

"THE ERROR OF PRE-EXISTENCE" – ABOUT THE USE OF THE SO-CALLED ANAMNESIS DOCTRINE IN TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

Plato's dialogue *Meno* is a text that is often used in teaching philosophy. The slave example as well as the so-called "theory of reminiscence" (*anamnesis* doctrine) enjoy great popularity. However, the interpretation of this supposed doctrine is demanding and controversial. One problem is that the doctrine as presented in the *Meno* is peculiarly interwoven with religious ideas. If one takes Plato's text literally here, one must ascribe to him a bizarre thesis. This would be particularly unfortunate for philosophy lessons. In this article I introduce the context of the *anamnesis* doctrine in the *Meno*. By positioning the doctrine in its context the limits of mythical-religious interpretations become clear. I then present a standard interpretation and place it in the reception context of modern rationalist epistemology. Lastly, I outline a proposal for an interpretation that should also address the practical relevance of these considerations in the context of the Socratic way of life.

Keywords: Plato, *Meno*, *anamnesis*

Plato's dialogue *Meno* is a text that is often used in teaching philosophy, especially in high schools. This is undoubtedly connected with its fundamental ethical theme, namely the question of the teachability and the nature of virtue, but above all because the process of philosophizing itself is reflected in this dialogue. Against the background of the topic of the teachability of virtue, questions about the possibility of learning, about forms of knowledge and thought, or about the value of knowledge are addressed here in a very vivid way. The slave example as well as the so-called "theory of reminiscence" (*anamnesis* doctrine) enjoy great popularity. As Hans-Bernhard Petermann states, this text is particularly suitable as an introduction to philosophizing (Petermann 2007: 52-53).¹

¹ Petermann develops his own model of philosophical knowledge based on the first two chapters of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. From this, he wants to gain a "kind of didactic system of forms of philosophizing" (Petermann 2007: 42), which should be suitable to specify the demand for competence orientation for the subject philosophy. Although Petermann's approach captures the reflexivity of philosophical knowledge in a differentiated way, the competence grid taken from the Aristotelian text remains blurred: For example, "experience" and "feeling" are called differentiations of the competence of "seeing" (ibid.: 51). Furthermore, the orientation towards non-empirical conceptual problems, which is essential for philosophizing, is not sufficiently illuminated. In order to

1. Introduction and didactical classification

Dealing with Platonic dialogues presents unusual challenges to the didactics of philosophy. It is well known, Plato's dialogues are multi-layered works already due to their literary form, the philosophical content of which is not always obvious (cf. Wieland 1982, Szlesák 1993). The liveliness and superficial accessibility of the dialogical form easily conceals the complexity and depth of the philosophical problems negotiated. To work with these texts therefore does not only place high demands on the hermeneutic skills of the interpreters but requires a thorough understanding of the special nature of philosophical problems and questions. The philosophically appropriate examination of Plato's dialogues is already demanding for experienced readers, and even more so when Plato's philosophy is to become a topic of teaching in high school.

With ancient texts, there is the additional difficulty that the world of thoughts, e.g. of Plato and Aristotle, often seems strange to today's readers, especially to the younger students. Aristotle's so-called virtue ethics will not be accessible to them if they expect what can be found in self-help literature, or if they think in terms of empirical-psychological concepts of happiness or in terms of old-fashioned moralizing concepts of virtuous action. A similar situation can also be observed in the use of Plato's work, and the fact that Plato often presents his thoughts in the form of parables and myths makes it even more difficult. Their philosophical content is fundamentally missed if such myths are interpreted as pictorially conveyed teachings of Plato. A particularly sad chapter in the history of such hermeneutical misconduct is the handling of the aforementioned anamnesis doctrine, which plays an important role in the *Meno*.

The interpretation of this supposed doctrine is of course controversial. One problem here is that the anamnesis doctrine presented in the *Meno* is peculiarly interwoven with religious ideas, but also with metaphysical assumptions about the human soul and its connection with the body. The helplessness in the philosophical interpretation of the passages in question in the *Meno* easily leads - especially in school contexts - to present these thoughts literally as a "doctrine" with a certain reverence for the old. It is then attributed to Plato the "theory" that souls in an earlier life, before their incarnation, have looked at ideas and that the individual can fall back on this earlier knowledge of his soul when he gains knowledge. If one takes Plato's text literally here, one must therefore ascribe to him a bizarre thesis.² This would be particularly unfortunate for philosophy lessons because then Plato would no longer be presented as a philosopher with whom it would be worthwhile to think about concepts such as knowledge, but would be, as it were, forced into a museum and would only be thematized in the mode of a subject lesson as the representative of a peculiar theory that could at best satisfy esoteric needs (keyword:

reflect on this aspect of philosophizing with didactic intention, Plato's *Meno* is particularly well suited, as will become even clearer in this article.

