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Platonic Recollection and Mental Pregnancy

GLENN RAWSON*

I. AN INVITATION TO REINTERPRET PLATONIC RECOLLECTION

ONE UNDERAPPRECIATED PUZZLE about Platonic recollection is why this notorious legacy to epistemology and theory of education, this pioneering notion of innate ideas, should so often be ignored by its author. In the *Phaedo*, Cebes claims that Socrates often spoke of “the account...that our learning is really nothing but recollection” (72e), as though it were persistent doctrine. But outside the *Phaedo* this notion is rarely discussed, and never presented with much seriousness. The common view¹ that Plato maintains this momentous doctrine throughout his middle period, but often omits it because it is often not directly relevant, cannot be fully convincing. Plato finds ways to remind us constantly of his favorite teachings,² and recollection would be particularly relevant at important moments in *Symposium* and *Republic*, which offer different models of innate ideas instead: in place of the *non-dispositional* model of recollection, which implies the innate possession of the content of the knowledge to be acquired, these dialogues offer *dispositional* models such as mental pregnancy, in which the actual content of knowledge is not

¹ See, e.g. (in chronological order), Norman Gulley, “Plato’s Theory of Recollection,” *Classical Quarterly* (1954): 194–213, at 200, 209; R. Hackforth, *Plato’s Phaedo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 77; F. M. Cornford, *Plato’s Theory of Knowledge* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), 5, 28; R. S. Bluck *Plato’s Meno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 50–59; W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy [History]*, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962–81), 4: 389, 392; R. E. Allen, *The Dialogues of Plato*, 4 vols. (New Haven: Yale, 1984–97), 2: 89–90; Terence Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 315; Thomas Williams “Two Aspects of Platonic Recollection,” *Apeiron* 35 (2002): 131–52, at 151.

² E.g., knowledge surpasses true belief by virtue of the ability to give an account (*Meno* 97c ff., *Symp.* 202a, *Phd.* 73a, 76b, 78cd, *Resp.* 534b–c, *Phdr.* 247d–48b, *Ti.* 27d–e, *Th.* 201c); the fundamental difference between being and becoming (*Symp.* 211a ff., *Phd.* 78d ff., *Resp.* 476e ff., *Phdr.* 247d–e, *Ti.* 27d–e, 37c ff.) and the corresponding distinction between perceptible and intelligible (*Symp.* 211a ff., *Phd.* 65d ff., 78d ff., *Resp.* 506c, 507b ff., 509d ff., *Phdr.* 247c, *Ti.* 27d–e); genuine learning requires acting on a desire to learn (*Grg.* 457e ff., *Euthd.* 273d ff., *Meno* 84a–d, *Symp.* 204a, *Phd.* 89d ff., *Resp.* 535c ff., *Th.* 210b–c, *Soph.* 229a ff.); gods are completely good (*Euthphr.* 6a, 15a, *Symp.* 202c–d, *Phd.* 62d–63c, *Resp.* 377e ff., *Phdr.* 242d–e, 246d–e, *Ti.* 29a, 30a–b).

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innately present but the product of a specialized innate potentiality being actualized through specific kinds of experience and mental activity.³

The *Phaedo* stands alone in its apparent insistence upon that naive and extravagant non-dispositional version of innate ideas. In the *Meno*, Socrates introduces recollection at secondhand from vague and dubious sources (81a–b), then discounts as questionable all but its encouraging practical implications (86b–c). In the *Phaedrus*, recollection is the centerpiece of a fantastic rhetorical display that begins with teasing disclaimers (242b–44a) and is later straightforwardly disowned as playful and potentially misleading (262d, 265b). Meantime, the *Symposium* and *Republic* fail even to mention such recollection, and in fact seem studiously to avoid including it where they should if it were Platonic doctrine—as when Socrates argues against the notion that education puts knowledge into empty minds (*Resp.* 518b ff.), or when Diotima argues that study replaces lost knowledge with memories that only “seem to be the same” (*Symp.* 207d ff.). Nor does recollection figure in Plato’s famous tales of posthumous judgment and reincarnation, even in the *Phaedo*.⁴ The epistemological *Seventh Letter* does not include recollection either, though it was written either by Plato or by a near contemporary who knew his life and teachings well. If the *Phaedo* alone in the Platonic corpus had not survived his Academy, we could not think that Plato had a *doctrine* of recollection at all. We would still have plenty of material for debate about Forms, immortality and reincarnation. But we would naturally consider recollection just one of Plato’s various provisional models for exploring how philosophical inquiry requires active employment of native mental resources—as in the correspondingly significant yet playful models of mental pregnancy, spiritual nourishment, and intellectual vision, which no one calls Platonic doctrine.⁵ Each of these early, tentative models of innate resources appears repeatedly in middle-period dialogues, but each is incompatible with the others in its own specific details. To the extent that learning is specifically like remembering what was already known, it is not like a developing pregnancy or redirecting a distracted eye of the mind. So perhaps even in

