

Melodies and Faces: A *Meno* Meditation\*

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## Lecture on *Meno*

Argus, Odysseus's old hound dog, wags his tail once before he dies. His master has returned after twenty years. Odysseus hides a tear. He has to conceal who he is, until he can take back his house and win the respect of everyone in his household, including Penelope. Hardly anyone can be expected to recognize him or acknowledge him without a challenge. "Move the bed into the hall," says his wife, fully aware that the tree from which he carved it is still anchored to the earth. Why test him like that unless his welcome is in doubt?

Because, I suppose, memory always needs testing: we're never entirely sure that what we recall mightn't deceive us. That friend I ran into at an alumni meeting--so much has changed in appearance--hair longer or shorter than I remember, a few strands of gray or white, furrows now line the face, the voice more grainy or gravelly. Is the new suit needed to broadcast prosperity? Or just a larger appetite? Above all, how has life changed us? Either the friend or me, the observer? Is either one of us the same person?

Yes and no. *Tout ca change, tout c'est la meme chose*. But some sameness is important--not rigid identity, but an underlying kinship. Recognition has a way of restoring us to ourselves and grasping something new as well.

## Recognition

Literature and scripture are full of such scenes. Joseph conceals himself from his brothers as long as he can. Thomas doubts the presence of Jesus Christ until he can feel the wounds. Abraham pretends his wife is his sister. Elektra is prompted to identify her brother, Orestes, by a lock of his hair; Rosalind adopts a disguise for protection, then finds other uses for it; Edgar, too, needs to hide behind a false identity, until he can reveal himself to his blind Lear. Hardest to recognize are characters like Iago, because he conceals his motives, not just appearance.

But a play is where you might expect to find disguise. That's what actors are good at. It's what they do best. So when the playwright notifies the audience of a false identity we always take notice. It's a special event when the imposter is unmasked, the spy discovered, the intentions of the secret enemy or secret lover are exposed.

Most famous example of all, perhaps is Proust's "Madeleine:" dipped in lime blossom tea, tasted in a moment of sad repose, the taste of that cookie and that tea slowly, almost reluctantly, opens the door of memory to Marcel's childhood, and then to volume after volume of reminiscences. The whole town of Combray wakes up, centered around his mother, his father, friends and relatives, above all Schwann, whose tragic love affair with Odette provides the source for most of the developments in the first book of *Remembrances of Things Past*.

We can't limit examples to literature, or to what has been described in print. The need to

recognize and identify reaches all levels of our life, from primitive cells that form our bodies up to national, familiar, racial, tribal, political and even aesthetic characteristics.

Why should Socrates ascribe learning to a kind of recognition in philosophy, to where truth and not just motive is at stake? Because, I think, Meno has found a serious objection to Socrates's whole endeavor, one that threatens philosophy at its core. It is what Socrates calls a "trick argument," an "eristikos logos,"--a debating ploy, if you will--but one that must be confronted and refuted.

Otherwise no philosophy is possible.

Here is the argument: if you don't know the truth, how can you ever discover it? For you must know it already if you are to recognize it when you meet it, even the very first time. Otherwise you are dependent on others to give you the criterion for truth, and rely on their authority, for which there is no absolute assurance.

One has to take this challenge seriously. The very possibility of philosophical inquiry hinges on our ability to defeat it.

### *Meno*

Meno holds this weapon in reserve until Socrates backs him into a corner. His first address to Socrates is bold and confident: "Are you able to tell me, O Socrates, whether virtue can be taught..." This sounds like little more than an attempt to make fun of Socrates: "Do you have in you what it takes to beat me in debate...", or, maybe a bit less aggressively: "Please, Socrates, give me an argument that will defeat others and gain admiration." For that is the extent of Meno's interest: winning. He couldn't care less about the truth.

He is not alone. Athens is at a crossroads.

Is Meno serious? Cynical, to be sure. He admires Gorgias and the Sophists, who have captured the attention of the youth of Athens, with their boast of superiority in speech, their ability to answer any question and persuade multitudes. The examples that remain of their orations are smooth and pleasant to listen to, full of half-rhymes and rhetorical flair: flashy and showy. Just the kind of speech that would attract an audience lacking principles. Rhetoric is king, and oratory a show. Meno is perhaps a typical admirer, and wants to go into business on his own. He's committed to winning debate by any means. In such circumstances, it is not hard to see how a true cynic like Meno assumes that the only judgment worth heeding is popular acclaim. There is no goal but verbal conquest, no authority but opinion.