² This is emphatically argued for by Ebert (2018), who not only problematizes literal interpretations of the anamnesis metaphor as "doctrine", but is also skeptical of all attempts to philosophically interpret the reminiscence metaphor. Cf. the pointed remarks in Ebert 2018: 178-179. Ebert's commentary offers many valid considerations, based on a close reading of the text, against the widespread assumption that this is a "doctrine". On the other hand, he seems to underestimate the possibility of understanding reminiscence as a metaphor that can be interpreted in terms of its philosophical content. There is, as will become clear in the following, a philosophically reasonable tradition of interpretation that manages without mythical assumptions.

transmigration of souls). Instead of making it possible for students to gain experience in thinking, which they could gain by coming to terms with a paradigmatic philosophical position, a philosophical fairytale lesson is offered.³

What is problematic with such teaching is not only this little differentiated hermeneutic confrontation with Plato's dialogue. Even from the point of view of the didactics of philosophy, the mere retelling of mythical images or the unreflected reproduction of the utterances of a philosophical genius are completely unphilosophical and must therefore be avoided in philosophy lessons. According to many positions in current didactics, the focus of philosophy teaching should be on problems.⁴ Now it is characteristic of philosophical problems or questions that they cannot be examined or solved with the help of empirical methods. They are essentially conceptual problems.⁵ They arise when basic concepts and distinctions that are used in first-order practical and theoretical thinking are thematized in a reflective manner. Jay Rosenberg has therefore characterized philosophy as a "second order" discipline (Rosenberg 1996: 5).⁶ In other words, philosophical investigations are based only on thinking, and one of their most important methodological tools accordingly is argumentation or the analysis of arguments (Rosenberg 1996: 20). Every philosophical assertion must be justified by arguments. This does not only apply to the reconstruction and evaluation of other's positions, but also to the formulation of one's own positions.⁷ Last but not least, this also applies to an assumption which is according to the standards of common-sense as peculiar as that of the pre-existence of the human soul - regardless of whether Plato actually subscribed to it. If, on the other hand, one leaves it at the naïve re-narration, one already for methodological reasons misses the claim of philosophical thinking and leaves the field of philosophy, for mythical narratives do not require any justification.

As already indicated, the analysis of basic concepts supported by argumentation is paradigmatically presented in the *Meno* and is itself made the object of methodological reflection: in the first part, Socrates conducts a conceptual investigation with Meno by discussing the question of the nature of virtue. Specific philosophical lines of argumentation are presented in the form of Socratic refutation strategies. In the second part, which focuses on a conversation between Socrates and a slave boy, the method of philosophical dialogue is presented and reflected upon. In the third part, finally, the method of testing a hypothesis and

³ The identification of the mythical narrative with a doctrine is widespread in German textbooks. Cf. Nink 2011: 191; Heller/Gerhardt 1993: 105-108; Aßmann/Henke et. al.: 369.

⁴ For an insight into the discussion about problem orientation in philosophy lessons see the schemes in the context of the infamous "Bonbonmodel" by Siermann 2016: 203-206 as well as, in more detail and differentiation, Thein 2017: 23-48.

⁵ This possibly uncontroversial minimal provision should suffice for the following explanations. The fundamental philosophical discussion of what exactly a philosophical problem is can therefore be ignored here. Cf. the contributions in Schulte/Wenzel 2001 and, for didactic purposes, the passages in Thein 2017 cited in the previous footnote.

⁶ Rosenberg formulates this aptly when he states that "philosophers are not in any straight forward way thinking about the world. What they are thinking about is *thinking about the world*." (Rosenberg 1996: 7)

⁷ Cf. again Rosenberg 1996: 20: "What Rule One insists is that although any view, however outrageous, may properly be introduced for philosophical discussion, its proponent is obligated to endeavor adequately to support that view by giving reasons for it, by producing arguments which subsequent critical exploration of the view can then usefully and fruitfully engage."

its implications is used to clarify the question of whether virtue is teachable (on the method of testing hypotheses see Hallich 2013: 136-140).

In philosophy lessons, high school students should learn in philosophy lessons to identify philosophical problems and to acquire the conceptual means to deal with such problems appropriately, and that means: not on the basis of a mere exchange of opinions. This is not possible, however, if one only externally appropriates and reproduces what a recognized philosopher has said. The exemplary examination of this can only take place after a problem and the concepts relevant for thinking about it have been identified and formulated. In the problem-oriented didactics of philosophy the concept of the "pre-concept" has been proposed in this context; from these pre-concepts of the students, which represent a first positioning to philosophical questions, the joint philosophical reflection can proceed (cf. Zimmermann 2016: 62-70, Thein 2017: 55). These pre-concepts can be understood as pre-opinions and views that learners bring into the classroom even before they are confronted with philosophical theories.⁸ Learning can then be analyzed as a "conceptual change" (Zimmermann 2016: 62-64). According to this didactic model, the teacher's task is to collect pre-concepts, to put them into the form of assertions that can be evaluated, and to record and, if necessary, already work through explanatory patterns for such assertions (cf. Thein 2017: 51 and 55-59). Through insight into incoherencies or tensions between individual assertions, conceptual problems can be formulated that arise from the implications of the pre-concepts or the presupposed explanatory patterns. With regard to the *Meno*, such pre-concepts could also be easily collected. From my own experience with introductory courses in theoretical philosophy, I suspect that many students will, for example, express the opinion that all knowledge is preliminary and fallible, that all knowledge is based on experience, or that they will uncouple the concept of knowledge from that of truth, because there is "no truth". Such pre-opinions can be expressed in the form of assertions (e.g. "everything we know, we know from sensual experience"). In a further step, one can collect arguments that speak for or against such assertions. In this way, students can come to the conclusion that there is also knowledge that is not based on experience, namely mathematical knowledge. Only when an awareness for such conceptual contexts has been developed can the questions addressed in the *Meno* be approached with a view to philosophical insights: How does knowledge differ from casually true opinions? What is the value of justified opinions as opposed to merely randomly correct opinions, when both can lead to success in practice? What kind of knowledge do definitions of terms as demanded by Socrates give us? And finally the central question for the interpretation of the anamnesis metaphor: what could knowledge have to do with memory? So if one orients oneself, as in this ideal-typical run, on the conceptual questions and problems that the canonical texts or approaches as well as their specific terminologies pose, these take on a different function. They are no longer a "subject matter" that is badly appropriated and at best judged externally (i.e. as an opinion expressed that is usually pompously called "one's own statement"), but they become