³ I use the vague traditional term ‘innate ideas’ because that term has been used to refer to allegedly innate actual content of knowledge, beliefs and concepts, as well as to allegedly innate dispositions or specialized potentialities for producing such actual content. This vague term therefore applies well to Plato’s broad range of models for exploring innate cognitive resources. For explicit discussion of dispositional versus non-dispositional “innatism” or “nativism” with some attention to Plato, see Stephen Stich, “Introduction: The Idea of Innateness,” in *Innate Ideas*, ed. Stephen Stich (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975), 1–22; Dominic Scott, *Recollection and Experience: Plato’s Theory of Learning and its Successors [Recollection]* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 91–95; Fiona Cowie, *What’s Within? Nativism Reconsidered [What’s Within]* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), ch. 1. For a comprehensive introduction to the more specialized categories of recent nativist theory and research, see Peter Carruthers, Stephen Laurence, and Stephen Stich, ed., *The Innate Mind: Structure and Contents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁴ Posthumous judgment of souls is mentioned together with recollection in the playful Palinode of the *Phaedrus* (249a–b), but there is no mention of recollection in the passages typically grouped as Plato’s “myths of judgment” (in *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic*).

⁵ Few raise this issue. Guthrie, *History*, 4: 390, calls mental pregnancy “metaphorical” while taking recollection as literal doctrine. C. J. Rowe, *Plato: Phaedo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 111, takes recollection literally, while his *Plato: Symposium* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1998), 251, takes Diotima’s account as metaphorical.

the *Phaedo*, Platonic recollection is a useful variation on this abiding Platonic theme, though nothing *specific* to the notion of remembering is Platonic doctrine.

This interpretation should be attractive, and not only for correcting an impression that Plato frequently neglects his own theory. It would also acquit this first great nativist in epistemology of a naively extravagant doctrine that has been dismissed by most philosophers ever since. In a discussion of the imprecise metaphors that pervade debates about innate ideas, Fiona Cowie writes:

to insist on a literal reading of the nativist's words is in many cases to violate a central imperative of interpretation—namely, that one shouldn't be too quick to ascribe stupid views to smart people. Particularly problematic in this regard is the attribution of a commitment to 'naive' or non-dispositional nativism... This view, according to which concepts or beliefs are, as it were, 'fully present' in the mind at birth, has for so long been known to be susceptible to so many and such obvious objections, that charity alone might prevent our attributing it to anyone, his or her taste in similes notwithstanding.⁶

But she and others agree that *Plato's* nativism, as expressed in Platonic recollection, is in that sense quite naive: namely that many or all true propositions are already in our minds since birth, because we already knew them in a previous form of life, and can know them again by recollecting (or in a process closely analogous to recollection).⁷ That model recommends Plato as the rare proponent of a clearly non-dispositional kind of nativism, according to which our innate cognitive resources include not just dispositions to produce the relevant knowledge but, in some unconscious form, the actual content of that knowledge.⁸ However, other Platonic models of innate ideas are incompatible on precisely this point. In Diotima's dispositional model of mental pregnancy, the content of the knowledge to be acquired is not already present in the learner's mind; rather, like a maturing embryo (*kuêma*), it requires successive stages of development from incipient innate resources that are far from complete.⁹

Plato's position in the history of epistemological nativism has thus been underestimated. Mental pregnancy is not recognized as a Platonic model of innate ideas coordinate with the model of recollection,¹⁰ and recollection is not understood by comparison with other such models in middle-period dialogues. To reveal that Plato's pioneering nativism is as a whole more tentative and subtle than what is

⁶ Cowie, *What's Within*, 6.

⁷ Cowie questions in Plato's work "the wisdom—not to say sanity—of basing one's epistemology on a doctrine of metempsychosis" (*What's Within*, 15).