How did such a market place of ideas arise in Athens at that time? Not only is it a symptom of Athen's decline; it signals the end of the greatest era of Athenian hegemony. She has sunk low since she and Sparta together defeated the Persians fifty years ago.

The subsequent split from Sparta and the protracted feud that followed sapped Athens's strength and resources. The plague devastated its population, the Sicilian expedition killed off the flower of her army. The crushing blow: almost all Athenian ships--the fleet that had been her strength--were destroyed by the Spartans under command of Lysander, cutting off Athens's source of grain and tribute.

Fortunately, despite defeat, the puppet government installed by Sparta was soon replaced by a democracy again. But democracy has its dangers: in a free market place of ideas, who is to say which are worthwhile and which merely the flavor of the moment? Perhaps, the most encouraging result of Athens's loss of political power in the region, one might say, is that it prepared the way for triumphs in philosophy, much more lasting and significant in the eyes of the world than her earlier military conquests. We've inherited her ideas, not her colonies.

Together, these defeats and catastrophes forced her to an ultimate surrender only two years before this conversation is supposed to have taken place between Socrates and Meno. Plato had turned thirty at the time of this dialog, and Aristotle was to be born thirty years hence. So, despite Athens's losses on the battlefield and ocean, her most lasting effect on the world was just beginning.

Not without cost: Socrates will be condemned to die in three years by a nervous jury of Athenians, egged on by accusers like Anytus, whose threat to Socrates in this dialog prefigures the vendetta that will accuse him of impiety and immorality. It is some compensation that Plato survives to preserve his memory and ideas, and Aristotle to develop them further and challenge those that need challenging. Without them the loss would be great. As he states in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates is chary of the written word. He never wrote down anything himself. So maybe he had to die to live on in print at the hands of his friends and disciples.

Judging by the testimony of the dialogs, Athens now becomes the world's free theater of ideas, with the drawbacks and advantages of that freedom. Its marketplace is the marketplace of words, where sophist, philosopher and statesman compete for attention and favor. And so Meno's address to Socrates with which this dialog begins--"Can you tell me, Socrates (the Greek could be rendered even more forcefully--"do you have proof..."), whether or not virtue can be taught...?"--may well have the air of hostility, or at least of challenge and bravado. It soon becomes clear that Meno is at best merely looking for ammunition, for arguments that will help him win the verbal contest with others. When Socrates punctures his balloon--gets him to admit that he himself has "spoken about virtue hundreds of times, held forth often on the subject in front of large audiences...[but] now I can't even say what it is"--Meno hauls out the crucial, if cliched, argument--the "eristikos logos"--that prompts Socrates to invoke Pindar and engage the slave boy as witness. Yet, even in the face of this evidence, Meno disclaims any interest in the essence of virtue: what he needs is some lines he can steal from Socrates, lines that will help him in debate, not in the search for knowledge. Winning is all that matters to him (and to much of his audience). It's all show. A contest. Whoever gains the audience's favor may get some disciples as well--money for his lectures, even fame--join the ranks of Gorgias and

Protagoras, travel Greece, Italy, Asia minor, selling rhetoric.

If you doubt the ugly mood at Athens at this time, consider Aristophanes's play, "The Clouds," produced during the Peloponnesian War twenty years prior to the time of the Meno dialog. The litigious propensities of the populace in general become the butt of rather vicious parody: an old man enrolls his son in what Aristophanes takes to be a school of sophistry led by Socrates, thereby hoping to escape his creditors in the law courts. But, the joke is, that as soon as he argues his father out of debt, the son decides he is also justified in beating him up.

Not so hard to see how, in such a climate, Socrates could be indicted for "impiety," and, in fact, in the defense recorded at his trial, he himself mentions the play as one of his silent accusers.

### The "trick argument"

We have to take Meno's trick argument seriously, and weigh Socrates's response. If Meno is right, then knowledge is futile. It doesn't exist unless we can recognize it, and we can't recognize it without prior knowledge. A dilemma!

On the face of it, Socrates does defeat Meno's objection, by introducing the assumption that we are born with all knowledge implicit in us. We have merely forgotten what we knew and need reminding. But, consider the cost of this assumption: nothing ever new; never an advance in knowledge, just rediscovery of what we learned in a previous life. And how did we learn that?

No, we have to think twice before we embrace the theory of recollection in its entirety, even if we can reconcile ourselves to the possibility of a conscious life before we were born, and the loss of that memory at birth. A permanent, changeless universe is the result, though it does remove the objection on which Meno's argument depends, since the truth already resides in us forever, only hidden. All we need to do is bring it to consciousness. On any given topic we both know and don't know the truth. What will remind us? An image, a word, a shift in point of view? There lies the skill of the teacher.