⁸ Cf. Zimmermann 2016: 65 with some examples especially for philosophy lessons. Thein associates the concept of "pre-concept" historically with that of "prejudice" (*Vorurteil*) (cf. Thein 2017: 52-55). Plato's Socratic dialogues, one could claim against the background of this didactic model, proceed from the "pre-concepts" or prejudices of the interlocutors.

the media of philosophizing through which students learn to better understand the specificity of philosophical problems and to differentiate their own attempts to think.⁹

In this contribution, I will now discuss suggestions for interpreting the "anamnesis doctrine", which do without mythical assumptions and place its philosophical content in the foreground. It is not, however, an exegetical contribution to research on Plato; rather, I am pursuing a more practical purpose related to teaching: I would like to suggest a problem-oriented approach in teaching philosophical questions about the concept of knowledge in the vicinity of Plato's *Meno*, exemplarily starting from the metaphor of anamnesis. More than a suggestion is not intended in this context, nor is it possible given the ongoing and ramified scholarly discussion.¹⁰

First, I introduce the context of the anamnesis doctrine in the *Meno*. Already by positioning the doctrine in its context the limits of mythical-religious interpretations become clear. I then present a standard interpretation and place it in the reception context of modern rationalist epistemology. Lastly, I will outline a proposal for an interpretation that should also address the practical relevance of these considerations in the context of the Socratic way of life.

2. The eristic paradox and a rejection of the naive-mythical interpretation

At the center of the passage in the *Meno*, in which the anamnesis theme appears, is a conversation between Socrates and a slave boy. The ability of the slave boy to solve a non-trivial geometric problem with Socrates' guidance is intended to illustrate the possibility of acquiring knowledge through reminiscence. The more precise context in the dialogue is a situation in which the conversation between Socrates and Meno about the question of what virtue is has reached a dead end. Meno has failed with his attempts at a definition, he feels driven into a corner by Socrates' arguments. As a good student of sophists, he tries to help himself by taking Socrates by surprise with the famous Meno paradox (or eristic paradox). This paradox is intended to rule out the possibility of learning in general (*Meno* 80d-e):

Men.: Why, on what lines will you look Socrates, for a thing whose nature you know nothing at all? Pray, what sort of thing, amongst those that you know not, will you treat us to as the object of your search? Or even supposing, at the best, that you hit upon it, how will you know it is the thing you did not know?

Soc.: I understand the point you would make, Meno. Do you see what a captious argument you are introducing – that, forsooth, a man cannot inquire either about what he knows or about what he does not know? For he cannot inquire about what he knows, because he knows it, and in that case is no need of inquiry; nor again can he inquire about what he does not know, since he does not know about what to inquire.

⁹ Rosenberg distinguishes history of philosophy as an object from history of philosophy as a medium of philosophical thinking (Rosenberg 1996: 9). With this differentiation, the contrast between philosophy teaching as the mediation of philosophical-historical knowledge as "Bildung" vs. "Selbstdenken" (*autonomous thinking*) also loses its explosiveness.

¹⁰ For a helpful overview with detailed bibliographies see Canto-Sperber 1993, Scott 2006, Hallich 2013, and Ebert 2018. For a discussion of anamnesis in *Phaidros* and *Phaidon* see Ebert 2018: 182-191.

The paradox uses, as Hallich emphasizes, the ambiguity of the Greek *eidénai*, which, as in the English verb *to know*, can denote both the propositional "knowledge that" and the relation of acquaintance (Hallich 2013: 92). One can reconstruct the argument following Hallich in such a way that this ambiguity is revealed (cf. Hallich 2013: 93):

P1) What you know (**by description**)/**by acquaintance** you do not have to search for (because you know it already).

P2) What you do not know (**by description**)/**by acquaintance** you cannot search for (because you do not know what you are looking for, so you do not know **by description**/(**by acquaintance**) what to look for).

K) Search is impossible.

Socrates could therefore have resolved Meno's paradox already by disambiguating the concept of knowledge. However, he does not do this, but continues the conversation by bringing into play the possibility of acquiring knowledge through reminiscence, what should then become known as the anamnesis doctrine. He first presents this supposed doctrine in a mythical-religious version, of course with a strategic intention for the conversation. In the context of the faltering conversation, he wants to convince Meno to continue the investigation into the nature of virtue. But this should happen not just "anyhow". Rather, Meno must also be convinced that the acquisition of knowledge is something valuable or worth striving for. Socrates must therefore resolve the paradox in such a way as to make apparent the connection with his conception of life as dedicated to knowledge. The practice of testing and reasoning leading to knowledge as demonstrated and exemplified by Socrates belongs to a virtuous way of life and that means: a good way of life. One could say that this is an indirect message of this dialogue and at the same time the dramaturgical background for introducing with the anamnesis metaphor a very specific concept of knowledge which is opposed to the sophistic conception. At the end of this article I will come back to this.

