

Gail Fine

The Possibility of Inquiry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). £55

The title of this dense, challenging, and enlightening study refers to a problem whose origins are found in the *Meno*. In fact, it is called Meno's paradox.

(M1) But how will you inquire into this, Socrates, when you don't at all know what it is?

(M2) For what sort of thing, from among those you don't know, will you put forward as the thing you're inquiring into? (M3) And even if you really encounter it, how will you know that this is the thing you didn't know? (80d5-8) (p.7)

When Socrates rephrases Meno's paradox it becomes a dilemma:

I understand the sort of thing you want to say, Meno. Do you see what an eristic argument you're introducing, (S4) that it's not possible for someone to inquire either into that which (*ho*) he knows or into that which he doesn't know? For (S2) he wouldn't inquire into that which he knows (for he knows it, and there's no need for such a person to inquire); nor (S3) into that which he doesn't know (for he doesn't even know what (*hoti*) he'll inquire into). (80e1-5) (p.7-8)

Inquiry is impossible because either one knows *x* or one does not know *x*. If one knows *x* she cannot inquire because there's nothing left to discover. If one does not know *x* she cannot inquire about *x* because she will not be able to recognize what she is looking for. As we know, Socrates' answer to the dilemma is the theory of recollection. Now, this paradox has been the focus of a lot of investigation on the part of Anglo-American analytic philosophers. Certainly, Fine has written a book that uses her considerable analytic skills to sort through a generous selection of recent English-language commentary. She seems to aim at something like a definitive sorting out of concepts, terms, and logic so that we can at last understand Meno's original paradox, Socrates' restatement of it, and his solution to it. That task takes the first half of the book. Then she turns to the *nachleben* of the paradox in Aristotle and the Peripatetics, the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the Skeptics. In this review, I will address only the first half of the book and only a few major points of the analysis there.

Fine focuses on Socrates' restatement of Meno's original paradox, which transforms it into a dilemma.

- (S1) for any x, one either knows, or does not know, x.
- (S2) If one knows x, one cannot inquire into x.
- (S3) If one does not know x, one cannot inquire into x.
- (S4) Therefore, for any x, one cannot inquire into x. (p.8)

She argues, however, that Socrates does not believe the dilemma is sound. In particular, he does not think (S3) is true. According to Fine, Socrates will show the falsity of (S3); he holds that we do not need knowledge of x in order to inquire about x. This claim about inquiry is different from another claim that Socrates also makes, one about knowledge. Socrates also says that one cannot know whether virtue is teachable without knowing what virtue is—i.e., without knowing the essence of virtue (71b). Nevertheless, according to Fine, inquiry into x does not require knowledge of the essence of x (p.51-53). In fact, she argues that, in his conversation with the slave boy, Socrates shows that inquiry is possible starting only with true belief. The slave boy does not know the essence of a square although he has the true belief that a square has four equal sides. Refined by elenchus, such preliminary true beliefs lead to secure belief, which is then the basis for what ultimately will be knowledge. At this point, we have the answer to the question whether inquiry about x is possible when one does not know x. Since the slave boy has conducted a successful inquiry without knowledge, the answer is “Yes.” Then Fine turns to her second task. Socrates says that recollection explains how inquiry is possible; but he is not forthcoming about how it does so. Fine thinks the explanation is implicit in the text. Here she offers an interpretation of the notion of recollection that goes counter to what others have said about recollection as an explanation for inquiry.

To understand her interpretation we have to start with what she holds is a wrong interpretation. Many have argued that recollection explains the possibility of inquiry because one recollects innate knowledge. In this view, the slave boy will come to know the solution to the geometrical problem because he already knows it innately and, by elenchus, he will recover what he knows innately. In this kind of account, somewhere in his soul, he knows the solution but only latently; it needs to be made explicit. Fine, however, argues that Socrates' notion of recollection, in the *Meno* at least, does not imply this sort of recovery of latent innate knowledge. According to Fine, Socratic recollection is based on prenatal knowledge that has been forgotten. One might ask how latent innate knowledge differs from forgotten prenatal knowledge. After all, if recollection is the recovery of forgotten prenatal knowledge then it seems indistinguishable from the recovery of latent innate knowledge. In both cases,