For we must remember that a teacher cannot just tell us the answer. If we merely repeat a sentence without fully understanding it, it isn't really our own sentence. Even if correct, it's what Socrates calls "true opinion." To become knowledge, it must be "tethered," as he says. We must be able to "give an account," explain its connection with other things we are confident of, use logic to explain how this opinion participates in our common understanding and derives its conclusions from proper inference and argument deduced from shared principles.

So, despite Socrates's repeated attempts to split Meno's opening question into two--to consider the definition of virtue before determining how and whether it can be taught--we end up with the latter question as the central one: can anything be taught? Now, there's a

question in which we have a special interest. Virtue may require special means, since it must include a pragmatic element, but the question of what teaching in general may be, that demands our full attention. How is any learning possible?

Go to the experts, is the obvious answer. Ask them for the truth and memorize their answers. Yes, but, of course, we have to be sure their wisdom is wisdom, and *reputation* alone for wisdom is not enough.

That is, if a passive grasp of what you are told is all you want, then, yes: ask those who say they know the truth. You don't even need a teacher. Information is available to everyone--on the Internet, in books. Learn the current vocabulary, and you can fool a lot of people about what you know. If, however, you want to *own* that bit of information, if you want to be able to say *why* it earns your conviction and respect, then you need more than the presumption of authority. You must be able to "give an account" of the reasons why it persuades you beyond doubt. At that point, you become your own authority.

There is a price to pay for such knowledge, but it is the only kind truly worthy of its name. The price is inefficiency. How much simpler and quicker to take the assurance of one who broadcasts his superiority, who has a reputation, one that has cost years of effort and study to acquire and maintain. Much easier to trust the reputation, join the disciples of Gorgias, whose persuasive powers, at least, have gained him a flock of acolytes. A few rhetorical tricks can persuade the casual listener. But, if we want to be secure in our knowledge, we have to trace every major argument to its roots ourselves, or, even better, in the company of honest like-minded seekers after the truth.

### "Dead Books"

To repeat Meno's question, but with honest intent: how do we look for new knowledge?

Galileo imagines three seekers after truth: one a disciple of Aristotle called Simplicio; one a proponent of some new ideas about Nature--Salviati; the third a wise and critical thinker named Sagredo. The last has advice we might all take to heart: "Pray let us enjoy the advantages and privileges which come from conversation between friends, especially upon subjects freely chosen and not forced upon us, a matter vastly different from dealing with dead books which give rise to many doubts but resolve none."

Is he talking about us?

He could be, perhaps. St. John's is a strange school, and misunderstood more often than not. We take a devious route. If you want to find out something, one might expect to consult those who claim they know the truth. That's not us. You'll have a hard time finding an expert here. You won't find another school so full of amateurs. But "amateurs" ought to mean "lovers of wisdom"--*philosophers*, that is, true students.

That's why our school is so often misrepresented: Because our name and our reputation

paint us the opposite of what we are. We're not a religious institution dedicated to promulgation of the Gospel, and we have no intention of limiting wisdom to the teachings of "the Great Books." We read those books because they are worthy partners or even opponents. There's no book we don't argue with and about. It's a tough fight debating with Aristotle or Descartes, but what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

Most people don't know who we are. Our name and our reputation deceive many. "St. John's," seems to be a declaration of allegiance to the fourth gospel of the New Testament, does it not? As for our other best known description as "the great books school," that inevitably makes many people--like Sagredo--think that we base our teaching on outdated manuscripts, that the *Iliad*, *Almagest* and *Principia* are our textbooks, and Plato, Aristotle and Newton our teachers. This all depends on what you mean by "textbooks" and "teachers."

Teachers and their texts are usually regarded as sources of information, of vocabulary and method, rather than a voice asking us to think for ourselves. But Plato only teaches us if we argue with him, and with others who defend him. And Aristotle doesn't seem quite so old fashioned once you sort the wheat from the chaff; if you take care to distinguish his mistakes from his insights, you might well learn how to do that for yourself when the latest best seller or political debate captures your attention for a moment.

As to our religious connection, all of you know that we try to read and talk about the Bible with no more and no less reverence than we read and discuss any other book. Faith imbues that book with special meaning for some, so we have to learn how to define and communicate across the bounds of faith. That's another version of how seriously to judge a claim to authority.

In retrospect Sagredo's critique turns into a question: "What kind of reading and teaching promotes learning?" And if the authors of the books we read are *not* authorities, how can they teach us anything? Whose authority *can* we trust?