In order not to misinterpret this passage, the strategic intention of Socrates must be kept in mind. In his mythic-religious narrative Socrates refers to priestesses, to whom he ascribes ideas of the immortality of the soul and its reincarnation (*Meno*, 81a10-d6). From this it must not be concluded, however, that Socrates or Plato, through the figure of Socrates, are concerned with making plausible the idea of immortality of a substantially existing soul or even with providing an argument for it. If one would actually interpret this passage as an argument for the immortality of the soul, it would be circular (cf. Canto-Sperber 1993: 75).

According to that argumentation the statements of the priestesses would serve to prove immortality, which in turn is a condition for the souls to have already acquired knowledge before their incarnation. The statements of the priestesses would then have a justifying function in connection with the question why the soul has knowledge without sensual experience. It has such knowledge because it is immortal. People are therefore not only dependent on experience when they want to learn something, but can fall back on the knowledge acquired by their soul in the prenatal state by remembering it again. In this sense, learning, getting to know, and

searching in general can be addressed as ways of remembering. So one can, contrary to Meno's paradox, search for something one does not yet know.

The statements of the priestesses remain dogmatic, of course. This becomes clear when one further asks why the soul was able to acquire knowledge before its incarnation. The answer would be because it is immortal. But why is it immortal? Because otherwise it would have no knowledge without sensual experience and it would then also be impossible to understand why one can learn something etc. The dogmatic setting leads into a circle. Against this background, the episode with the slave boy would serve proving the initially dogmatic – and in the end circular – thought of a prenatal acquisition of knowledge. Since the conversation with the slave already presupposes the immortality of the soul, it would be circular in relation to the myth of the priestesses and thus would also prove nothing.

If one wants to avoid these circles, one can simply grant the idea of immortality the status of a religious belief, which could then be persuasive only outside of philosophy. An interpretation of these passages, which aims at attributing Plato or Socrates the thesis of the immortality of the soul or even a theory of reincarnation, thus already encounters fundamental logical problems (dogmatism and circular reasoning). So it is somewhat naïve to assume literal "doctrines" or "theories" here, and it would also and especially make sense for the teaching of it to completely dispense with such assumptions and to avert the fascination for the esoteric, which may easily arise in this context. Socrates is by the way quite aware of these inconsistencies and accordingly distances himself at the end of the episode from the mythic-religious view of knowledge as anamnesis (*Meno* 86b6; cf. also Ebert 2018: 95-96).¹¹ The teacher should therefore explicitly point out that Socrates speaks descriptively and ironically about any priestesses who have this opinion without him sharing it.¹²

As I have already indicated, it is a matter of dissolving the paradox and preparing Meno for the Socratic conception of knowledge (of course in a way that corresponds to his modest mental capacity). This conception of knowledge, which is explicitly reflected in the context of Socrates' conversation with the slave boy (*Meno*, 84a4-d5), is also a background motif for the

¹¹ In order to reject misunderstandings from the outset, I want to emphasize that I am not interested in criticizing Plato's metaphysical speculations as such. This article is not at all about judging Plato's doctrines, e.g. about the soul or the theory of ideas. My aim is rather to stimulate a philosophically reflected handling of these doctrines in the context of school teaching. For the study of Plato in class it is therefore necessary to distinguish between the well-founded or at least justifiable conceptions of philosophical metaphysics and a mere spiritual understanding of metaphysics. As I have already stressed, for this purpose it is necessary to understand the philosophical problems for which metaphysical theories want to offer solutions and the argumentations which are intended to justify these theories. A spiritually understood metaphysics is naïve against this background, because it renounces both. Interpretations of Plato's philosophy that promote such an unreflected pre-conception of metaphysics are accordingly naïve.

¹² In religious or theological terms - not only in the mythical folk religion of ancient Greece - it is often assumed that the soul is not something sensually perceptible or scientifically explainable. Thus at this point Platonic Socrates does not have to be accused of believing that the soul, although not sensually perceptible, nevertheless exists; rather, Socrates is probably concerned with identifying the speech of "soul" as a paradigmatic case of an unobservable entity on the basis of a popular-religious commonplace. It would thus be a question of linguistic clarification of a common concept rather than the taking up an unfounded assertion. This thought, to which Philipp Richter drew my attention, certainly refers beyond the text. It is, however, philosophically relevant both methodically and systematically for an understanding of reflected speech about non-empirical observables as well as for the teaching of philosophy.

further course of the dialogue. The question then is: what is the peculiar philosophical content of these passages about the connection between knowledge and reminiscence (anamnesis).

One can certainly emphasize an epistemological aspect that concerns the concepts of knowledge, the opposition of knowledge vs. true belief, as well as the question of the value of knowledge. This epistemological dimension has always been at the center of the philosophically informed reception of the *Meno*. But one can also add an ethical aspect to this, which refers to the way of life propagated by Socrates (the Socratic *ethos*, the answer to the question of a good life worth living).¹³ After all, this dialogue is also about determining the essence of virtue (although this question is ultimately answered just as little as the question of the teachability of virtue).

