

ADVANCING BEYOND SOCRATES?

On Education, Inspiration and Inwardness in Kierkegaard and Levinas

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In the history of philosophy, from Plato to Hegel, the identification of knowledge and recollection has always been very influential. The present article demonstrates how Kierkegaard, reacting to this idea of identification, develops a different epistemology. As a result, recollection and eternity make room for a focus on the human relation to temporality and finiteness. This new, Christian, thinking about time is the underlying motive of the comparison which Kierkegaard (in *Philosophical Fragments* and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*) makes between the teaching mission of Socrates and Christ's teaching.

Considering a number of parallels between the Christian thinker Kierkegaard and the Jewish philosopher Levinas, the author further explores the implications of their thought on education and inwardness. Generally speaking, there is agreement about the idea that education should lead to the cultivation of humanity. Kierkegaard's as well as Levinas' thought demonstrate that a philosophical articulation of the dimension of inwardness cannot be neglected in this context. In addition to this, the question must be raised how inwardness relates to exteriority and eternity.

1. *Introduction*

Kierkegaard was right: the ultimate choice is the one between the Socratic recollection and the Christian repetition: Christianity enjoins us to REPEAT the founding gesture of the primordial choice. (Žižek 2001, 148-159)

“You don't know what you know”: this was the title of a well-known grammar book (Van Dort-Slijper *et al.* 1976) at the time when I studied Dutch language and literature. But it could just as well be a slogan summarizing the teaching of Socrates, since the basic principle of his teaching, the hypothesis so astonishingly demonstrated by Socrates in Plato's *Meno*, is that learning is a form of recollection. Central in this Platonic dialogue is the question whether virtue can be taught, and in line with this question the protagonists Socrates and Meno end up in a discussion about the question whether it is possible to learn what one does not know. As they do not reach agreement Socrates relates, reluctantly, that he has heard from wise men, priestesses and poets “things which are at the same time true and beautiful”: that the human soul is immortal and in earlier lives has already seen everything of importance. Therefore, we never learn anything new and it is better to regard learning as a form of recollection (*Meno 81d*). To be sure, the content of the recollection is not

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directly accessible because we have lost knowledge through the shock of our birth. But by means of training and association this lost knowledge can be reactivated. Socrates demonstrates how this reactivation works by means of a conversation with Meno's slave about a geometrical problem. First, Socrates asks the boy whether he speaks the Greek language — if not, the happening cannot take place. In the following conversation two things become clear.¹ First of all, the boy, being a blank mind mathematically speaking, is able to pronounce propositions on geometrical questions. Furthermore, Socrates makes him aware of the unfounded character of his knowledge and this stimulates him to continue asking questions and to search, with Socrates, for the solution which he, unknowingly, already possesses inwardly (*Meno 85c, 84a-d*).

Well, do you or don't you know what you know? Can you learn something new which you didn't know before? The Socratic pedagogy assumes that you can't. All really important knowledge is already present in our inner self. However, it is a 'sleeping knowledge', waiting to be awakened. Precisely for this reason Plato is interested in the teacher: he is able to awaken the student by causing confusion. In this way the slave boy became embarrassed in his conversation with Socrates when it appeared that he didn't know certain things, whereas he thought that he knew them. He was paralysed by the stingray, Socrates then says, using an image brought into the conversation by Meno as a reaction to his own conversation with Socrates. Meno compared Socrates with this fish, whose electric impulses have a paralysing effect on whoever comes near him (*Meno 80a*). Apparently not only recollection is indispensable for learning, but also someone who arouses recollection and gives it significance, in short: the teacher.

In the stories about the Flemish parish priest Poncke one can read an anecdote which recalls the dilemma in Plato's *Meno*. The problem, which is, generally speaking, familiar, is the question: does it make sense to teach those who do not know? On a certain day Poncke was confronted with this question when he had to deliver a sermon, but didn't know the topic. Yet, he mounted the pulpit, looked at his listeners and said: "Beloved parishioners, I'm your teacher. But do you know the subject which I will speak to you about?" They answered: "No pastor, how could we know?" His reaction was that it would not be possible to preach to them on a matter which they didn't know anything about. So, he descended the pulpit and disappeared in the sacristy. After a while he returned, ascended the pulpit again and asked: "Beloved parishioners, do you know the subject which I will speak to you about?" "We do know", some answered, thinking they could thus entice him to deliver a sermon. However, he shook his head saying: "Why should I trouble myself to speak to you about a subject which is already known to you?" And again he departed to the sacristy. The parishioners patiently waited for him and, indeed, he returned for the third time. Again he asked: "Beloved brothers and sisters, do you know the subject which I will speak to you about?" This time the parishioners had agreed

¹ For a description of the line of reasoning in *Meno* see Bluck (1961, 1-47). An intriguing commentary on the mathematical passage in this dialogue was given by Boter (1988).