### Recognition--the backbone

At Homecoming and on parents' weekend it is not unusual to run into former students and friends without being sure who they are. Such encounters prompt an unusual state of mind: one of simultaneous knowledge and ignorance, of familiarity and strangeness. I remember the face, and yet the hair has grown gray or disappeared or changed so radically in style that it is hard to see how anything remains to recognize. The face may well have darkened or broadened, acquired new lines and furrows, added or subtracted a beard, glasses, jewelry. How can we possibly identify an acquaintance after so long an absence and so many changes in shape and color?

There may be a gene for such recognition, but I don't have it. My wife does. Despite the forgetfulness of time, she identifies a chum from high school or even elementary school that she hasn't seen since childhood. I'm usually left with no more than a nagging

impression of familiarity without any apparent reason for it, no single feature prompts a name or the memory of an action or of some feature that will help me identify the stranger.

Recognition plays a part in music as well, especially where the tune does not rely on text. And our ability to recall a tune when transposed to a different key, or even when decorated with trills and other ornaments proves the existence of a profound access to the essence of melody. How else can we explain the delight we take with theme and variation, with jazz and improvisation of all kinds? (Play examples, e.g. First variation of Beethoven's riff on "God Save the King"). Our ability to identify melodic similarities reaches deep, and can form the basis of theoretical analysis. (Consider 3 tunes--one from Borodin quartet, Rusalka's aria; "Somewhere Over the Rainbow"). A descending scale forms the backbone of each of these, and despite their obvious differences, they also cannot conceal the kinship this skeleton provides.

What connects and what distinguishes different melodies is the basis of enormous insights into musical theory. Bach discovered that you can stretch out a melody or compress it, even turn it upside down: we still recognize it. The one transformation that escapes us is reverse order of tones. Play a tune backwards and few if any of us will recall its original. (Example, maybe: first phrase backwards of "God save the king..." i.e., "My country, 'tis of thee...") Unlike faces, music belongs to time and time belongs to music. The Beatles and Led Zeppelin experimented with such retrograde melodies in the Eighties, and generated controversy as a result of what came to be called "backmasking." What were they hiding? Did their songs contain a covert message? Were they spies? Delivering coded reports? They meant all in fun, but some people saw a potential threat in their games. For us this proves only, that music advances forward in time, never the reverse.

So symmetry plays little part in a melody as it does in a face, since we don't hear it as such. Spoken or sung, words fall in between these extremes: time and tone inhere in poetry; less so or not at all in prose. And forced verbal symmetry only becomes a riddle, a palindrome. Contrast this with melody: Whatever identifies it belongs to time--not just to succession in time, as does speech--but to measured time, to rhythm. Faces, on the other hand, belong to spaces, though they do need orientation to be recognized. Not temporally: What turns out to be essential to our perception of a face is uprightness: vertical orientation. A face upside down somehow loses its identity, much as does a melody played backwards. Where Melodies display their profiles bit by bit and only in time; faces sound all their notes and tones in space, and all at once.

What about thought embodied in words? Like melodies in time or faces in space, words may actually obscure the truth if their orientation doesn't suit us. Rhetorical manipulations can distort the message intentionally or unintentionally. Does the form of myth that Socrates favors or his mode of questioning distort or amplify the truth? I suspect that his images make clearer his ideas--for example, maybe we do often sit in some kind of cave of our own heritage and custom until someone helps us rise, turn and escape. Such a myth may reveal the truth of our condition better than a more traditional depiction in terms

of politics and education. Or perhaps the dialectical method is what brings us face to face with the truth most immediately by circumventing our prejudices. It is worthwhile hunting down the forms of discourse that clarify meaning and distinguish them from others that may distort or obscure the text.

The powers of recognition affect our lives in all kinds of crucial ways. Even our cells--the very elements of our bodies--need to identify one another. And sometimes such kinship is misleading, as when a cancer cell pretends benign kinship rather than danger and hostility to the body it inhabits. The cells we see growing out of control: they are our own cells, aren't they? Could they possibly be harmful? In a Darwinian world, it is important to distinguish true friends from enemies as soon as possible.

Back to the *Meno*.

### The *Meno*--how is learning possible?

Is the struggle to identify aging faces similar to what goes on when try to learn something? In the dialog in which Meno is his principal interlocutor, Socrates says 'yes:' it is just a matter of recollecting what we have forgotten, since, before we were born we met all knowledge, and merely need to recall it.

Now, it is true that the effect of arriving at the truth may resemble the pleasure we feel at meeting an old friend whom we may have forgotten in his or her absence. But, if the *only* way we discover anything is by recalling it, then we never learn anything new. We know everything knowable already; it just slips our minds until someone or something reminds us. Mired in the past, we never advance, always playing "catch-up."