3. A standard interpretation and its rationalistic precursors

So what could be meant by the thought that every acquisition of knowledge can be understood as reminiscence? This can be followed by further questions: Is the soul a kind of subject that exists in principle independently of the body and that remembers things? Is memory the discovery of something that already exists? In particular, the question arises as to how the metaphor of "anamnesis" (memory or reminiscence) is to be interpreted exactly and why this thought is unfolded using a geometric example. When dealing with the text, it is therefore necessary to explore the scope of meaning of this metaphor and to work through possible interpretations: What exactly does "remember" mean here? Does it make a difference whether we are talking about "memory" or "reminiscence"? What exactly is "remembered" and how does this happen? Thinking about such questions will also make students aware of the fact that it is indeed a metaphor that needs its own philosophical interpretation, not a factual statement about substantially existing souls. A philosophical interpretation would therefore not be an esoteric speculation. Rather, it would have to make this metaphor understandable as an attempt to express a philosophical thought, which in principle is also accessible to a conceptual-argumentative discussion.

Let us first remind ourselves of the geometric problem: the task that Socrates sets the slave is to construct a square from a given square that has twice the area of the square of origin. The wit of it is that you have to construct the square you are looking for from the diagonal of the starting square. Socrates proves this in dialogue with a slave boy by leading him step by step through questions to this insight (see *Meno*, 82b-85b, for a clear presentation see Hallich 2013: 101-104).

An interpretation perspective, which I take up here and which is widely accepted today (at least in some variants), can be described as "minimalist" (Canto-Sperber 1993: 83). It goes back to Plato scholar Gregory Vlastos. Vlastos interprets "anamnesis" as a metaphor for how one can expand one's own knowledge on the basis of logical abilities, namely the right reasoning (Vlastos 1995: 157). These inferential abilities are activated by Socrates through

¹³ The good life is of course to be understood as a good life in the polis. The initial question of the teachability of virtue thus acquires an eminently political significance. It refers to the question of who is suitable to make citizens better citizens. This topic is explicitly addressed in the final part of the dialogue: cf. *Meno* 99a-c. However, the text ends in an aporia, if not even ironically, when virtue is called "a divine dispensation" (99e).

simple questions. Socrates therefore does not manipulate his interlocutor or ask suggestive questions.¹⁴ Rather, he specifies tasks that the slave boy must solve on his own. According to this interpretation, the slave's mistakes during the first attempt at a solution can be understood as an inadequate actualization of logical abilities. The true opinions, to which the slave boy finally arrives, do not have to be understood as expression of propositional knowledge, which was already there and only waited to be "taken out" from the depths of the mind. This would be implausible because the slave is presumed not to have any mathematical knowledge. All the more the question arises what it could mean that his soul should have this knowledge; and this question makes clear the problem of the naïve hypostasis of the soul as an immaterial substance. Under this condition one would be compelled to accept still another soul beside the slave and his inner life, which can be active independently of the body of the slave, e.g. which learns or actualizes knowledge.

An obvious strength of Vlastos' minimalist interpretation is that it does not require such unfounded metaphysical or religious-esoteric assumptions. Another reason for his criticism of the propositionalist interpretation is the fact that the insight of the slave does not set in by itself, but is accompanied and triggered by questions. The slave's own contribution consists in establishing the connections between the individual steps that he develops together with Socrates. Thus the propositionalist misunderstanding with regard to the actualized knowledge in the described learning situation is excluded from the outset. Hallich therefore characterized the knowledge actualized by the slave as "understanding knowledge" (*verstehendes Wissen*) in contrast to propositional knowledge (Hallich 2013: 111). In the next section, I will make a proposal on how this interpretation can be expanded a little further.

Before I do so, I will discuss a reference to the *Meno* in the context of modern rationalist epistemology that is important for the correct understanding of the so-called anamnesis doctrine. It stands in the context of the controversy over innate ideas between empiricists and rationalists. In § 26 of his *Discourse on Metaphysics*, entitled "That We Have All Ideas in Us; and of Plato's Doctrine of Reminiscence," Leibniz writes about the ideas:

We have all these forms in our mind; we even have forms all time, for the mind always expresses all its future thoughts and already thinks confusedly about everything it will ever think about distinctly. And nothing can be taught to us whose idea we do not already have in our mind, an idea which is like the matter of which that thought is formed.

This is what Plato so excellently recognized when he proposed his doctrine of reminiscence, a very solid doctrine, provided that it is taken rightly and purged of the error of preexistence and provided that we do not imagine that at some earlier time the soul must already have known and thought distinctly what it learns and thinks now. Plato has strengthened his view by way of a fine experiment, introducing a little boy, whom he leads insensibly to extremely difficult truths of geometry concerning incommensurables without teaching him anything merely by asking appropriate questions in proper order.

¹⁴ Just as esoteric interpretations take Meno's philosophical claim seriously in the wrong way and completely misunderstand it as a philosophical claim, one underestimates this claim and misses the philosophical punch line by falsely accusing Socrates of manipulative questioning, see Hallich 2013:104-108.

This demonstrates that our soul knows all things virtually and requires only *attention* to recognize truths, and that, consequently, it has, at very least, the ideas upon which these truths depend. One can even say that it already possesses these truths, if they are taken as relations of ideas.

Here Leibniz excludes from the outset the misleading thought of a "pre-existence" of souls.¹⁵ He then emphasizes an aspect that the minimalist interpretation does not take into account. Plato expressly admits that in the process of learning as *anamnesis* both false and true opinions are initially produced (the slave boy is initially mistaken). Leibniz takes this up by specifying that the soul knows "virtually".¹⁶ It should be noted, however, that "virtual" does not mean "merely simulated" or "not real", as the expression is often used today, for example, when we are talking about "virtual reality". Rather, the term derives from the Latin "virtus" (force of action, according to force, cf. Knebel 2001: 1062). The term refers to the contrast between act and potency, i.e. to something that is implicit or possible (as the German translation by Holz makes clear, see Fn. 16). The concept of the virtual on the one hand captures that the mind or soul actually possesses "innate" knowledge, but this knowledge is not always complete and actualized. Therefore, attempts to actualize it may at first bring false opinions to light. The process of actualizing, i.e. in Plato's metaphor the "anamnesis", requires mental effort from the subject, as well as practical exercise, and may, if only temporarily, even fail.

