optimistic, we can then see the potential for a whole variety of other positions to appear. To locate where the ancient philosophers stood on this continuum will be the third concern of this book. This task is made difficult because in some cases, a philosopher may profess to be taking one attitude – that of the friend and ally of common sense, for instance – but when it comes to working out a philosophical theory, may trample the intuitions freely under foot.

These, then, are the three issues that will concern us in this study: the opposition between innatism and empiricism, the distinction between ordinary and philosophical levels of learning and the relation that holds between them. As we have seen, it should be no surprise that we are discussing the first issue, but what makes the second and third ones salient? The answer arises from the fact that, at present, there is a controversy about Plato's theory of recollection in which these two issues are central. From the current state of the literature, it seems that most votes at the moment would go to one side in this controversy. As a result, not only has the theory itself been misunderstood but the whole way in which we look at the later development of the learning debate has been distorted.

Everyone would agree that the theory of recollection is intended to explain how philosophical and mathematical discoveries are made. But in most people's view, this is not all it does. For them, Plato is attempting to explain not only higher learning but ordinary learning as well. Recollection explains how we all form the concepts of ordinary thought, concepts of equality and beauty, for instance. The theory also helps account for our linguistic capacities. It then goes beyond this by explaining how we can develop these innate concepts into fully fledged definitions, but this is a continuation of the process of recollection.

This, as I shall argue in section I, is wrong. Instead we should

come to understand Plato's theory in an entirely different way. Plato proposes recollection only to explain the later stages of learning. Ordinary learning, in which he is little interested, is accounted for externally; we acquire our concepts of equality or beauty from sense perception, and moral notions from hearsay or tradition. Recollection only enters the story when we have already reached the level of ordinary conceptual thought and start to become puzzled and dissatisfied with the perspective thus gained of the world. Those who do not become puzzled in this way do not even begin to recollect, and the extraordinary resources latent within them remain completely unused.

It should be clear that this controversy involves the second of our three issues, the question of what level of learning is being explained. But, as I shall argue, it also involves the polarity between pessimism and optimism, because in the first interpretation philosophy is not seen as marking a radical transition from ordinary thought, but as the continued recollection of concepts that have, to some extent, already come to light in our pre-philosophical thinking. The second interpretation, on the other hand, involves a strict discontinuity between the two perspectives and presents Plato as the severe critic of common sense. The few who do start to recollect find that their perspective of the world, both metaphysical and moral, becomes utterly transformed. That Plato adopted this kind of approach to philosophy elsewhere, for instance in the central books of the *Republic*, is very often conceded. What is not appreciated is that he also took this line when he proposed the theory of recollection itself, especially in the *Phaedo*.

The first section of this book, then, is designed to dislodge a widespread reading of Platonic recollection. But the point of the book as a whole is that this misunderstanding blights not only our appreciation of Plato but also of the rest of the learning debate in antiquity and even, as we shall see, beyond. If we misread Plato's own theory, we shall find affinities between him and his successors where no such affinities exist. Equally, we may find differences where there are none.

After our discussion of Platonic recollection in section I, we shall go on to examine its rivals, specifically from the point of view of the three issues just laid out. The first of these rivals, Aristotle's theory of learning, represents a somewhat rude rebuff to Plato's theory. In a famous chapter about the discovery of first principles, Aristotle

appears to write off recollection as 'absurd'. His exact reasons for saying this, which have not often been discussed, will be examined in chapter 3. We then turn to two issues of special importance that will arise from our reassessment of Platonic recollection. There can be no doubt that just after Aristotle, among the Hellenistic philosophers, there was a very strong interest in how our most mundane concepts are formed. If this interest was not something brought into philosophy by Plato, was it a Hellenistic innovation or had Aristotle already filled the gap?

Aristotle, as we shall see in chapter 4, shows almost as little interest in the earlier phases of cognitive learning as Plato. Instead he focuses all his attention on the progress from the more familiar to us to the more familiar in nature. But the theory that he gives, as it is usually conceived, appears to be very different from Plato's theory of recollection as we have characterised it in section I. There, Plato emerges as the stern critic of perception and common sense; Aristotle, on the other hand, is often held up as their champion. But how sharp is this contrast? There are many places in which Aristotle seems to profess an intention to conform to perception and common sense. But in his ethics, for instance, there are passages that suggest he is deviating from them in a spirit of almost Platonic revisionism. How, for instance, can the status he accords to intellectual contemplation in his account of human happiness be said to conform to the opinions held by the majority of people? In chapters 5–6 we shall be looking more closely at his views on scientific and ethical discovery to see how clear the contrast with Plato really is.