Such seems to be the consequence of embracing Socrates's suggestion that learning is just recollection. Moreover, this theory doesn't really explain how, even in a previous state, our soul ever found out anything. Were we told the truth, and just accepted this passively? What kind of experience unavailable to us in this life on Earth discovers the truth to us before we are born? And why is it no longer open to us? And if not confronted during our lifetime, how can we ever understand it outside our mortal existence.

The stultifying consequences of relying on a literal reading of Socrates's tale of recollection must have given him at least some doubts. It is Meno's attack on learning in general that prompts Socrates to respond in this way. For Meno has delivered a nasty blow to education: how, indeed, can we learn anything worth knowing if we don't already know it well enough to recognize its truth? Does truth prevail upon us with reliable signs of its validity? And why are they reliable? No, one might well follow Meno blindly into the abyss that ascribes *all* knowledge to authority, to the force of rhetoric or politics, to belief, not knowledge. Knowledge, according people like him, is just information. We "learn" by dictation. Someone in authority tells the "truth," and we adopt it until another contradicts with greater force, that is, one might be tempted to say: with *greater* truth.

But even if Socrates's myths and demonstrations are his means of combatting defeatist formulas like the one Meno dredges up at this point, how are we to take them? If literal, the myth of recollection leaves us in a static world of fixed and finite knowledge: we never discover anything new, just recover what we already knew but forgot. Is there a less restrictive way of understanding "recollection?" Some way that encourages us to explore and find out for ourselves?

One thing we must agree on: any assertion must acquire a verbal form for us to be capable of weighing and examining its truth.

In the *Theatetus*, Socrates speaks of himself as a "midwife," someone who merely assists at a birth, someone who helps decide whether the birth of an idea that produces real offspring or just a "wind egg." Here arises the possibility of a real advance in knowledge, for whatever idea this verbal "child" represents inherits nothing from the "midwife," but solely from the "parent," the one who first puts the idea into words. So, *Theatetus* does not have to rely on previous existence or experience to articulate the truth. His definition of knowledge, for example, may be evaluated independent of its "parentage," as soon as it is born into verbal form.

Here is one way out of the dilemma presented by the theory of recollection: learning is not just recognition of something already known, but can be the birth of something new in the soul. Thus also the slave boy in the *Meno* dialog: once he has been shown a line upon which to build the double square, he must examine it and test it to make it knowledge and not just true opinion--"tether it" so that it won't run away, as Socrates says. You don't really know anything unless you can account for it with a logical argument that ties it down and makes it yours.

How important is it that the slave boy received help to discover the proper line? It doesn't detract from Socrates's refusal to claim ownership of this line as long as the boy accepts the diagonal as a mere *candidate* for what is sought, one that ignores any influence of the teacher, of Socrates. The line is like a hypothesis--it gains acceptance with testing. The more we wrestle with a hypothesis, the more it persuades us.

There is another advantage to be gained from this "maieutic theory" expounded in the *Theatetus*: one discovery can prompt others. Thus, the diagonal that solves the problem posed by Socrates in the *Meno* has properties interesting to explore. Were the slave boy encouraged to examine this line in relation to the sides of the square he might possibly notice that they are not commensurable: no line, however small, can measure both side and diagonal precisely. Here could begin a whole new science, one which makes clear the essential mathematical difference between arithmetic and geometry. Surely it is no accident that we discover *Theatetus* at the start of his dialog eagerly exploring the nature of incommensurability as expressed by surds: what we would call square roots and their relations: the incommensurables.

The recollection myth (I think at this point I can call it a myth) recurs in the *Phaedo*. But there it is the face of death, not ignorance that inspires the tale. It is the day assigned to

Socrates's execution, and Socrates realizes that he must find a way to comfort the friends and disciples he will leave behind when he swallows the poison. So he must convince them that he will survive death: the soul lives not only before birth, as the theory of recollection requires, but after death as well. Immortality!

But forgetfulness as well. The same dilemma confronts us as in the *Meno*. Our mortal life never teaches us anything, says that dialog, at best recalling what we learned before we were born. The world of ideas fixes us forever the same, nothing new ever greets us.

One more dialog comes to mind, when we search for the answer to the question of how learning is possible: the *Phaedrus*. An indirect answer, perhaps, but a compelling one: "Beauty alone has this privilege," says Socrates, "to be most manifest to sense and most lovely of them all" (i.e. of the forms of the virtues, like temperance, justice and wisdom-- c.f. 250d). That is, we fall in love because we see the form itself of beauty, and by this passion can recognize the fact that we have come face to face with an ideal, with a platonic "eidos," or form, something usually obscured by our bodies, by failures to describe it in language, by the conflict of needs and desires, by the distractions and exigencies of everyday life.