Descartes also stresses the necessity of activity with reference to the *Meno* in the letter to Voetius, when he states that the assumption of innate geometric truths does not imply that this knowledge must be known as something finished (e.g. in the form of the Euclid's *Elements*) to every person.¹⁷ The virtual character of innate knowledge thus does not necessarily mean that it is present and always easily accessible to everyone.

According to Leibniz, even future knowledge is virtual in the mind and not only, as in the minimalist interpretation, the ability to acquire it - a thought which, however, can only be understood if one observes Leibniz's analytical theory of truth (Poser 2016: 120-121). Thus Leibniz's and Descartes' rationalistic appropriations of Plato's anamnesis metaphor offer an answer to the question of how knowledge can be extended a priori on the basis of a source; thus one does not have to restrict knowledge a priori to conceptual relations that remain tautological, as in empiricism.

¹⁵ It does not become expressly clear from this quotation what Leibniz believes to be the error of pre-existence. However, it can be inferred from the text that Leibniz understands "reminiscence" as the ability of the soul to clearly think thoughts which it "already thinks confusedly" i.e. virtually. This ability of the soul does not presuppose that it must have existed before the body. In general, the ability to gain knowledge through pure thinking does not presuppose such an assumption. But also assumptions about the existence of the soul, by the way, would need to be justified: What exactly could be meant by the assertion that the soul "exists" or even existed before its incarnation, especially since it is not an object that can be identified in space-time?

¹⁶ Hans Heinz Holz translates the French "virtuellement" into German as "der Möglichkeit nach" (engl. "possible"). Compare with the translation by Herbert Herring in the edition published by Meiner (Leibniz 1985).

¹⁷ „Atque inde Socrates apud Platonem, puerum quemdam de Geometricis elementis interrogando, sicque efficiendo ut ille puer quasdam veritates ex mente propria erueret, quas prius in ea fuisse non notaverat, reminiscantiam suam probare conabatur [...]. [E]x eo quod omnes Geometricae veritates fint eodem modo nobis innatae, dixisses neminem esse in mundo qui nesciat Eculidis elementa.” (Descartes 1974: 167)

The considerations of Leibniz and Descartes can well be related to the minimalist interpretation, for even according to this interpretation the anamnesis must essentially be understood as a process of actualizing already existing abilities. Our rationalists, however, go further by at the same time offering a philosophical explanation of how knowledge can be expanded a priori on the basis of a source of knowledge - a claim that the minimalist interpretation does not make. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Neo-Kantian philosopher Paul Natorp attributes to Plato relating to the *Meno* the "discovery of the a priori" (Natorp 1921/2004: 43). Natorp criticizes, however, that Plato's logical investigation in connection with the theory of reminiscence has taken a misleading psychological turn. In contemporary interpretations, the idea of "virtual knowledge" reappears under the term "tacit knowledge" (cf. the discussion in Hallich 2013: 112-115).

It would certainly be tempting to use the passages from Leibniz's *Discourse on Metaphysics* in school for advanced students to explain the slave example and to continue the epistemological problem of knowledge a priori in its rationalistic as well as transcendental philosophical variants. If one sticks to the fact that competence-oriented philosophy teaching always aims at building up a reflective knowledge of such distinctions and the criteria of their use in the solution of philosophical problems on the basis of basic conceptual distinctions (cf. Tichy 2016: 49), this topic offers itself almost as a paradigmatic training field for these purposes. Following the introductory remarks on the role of pre-concepts in problem-oriented teaching, the lesson plan would first have to determine the philosophical problem. With regard to the rationalistic conceptions and their connection to Plato's anamnesis metaphor, this could be the question of whether knowledge can be expanded exclusively through sensual experience. The lesson plan would furthermore be guided by the question of how students should change their position on the concept of knowledge, which they initially advocated as a pre-concept, in the course of such a discussion. In this way, students could acquire the distinction between different sources of knowledge such as thinking and sensory perception, which they may not initially be familiar with, and refer to the further distinction between knowledge as propositionally fixable content and knowledge as a process and actualization of abilities. They could then continue by becoming aware of the relevance of such distinctions for their own learning processes in various areas of their environment. The mastery of such distinctions can be used for opening up other philosophical problem areas (e.g. the justification of norms), but of course also for further work with the *Meno*, in order to work out the difference between knowledge and true opinion and then the question of the value of knowledge in connection with the parable of Larissa. Again, it is necessary to identify the philosophical problem and possible pre-concepts so that they can be reflected on and refined together in the classroom. In view of the parable of Larissa, students are inevitably confronted with the problem of reducing knowledge to practical success: it is possible to succeed even without knowledge. Why then does it make a relevant difference whether I know something or only mean to know it?¹⁸

¹⁸ Konrad Paul Liessmann (2008) discusses the topicality of this problem in a moody way as errors of the knowledge society.

