Commentary on Gentzler¹

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I.

There are reasons to believe that Socratic cross examination does not serve a purely negative purpose. As Socrates himself tells us in the Theaetetus (149a), only "the ignorant world," only those who do not know "his secret," think of him as "an eccentric person who [merely] reduces people to hopeless perplexity." What, then, is Socrates' secret? What does Socrates intend to achieve by displaying his interlocutors' ignorance and perplexing them?

Professor Gentzler argues that Socrates sees himself as not only trying to expose the moral ignorance of his interlocutors but also as being engaged in an inquiry concerning the nature of virtue. If this is really Socrates' intention, what we are missing is, according to Professor Gentzler, a reason to believe that Socratic cross examination is truth conducive and that, if continued, it would really lead to genuine knowledge of the nature of virtue. Professor Gentzler follows others who believe that Plato was not unaware of this, and that the theory of recollection is his proposal for a resolution of the problem of Socratic elenchus.

In this commentary I will focus on Professor Gentzler's understanding of how Plato's theory of recollection is supposed to resolve the problem of Socratic elenchus. But before we turn to this central issue, a few explanatory remarks about the doctrine of recollection are appropriate.

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Let us say at the outset that the doctrine of recollection is as obscure as it is fascinating. What makes it so obscure is that it is neither clearly formulated nor elaborated; we can never be sure of the true nature and full scope of recollection. Plato introduces it in the *Meno* in a half-mythical way, referring to “men and women who understand the truths of religion” (81a). As Plato is well aware, in Greek mythology Lethe is the river of forgetfulness, the symbol which suggests the oblivion of ignorance and the death of spirit. The Greek word for truth is *a-letheia*, which clearly preserves the intimate connection with mythology. Truth is what keeps us away and safe from the lethal waters of Lethe. *Aletheia* is allowing things to “shine forth,” as they truly are and should be. Following the traditional mythology and the mysterious religious cult of Pythagoreans, Plato is traditionally bound to believe that truth is to be sought in recollection (*anamnesis*) and that the ultimate goal of the search for truth is salvation of the soul. On its way to live again in the world above, in our world of daily experiences in which the soul is bounded with a body, each and every soul must drink the water of Lethe, the river of forgetfulness.² It is the true vocation of a philosopher, a lover of wisdom, to prepare himself for dying and death. Death brings liberation of the soul from the desires and evils of the body, and allows the soul to remember and again see things as they really are.

Plato introduces the doctrine of recollection in the *Meno* in connection with a possibility of inquiring and learning in this life, while the soul is still bound to a body. Yet what Plato says is vague: “In as much as the soul is immortal, has often been born, and has seen all things both here and in Hades, there is nothing that it has not learned” (81c). That the soul has seen “all things” could hardly be taken literally. The dialogues written after the *Meno* suggest that these things are above else, and perhaps only, Forms.³ That the soul has seen all things presumably means that

². Cf. Republic X, 621ab.
³. A reference to Hades “leads” toward the Forms, even though they are not explicitly discussed in the *Meno*. In *Cratylus* (404b) Socrates connects Hades with the invisible (world) and with knowledge of all noble things.