Now, Socrates maintains that sight is the clearest sense, and the faculty that affords us the best glimpse of beauty. But I wonder what music has to contribute to the longing for virtue, knowledge and wisdom. What appeals to the eye and what appeals to the ear should have something in common, if we call both the sight and the sound "beautiful," even if that common thread of beauty eludes words. Socrates does not mention it, so focused is he on dialectic and discourse, but experience can sometimes be better shared without relying on textual explication. Try to tell someone who has never been in the water how it feels to dive or to swim. No, you have to get your feet wet to know what swimming is.

Many of us think of music as song. The latest hit is almost always identified with its text. But the marriage of words and melody is always uneasy. It is tempting to consider the music as derivative: first came lyrics, then we "set them to music," much as we might add illustrations to a story. Hardly ever does the music come first.

If we go back a few hundred years, however, we find a different story. The seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of our own millennium brought about a revolution. Instrumental music freed itself from text, made it clear that words could get in the way. In prior centuries, a band might decorate a dance or a dinner, but I doubt anyone thought of celebrating the music for its own sake, other than to provide a pleasant background. We've come a long way since then. A symphony or a sonata doesn't sound incomplete because lacking text. In fact, words would interfere and distract from the purely musical experience. Think how silly it would be to add words to a Beethoven symphony, e.g. "Beethoven's Fifth...Gives you a lift." An advertising jingle at best!

Opera? Well, yes. It evolved during the same time that instrumental music branched out on its own. But there's always a shaky marriage between text and music, and in practice

almost inevitably we regard the words as primary, the music as at best commentary and illustration. We do associate musical gestures with energy and passion, but with little precision. Is an aria delivered with love or anger? To find out for sure, we consult the plot, character and lyrics rather than the melody or rhythm.

The music can, of course, *compliment* the passions called for by the drama, and raise the level of enjoyment far above cliché or awkwardness in the words sung. In which case we might well choose to ignore the textual details, retaining only its general sentiment. But to omit all reference to the character's role and the immediate circumstances of plot would defeat the purpose of the opera. As for listening to music without words, much of the richness of that experience depends on transformation and recognition: on our extraordinary ability to detect similarities in a melody even when transposed to a different key or mode, decorated with trills and other musical flourishes, stretched out or compressed in time, altered rhythmically: in short, to recognize a melodic profile.

So song writing or musical drama must always present a struggle between two very different arts: a fruitful struggle, perhaps, but always a rivalry. Whatever can be expressed in words will almost inevitably capture our attention first, since that can prompt debate in words. But something immediately displays its absence if we eliminate the music and read a libretto like a drama. Can the same thing be said were we to hear an opera without words, or even sung in a language we don't understand? As is true of most operas we're likely to hear.

An article in the July issue of "New Scientist" (?) talks about new technology to help identify nuances in facial and vocal expression that convey subtle but significant information about emotions, nuances that we are aware of perhaps only half the time but are reliable indicators. Companies have already invested in instruments--e.g. special glasses--to amplify and interpret such cues in order to increase sales. Scary!

Not quite so frightening, perhaps, if we recall (from the tale of Odysseus's dog, Argus) that animals are quite adept at simple recognition of that kind: of mood and attitude as well as physical identity. Peculiar to mankind is a much deeper and more subtle kind of recognition. We at least try to glimpse the face of truth and the melody of justice! (Or the face of justice and the melody of understanding.)

Our powers of recognition extend all the way from cell to sensation to thought. Socrates would be suspicious of the claim to musical recognition, if for no other reason than the difficulty we have talking about pure music without relying on cumbersome technical jargon.

The problem is more acute with the printed word than with sheet music, for words can signify silently, music can not. It is not necessary to translate a sentence into speech--spoken speech, that is--for it to mean something, whereas silent music is no music at all. Except in the case of poetry, it is not the *experience* of hearing speech that is important, whereas it is precisely perception of the pitch, timbre, dynamics and rhythmic profile that makes music what it is. Thus, our pleasure in listening to a concert may be complete

simply in listening to it, but there is always something missing when we read a dialog. Reading it aloud wouldn't help much. We can't share thoughts in the same way as we share music. Music comes alive with performance. A dialog must be generated anew from principles and ideas, melted in the cauldron of conversation before it comes to life again.