I will deal with this question in the next section. I will therefore no longer pursue the rationalist lines of interpretation here, but come back to the minimalist interpretation. Perhaps one can even dispense with the assumption that it is essentially about the knowledge of a priori truths. Geometry would then have a different accent as paradigm.

4. An alternative proposal

The interpretations presented in the previous section emphasize in *anamnesis* the aspect of the process rather than the result of the process, i.e. the propositional knowledge extracted at the end.¹⁹ This aspect becomes clear in the text if one pays attention to the distinction between true beliefs and knowledge. This distinction is already introduced during the conversation with the slave boy and is taken up again at the end of the dialogue, after the parable of Larissa. There Socrates explicitly asks Meno again about the anamnesis metaphor. In the conversation with the slave Socrates stresses that the ignorant already has true beliefs:

Soc.: So that he who does not know about any matters, whatever they be, may have true opinions on such matters, about which he knows nothing?

Men.: Apparently.

Soc.: And at this moment those opinions have just been stirred up in him, like a dream; but if he were repeatedly asked these same questions in a variety of forms, you know he will have in the end as exact an understanding of them as anyone. (*Meno* 85c)

And shortly before Socrates distances himself from the mythical content of this thought, he summarizes the result of the exercise with the slave boy as follows:

Soc.: So if in both of these periods – when he was and was not a human being – he has had true opinions in him which have only to be awakened by questioning to become knowledge, his soul must have had this cognizance throughout all time? (*Meno*, 86a)

According to Socrates, it is therefore not so much the fact that true beliefs (*aletheis doxai*) were already present in the slave boy, or in the soul, which were now brought to light that is decisive, but the conversion of such true beliefs into real knowledge. This is done by the Socratic technique of questioning. In this respect, it is not the content of any true beliefs that is the subject of *anamnesis*, but the process that leads to knowledge. In this process, the validity and conclusiveness of the inferences that lead to the solution of the geometric problem are examined. The conversation with the slave boy should therefore demonstrate, using a particularly clear and comprehensible example, what it means to arrive at well-founded insights from merely true opinions, starting from generally communicable contents in the form of statements, by examining inferential connections between these statements. For in fact the slave boy does not literally remember the solution of the geometric problem; only in conversation with Socrates, i.e. in the dialogical process of reflection, errors are uncovered and

¹⁹ The suffix -sis usually denotes a process in (ancient) Greek.

the disconnected, only coincidentally true beliefs turn into real knowledge. The comparison with a dream in which all ideas are merely "stirred up" but not yet consciously arranged into coherent interrelations fits in well with this.

The question now is why this process is illustrated with the metaphor of "anamnesis". In order to answer this question, one must connect Socrates' conversation with the slave boy with a passage that is often overlooked, but which is quite crucial if one wants to liberate the anamnesis metaphor from the "error of pre-existence" (Leibniz) of souls.

I mean a passage following the parable of Larissa, which deals with the distinction between true beliefs and knowledge. It is about the practical service of knowledge to orientation. When it comes to finding the right way to the city of Larissa, true beliefs and knowledge perform the same service. Both lead to the same end:

Soc.: Hence true opinion is as good a guide to rightness of action as knowledge. (*Meno*, 97b)

Thus Socrates records the result, whereupon Meno rightly says the following:

Men.: It appears to me that he must; and therefore I wonder, Socrates, this being the case, that knowledge should ever be more prized than right opinion, and why they should be two distinct and separate things. (*Meno*, 97d)

Socrates answers again with a comparison aimed at the difference between true beliefs and knowledge. The particular value of knowledge is that it is linked to reasoning, making knowledge permanent. In this context, Socrates refers to the anamnesis metaphor:

Soc.: For these, so long as they stay with us, are a fine possession, and effect all that is good; but they do not care to stay for long, and run away out of the human soul, and thus are of no great value until one makes them fast with causal reasoning. And this process, friend Meno, is recollection, as in our previous talk we agreed. But when once they are fastened, in the first place they turn into knowledge, and in the second, are abiding. (*Meno*, 97e-98a)²⁰

At the latest as this point, the absurdity of (textbook) interpretations of the anamnesis metaphor becomes apparent, which associate it with reincarnation esotericism.

The passage confirms once again that "anamnesis" should be understood as a process. Anamnesis is here addressed as the making fast of the true beliefs "with causal reasoning" (*aitías logismo*). It is reminiscence that turns true beliefs into lasting knowledge. What is meant

²⁰ Cf. Canto-Sperber 1993: 89-91. Ebert considers the sentence in which the motif of reminiscence is taken up to be a text forgery "from the circle of Pythagorean Neo-Platonism". According to Ebert, this assumption is supported by the existence of a manuscript tradition dating back to Stobaios in which the passage in question does not appear, cf. Ebert 2018: 180-182. I cannot discuss this philological finding in the context of this article. But even if Ebert's hypothesis could be proved to be true, the philosophical content of the interpretations discussed here would thereof remain unaffected.

is that a "logos" – not an isolated statement, but an argumentative context –, provides for the *aitía*, the cause in the sense of an explanatory reason for the true beliefs. True beliefs are thus placed in a coherent and explanatory context by reasoning. Anamnesis would thus be a process that consists in actualizing the ability of reasoning. On the basis of unexplained preconceptions in the form of true beliefs and of logical abilities (which are emphasized by the minimalist interpretation), thoughts are justified and developed into insights. Thus, this passage can easily be connected to the minimalist interpretation, whereby the ability of reasoning as a process does not merely mean the isolated verification of beliefs in the sense of a widespread opinion in today's epistemology. The standard definition of knowledge, i.e. knowledge as justified true belief, always refers to individual statements in the form of propositional knowledge. However, the example of the slave already makes it clear that it is not about individual beliefs, but about the actualization of an ability that is supposed to produce complex insights through the process of argumentative reasoning.