One thing we can be sure about in the next phase of the debate, the Hellenistic era, is that there was considerable interest in ordinary learning. In the light of our conclusions in sections I–II, this immediately raises the question of why such an interest arose in this period and not before. But the chief focus of attention in this section of the book will be the emergence in this period of a new version of the innateness theory. This was a theory infused with the Hellenistic interest in explaining the origin of our ordinary concepts. In other words, we have something that is precisely what Platonic recollection is not; the Hellenistic theory of innateness claims that certain concepts and beliefs that are acknowledged by everyone have been sown into us at birth by Nature or God. (It also differs from Plato's theory in being free of any associations

with reincarnation and recollection.) Furthermore, not only is it concerned to explain the formation of ordinary moral concepts, but it has exactly the kind of optimism we found lacking in Plato. The innate beliefs in question are operative in everyone's thought, as a result of which they are said to command universal consent. To put it the other way round, beliefs that are common to everyone are held up as the handiwork of Nature herself.

There can be no doubt that this theory was around in the first century BC. Many scholars have thought that it was invented only in that century. But among our sources, some texts point much earlier – some to Epicurus, others to the early Stoa. To settle this question we shall have to establish first of all whether either of these took a favourable attitude to common sense and second, of course, whether they espoused any form of innateness.

The chapters on Hellenistic philosophy will build on the way we reinterpreted Platonic recollection in section I. They provide a good example of how interpreting recollection as a theory about ordinary concept formation can mislead us into finding an affinity between Platonic and Hellenistic theories of learning. Once we restore Plato's theory to its true colours, on the other hand, we can appreciate the real discontinuity that the Hellenistic theory of innateness represents. As a result, that theory will emerge not as the product of a Platonic revival but as a significant innovation in its own right.

The full importance of this comes out when we realise the influence that this theory was to have later on in the history of philosophy, in particular during the most famous episode in the debate about innatism, in the seventeenth-century. In talking about that period, philosophers very often now refer to 'the theory of innate ideas'. What is so significant for us is that such a theory attempts to explain, among other things, the formation of concepts involved in ordinary thought. Leibniz, for instance, referred to the innate ideas as the 'inner core and mortar of our thoughts'. Now, if the conclusions of sections I and III are accepted it becomes clear that the theory of innate ideas was a Hellenistic invention, and has far less to do with Platonic innatism than is usually supposed. In section IV I shall substantiate these claims, in particular bringing out the affinities between the Hellenistic and seventeenth-century theories. Many philosophers of the later period tended to equate innate ideas with common conceptions and innate principles with

beliefs that commanded widespread assent. They often betrayed their Hellenistic influence by using the terminology of that period or even by quoting from the relevant sources.

By the end of chapter 9 it should be clear how inappropriate the word 'Platonism' is to describe the thought of this period. What is even more remarkable, though, is the way in which one empiricist philosopher, the most famous opponent of innatism in the seventeenth century, subjected these theories to attack. In the first book of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke lambasts his opponents by latching onto their distinctively Hellenistic feature of linking innatism to a respect for common notions. Empiricist though he was, he attacks these theories by using arguments that show an extraordinary similarity to Plato's revisionist epistemology in such dialogues as the *Meno*. Such a strange convergence is only intelligible when one accepts the great discontinuity between Plato and the 'Platonist' advocates of innate ideas in the seventeenth century.

This should give an idea of the way in which I shall be using the diachronic approach in this study. The first three sections will attempt to cast light on the ancient debate about learning by throwing the different theories into relief against each other. The fourth section then uses the conclusions of its predecessors to trace the true lineage of the seventeenth-century debate. The study as a whole is intended to be of interest to philosophers as well as historians of philosophy, both ancient and modern. In recent years there has been a renaissance of the innatist–empiricist debate instigated by Chomsky's rationalist linguistics and fuelled by the opposition of the likes of Goodman, Putnam and Quine. In company with other writers, Chomsky has brought out the importance of reading the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century participants in this debate. One of the aims of this book is that the voices of the ancients are also heard above all the commotion.

I have tried to ensure that this book can be read on different levels. On many of the issues there is already a large scholarly literature, but I have used the footnotes to indicate my debts and disagreements, and in the main text have tried not to lose sight of the points of broader philosophical interest. A certain familiarity with the relevant texts is presupposed. For readers who are more familiar with some of these than with others, here is a guide

to which are particularly important to the different sections of the book:

Section I – Plato, *Meno*; *Phaedo* 57a–84b; *Phaedrus* 246a–257b.

Section II – Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* I 1–3, II 8–10, 19; *Physics* I 1; *Metaphysics* I 1; *Nicomachean Ethics* I 1–8, VI, X 7–9. These texts can all be found in Ackrill (1987).

Section III – There is now an invaluable collection of Epicurean and Stoic texts in Long and Sedley (1987). For Epicurus, see sections 17–19, 23, 25, and for the Stoics, sections 39–40, 54.

Section IV – On the seventeenth-century debate over innate ideas see:

John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* I ii (1–5) and iii; G. W. Leibniz, *New Essays on Human Understanding* I.