None of this denigrates the power of music, but it does make a spoken dialog a more precarious mode of communication, in which the reader or auditor must participate as an *act-er* not as an *act-or*. That is, one can only play a genuine part in a Platonic dialog by confronting its ideas directly, seriously, honestly, refuting them where possible; adopting them where necessary, and always with another person to respond, argue and speculate on his or her own behalf. Perception of a dialog alone is not enough. One must join in, and not just pretend to. Everyone's knowledge and understanding are at stake.

### Immortality

So, as far as the *Meno* is concerned (or any other Platonic dialog, for that matter) we have to interpret, not swallow whole. It's not gospel. Indeed, when I'm listening to Plato, the gospel itself isn't "gospel," for that requires a faculty of judgment none of us are born with, and hence has to be granted us by divine dispensation. As Kierkegaard says, when Plato speaks no special monitor provides the condition necessary to understand what is said. We can discover his meaning for ourselves, and without Plato's help. My own attempt to wrestle with the dialog is for my benefit, no one else's. I harvest what I can from that struggle, taking care not to fall too easily under the spell of Socrates (who does indeed perhaps resemble the torpedo fish to which Meno compares him--I have to be careful not to be numbed by his wonderful myths and images). Reading the gospel as "gospel," however, requires privileged access.

Many of the dialogs, including the *Meno*, refer to a kind of immortality, insofar as they focus on the soul and its being and existence and fate. Our bodies grow, age and perish; the elements of memory, passion and reason that we want to identify with soul evolve in a different way, for, although some faculties may weaken with age, knowledge accumulates, and to some extent makes up for losses in speed and power. So, one is tempted to follow Socrates's lead in ascribing a life to the soul distinct from the body.

But what kind of life? Do we survive as *ourselves* after death? With all the personality and memories we call our own exclusively? Could we have existed preformed and preinformed even before we were born, as Socrates claims in the *Meno*, *Republic* and other dialogs? And, if we are not to take either of both of these hypotheses literally, how are we to interpret them?

We have already mentioned the disadvantages that accompany an assumption of all knowledge preexisting in us before birth: the rigidity involved in permanence, the lack of possibility of growth, of true discovery and learning. If, with Aristotle, you assume the existence of an omniscient mind of some kind, then we are perpetually groping towards something that always exists, however elusively, out of our reach. The truth does not

grow; it is we who grow towards it (if we are lucky and persistent).

Plato's intellectual cosmos seems to take a similar stance: "the soul has learned all things." But, to corroborate this myth, Socrates engages Meno's slave in a demonstration that leads further than the myth itself. For it looks as if the boy really learns something, something we don't have to assume he already knew but forgot, despite Socrates's insistence. The one part of the demonstration we must hold on to is the birth of the new geometric notion in his head, and, consequently, the curiosity and insight that birth must invoke. It is even possible, that, were he not a slave, the boy might have pursued some of the thoughts that inevitably spiral out from this discovery of the square's diagonal, in the way that Theatetus must have done under the tutelage of Theodorus: new thoughts about incommensurability and number and geometry. And so knowledge can grow and advance without the memory inherited from a prior existence, which could well turn out to be more an impediment than a help.

Of course, such new knowledge must be evaluated and tested. That is how it crystallizes into true knowledge. To begin with, it threatens to run away, like the statues of Daedulus (which were so lifelike, they could escape without warning.) It must be "tethered," as Socrates explains in the latter part of the dialog, it must be supported by argument, by a "logos," an account that answers potential objections or misunderstandings, that links one bit of knowledge to another to build a coherent whole. Just presenting the argument as a whole doesn't work. Each individual must make the connections himself or herself for it to advance from opinion to knowledge.

So, the Socratic myth that best introduces the possibility of a true advance in knowledge is rather the one that makes the teacher a "midwife" rather than a lecturer. Or maybe I could suggest another myth to supplement this one: a gymnast. Socrates is your opponent, a worthy opponent. Don't let him distract you or flatter you with his charming tales and images. You must wrestle with him and his ideas if you want to discover your own. No. He's not present? Then, let someone else take his part.

Gymnastics and music: some of you may recall how these two disciplines played a major role in the education of the young in Socrates's republic. There they were intended to balance the soul at an early stage of learning, before our full skill in verbalization has developed. But even after we have developed the ability to speak and argue, gymnastics and music continue to support the advance of understanding, each in its own way. Gymnastics becomes more a struggle with words and ideas than with bodies, transforming itself into dialectic. Music evolves into the participation in what I have to call the spiritual legacy of mankind, in an experience that transcends the separateness of individuals to share the best of imagination, thought and perception we all inherit from a universal past: universal because it has no specific interest in physical desire and necessity. The musical world cannot be measured nor limited by scientific tools, but only enjoyed by the human being as a whole. To relish the full experience, you have to listen and think at the same time.