Thus, according to the passage interpreted here, "memory" primarily means this explanatory aspect as a process, rather than the bringing forth of true opinions, which was at the forefront of the slave episode. If one now brings together both passages – the slave episode and the conversation about the value of knowledge – one can conclude as a result of this interpretation that the metaphor of reminiscence should capture these two aspects: the discovery of true beliefs *and* their justification in the sense of unfolding and examining their inferential connections. While the first aspect is also illuminated in the slave episode, the discussion about the value of knowledge is explicitly about the aspect of justification as a rational ability.

The metaphor of "reminiscence" vividly aims at the process of bringing out, but - and this would be a further aspect of this metaphor – of bringing out something that was not made by the subject, but is, as it were, given to the person from somewhere else. Thoughts that want to appear as justifiable assertions are not made by the thinker by being thought, but grasped by the exercise of rational abilities (cf. e.g. Frege 1918/1986: 35), as something that claims validity independently of the subject. Therefore, a thought can be grasped by any thinker with this claim to objective validity. In any case, it is not unusual to imagine the claim to objectivity of thoughts in this way. This applies especially to mathematical truths and proofs. However, all conceptual thinking, not least philosophical thinking, is oriented towards abstract structures. According to this interpretation, "reminiscence" would not only be a metaphor for the exercise of rational abilities and the possibility of gaining knowledge through them, but also a metaphor for the special objectivity of abstract thinking. Merely true opinions become insights based on justifications that are achievements of rational thinking, which is oriented towards abstract structures, i.e. structures accessible to thinking only. Thus thoughts are grasped that claim objective validity. The metaphor therefore remains understandable even if the thoughts brought out are not thought of as something that has literally once been experienced by the soul, either empirically or in "an earlier life". Of course, we are dealing with a metaphor: it remains open what the status of thoughts is. The text remains metaphorical, i.e. it does not commit us to a certain metaphysical teaching about the mode of being of thoughts, e.g. as ideas that exist in their own realm of reality.

One should not lose sight of the fact that the dialogue revolves around the theme of virtue and its teachability. The epistemological questions, in particular the theme of knowledge as reminiscence, fit into this theme which structures the dialogue. It is not least about the service of knowledge to orientation in practical life, or as Ursula Wolf puts it: "The *Meno* inquires if and to what extent it is possible to gain useful knowledge for human condition derived from verified hypotheses" (Wolf 1996: 123). The parable of Larissa has shown that true beliefs orient just as well as knowledge, but they offer no stable orientation. However, those who repeatedly test and justify their true beliefs according to the model of Socrates are better oriented, as is the traveler to Larissa who really knows the way. Socrates is not concerned with the stability of certain beliefs or bits of knowledge as such. Rather, his claim is aimed at the stability of beliefs as a valuable attitude guiding one's own practice. The Socratic way of thinking refers to a way of life that offers itself as an alternative to the success orientation of sophistry. Whatever virtue is exactly: A virtuous, good life is a tested, reflected life, a life lived in the "continuity of the *elenchus*" (Wolf 1996: 127).²¹ Thinking, which deserves this name, has its value not least in the orientation it can offer.²²

Thus the interpretation of the anamnesis metaphor proposed here on the one hand takes up the central motif of the so-called minimalist interpretation, namely the aspect of reminiscence as the exercise of rational abilities. But the proposal also goes beyond this, in that the rationalist motif of pure thought as a fundamental source of knowledge is strengthened in contrast to mere true beliefs (without, however, explaining the possibility of a priori expansion of knowledge, or even wanting to say anything about the ontological status of thoughts as abstract entities). This interpretation also places the metaphor of reminiscence in the context of the Socratic main question of the right way of life. In doing so, it wants to offer some starting points for a philosophically appropriate work with Platonic ideas in school, which is not a mythical-esoteric or ideological practice, but the joint operation with basic conceptual distinctions and reasons. This is exactly what students should learn.

The reading of Plato is philosophically demanding, and even more demanding is good teaching of philosophemes of Platonic dialogues. Contrary to what the easily accessible literary form of dialogue suggests, it is hardly possible or meaningful without an understanding of the specificity of philosophical thought. As with most philosophical literature, students must learn to face up to this challenge. Therefore, if one wants to open a path to philosophical thinking for them with Platonic dialogues like the *Meno*, one does not help them by avoiding these difficulties with simplistic narratives.

²¹ *Apology* 38a 1-7: "and if again I say that to talk every day about virtue and the other things about which you hear me talking and examining myself and others is the greatest good to man, and that the unexamined life is not worth living, you will believe me still less. This is as I say, gentlemen, but it is not easy to convince you."

²² At various points in the text it is considered whether the correct use of something requires a certain type of knowledge (*Meno* 87e5-88a5 and 88d4-e2). However, to what extent this technical knowledge is a suitable model for virtue knowledge remains open here, as in other dialogues. For further investigation (cf. Wolf 1996: 32-36 and 59-65). Furthermore, the ability to learn requires a good memory and must again be guided by prudence (*phronesis*, *Meno* 88b4).

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