But for us to take part in this artistic resource in music--as in the legacy of argument and

discussion--we need notation, we need to capture and preserve the experience in some symbolic form that can inspire performance. For music, this requires a notation; for philosophy we need the printed word.

Socrates himself doubts the efficacy of print. Too dumb and inflexible. Lysias's speech, for example (in the *Phaedrus*) gets torn to shreds by the subsequent dialog. But it also spawns competition on the part of Socrates to elevate the discussion with image and argument: e.g., by introducing the charioteer, Thoth, the Egyptian god of hieroglyphics, and Typhon, the windy abductor, who may still haunt the grove where he and Phaedrus find shade and conversation. In the end we have to question Socrates's own concern for privacy. After all, he refused to write anything down, and, as he seems to assert at the conclusion of the *Phaedrus*, warned others against the soullessness of print. Without a speaker, speech becomes a fossil. Don't freeze your speech. It will be misread and misunderstood and won't be able to defend itself. It always needs an advocate.

So, had Plato not dared to disobey his mentor, we would all be at a loss, not only for the opinions expressed in the dialogs, but for the chance to challenge and modify and develop them, make them our own, take a step forward in philosophy, progress beyond where we were. The danger of misstep and mistake is always there, yes, but that's what friends (and even enemies!) are for: to help us when we stumble.

There's another reason we have to be grateful for print and paper. Over the centuries we have accumulated a great legacy of literary, philosophical and musical works. We can participate in our inheritance whenever we choose--actively in the case of philosophy; passively for most of us in the case of music. Philosophy is in its nature never complete, always searching. Music, on the other hand asks for performance, yes, but not for substantial changes. It is enough just to become a part of that world created by gifted composers in the past, and we do so whenever we listen attentively. We have no interest in changing or developing an argument in music, as we do in discussing prose. Sharing in the musical experience is our aim, not improving it. Participating in our artistic inheritance is a form of immortality, one accessible to all of us.

## Conclusion

There are several different ways in which we can learn, then. We can adopt the vocabulary of another person, naming things and ideas with sounds and groups of letters that have been accepted as common reference to those things and ideas. That is the level of simple information. If we don't know the name of an animal we saw, we can describe it until our description recalls a picture to our interlocutor, and prompts a name: "large, heavy, gray, with a nose hanging down in front like a hose..." "Oh, you mean an elephant"

For such recognition all you need is someone who speaks the same language. But with a concept like "justice," you need an especially thoughtful correspondent, one who can develop the idea both in opposition and in agreement. That's part of the "tethering"

process. It's clear that the latter approach is the one that might expand the bounds of knowledge, building but not dependent on a common vocabulary through which we can conduct the dialog. So, yes, we need both types of learning and teaching, and the right balance between the two kinds of knowledge isn't always easy. If I am drawn more the latter, that is because it alone includes the possibility of advance in our human desire to grow, to find new planets to visit and new ideas to explore. The other kind--information--becomes easier to find every day. But it's borrowed knowledge at best: a "statue of Daedulus, if you will, that we can admire at a distance. To dwell with it long enough for it to become part of ourselves, to become "second nature," so that we can explain and demonstrate well enough to engage and convince others: that requires more effort than we may be willing to give it. But if we don't tie them down well, these "statues" will run away. We'll be left with mere information, with hearsay, not knowledge. The serious pursuit of music and gymnastics--of their mature form in art and dialogue--can achieve the balance of thought and experience which was what Socrates sought to create in both child and adult.

The prescription of both gymnastics and music for education does not cease when we move into adulthood and acquire skill at putting our thoughts into words. I may disagree with Socrates here to some extent, because he seems to be all too quick to discard what our eyes and ears can contribute to the well-being of us as sensitive as well as rational creatures, capable of perception as well as thought. Dialectic can embody elements of the both disciplines in a mature form: let gymnastics graduate into the art of wrestling with words rather than bodies; let music become the search for harmony in general, for the reconciliation of differences. But gymnastics should continue to exercise our bodies in its original form as well, and music to delight and lead our sentient selves into the participation in the beauty and truth which our most talented and ingenious predecessors have made accessible to all of us whenever we want. Human wisdom, the creations of the human mind and spirit, belongs to all of us; we take nourishment from it when we will.\*\*

\* The title page was added by the catalog librarian at the Greenfield Library. The title of the lecture was taken from the St. John's College 2012/2013 lecture schedule.

\*\* The last line was transcribed from the recording of this lecture.