⁸ The possession since birth of the actual content of knowledge is tacitly accepted as Platonic doctrine by many, and explicitly affirmed as such by, e.g., Gregory Vlastos, "Anamnesis in the *Meno*," *Dialogue* 4 (1965): 143–67, at 164; Stüch, "Introduction: the Idea of Innateness," 14; Graeme Hunter and Brad Inwood, "Plato, Leibniz, and the Furnished Soul" ["Furnished Soul"], *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 22 (1984): 423–34, at 425–28; Scott, *Recollection*, 91–92. See also Rowe, *Plato: Phaedo*, 11. Mark Gifford, "Wiser than the Laws" (unpublished, 2003) provides a helpful analysis of basic elements in the alleged doctrine.

⁹ The model of spiritual hunger and satisfaction, which I do not detail here, implies an innate capacity for recognition that is yet less substantial, consisting essentially in a kind of desire and lacking, rather than in an incipient possession.

¹⁰ The singular recent exception is Frisbee Sheffield, "Psychic Pregnancy and Platonic Epistemology" ["Psychic Pregnancy"], *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 20 (2001): 1–33.

expressed in the model of recollection alone, I begin (in section 2) with the *Phaedrus*, a dialogue often recognized as employing but not really subscribing to the notion that learning is recollection.¹¹ There we can see in a concentrated form how Plato combines recollection with other, dispositional models of innate ideas. Then I turn back to examine (in section 3) how the *Meno* had already concluded that neither knowledge nor beliefs are innate, and (in section 4) how the *Symposium* and *Republic* accordingly develop dispositional models of innateness. There I give special attention to the model of mental pregnancy as elaborated by Diotima in the *Symposium*. In light of this holistic approach to Plato's middle-period nativism, recollection even in the *Phaedo* can be understood (as in section 5) as a more provisional, heuristic model than is generally recognized. Finally (in section 6) I review some of Plato's pedagogical reasons for occasionally using the model of recollection in spite of his overall resistance to non-dispositional innateness.

2. THE PHAEDRUS AND THE VARIETY OF PLATONIC MODELS OF INNATE IDEAS

Socrates' grand second speech in the *Phaedrus* (the "Palinode") is famous for its creative use of elements from traditional mythology and love poetry to present the notion that philosophical learning is an exciting and painful erotic process of recollection. But this speech employs recollection as one of *four* influential models of innate cognitive resources, all of which also occur elsewhere in the middle dialogues. These include an innate *spiritual hunger* that is uniquely satisfied by apprehension of Platonic Forms (246e–48c; cf. *Symp.* 210d–e, *Phd.* 84a–b, *Resp.* 490b), and an innate faculty of *mental vision* whose special potential is fully actualized by apprehending Forms (249d ff.; cf. *Resp.* 518b ff., *Symp.* 212a, *Phd.* 83b). But most prominent is the detailed image of psychic feathers or wings (*ptera*) whose growth and flight represents the fulfilment of the natural human capacity to apprehend absolute beauty (251a ff.). This is an image of cognitive development no less than of emotional experience: though Socrates seems to imagine feathers on the whole soul (251b), he also writes that "the mind of the philosopher alone becomes winged" (249c). The wings stand for what is most divine in mortals (246d), and divine nature is due to beholding the Forms (249c), which *dianoia* or *nous* alone can do (247c–d). The whole image of sprouting and growing psychic plumage is in fact a variation on Plato's model of *mental pregnancy*, which figures so prominently in the *Symposium* and also appears with different details and emphases in the *Republic* and *Theaetetus*. At *Phaedrus* 251d–e Socrates even refers to the "birth pains" (*ôdinôn*) of growing these wings, associating them with the *aporia* and desire that come with partial recognition of beauty, as in the *Symposium*.¹²

¹¹ See R. Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 136–37 and Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedo*, 77; Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, *Plato: Phaedrus* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1995), xlv; Kenneth Sayre, *Plato's Literary Garden* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 77 ff.; J. E. Smith, "Plato's Myths as 'Likely Accounts' Worthy of Belief," *Apeiron* 19 (1985), 24–42, at 37–39. See also C. J. Rowe, *Plato: Phaedrus* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1986), 9–10.

¹² The psychic wings of the Palinode, again like the mental pregnancy of Diotima's speech, are partly modelled on male arousal and ejaculation, with their swelling and shrinking, throbbing and spouting (*Phd.* 251b–d; cf. *Symp.* 206d). See section 4 below.

While the Palinode specifically employs this image as one of re-growth, because the sprouting wings were allegedly full-grown in a previous form of life, even so it represents an innate potentiality for philosophical knowledge rather than the presence since birth of the actual content of that knowledge. For that non-dispositional innateness, we must rely upon the logically independent and strictly incompatible model of recollecting. If learning in this life is specifically like remembering, the actual content of the once and future knowledge must somehow already be unconsciously present in the learner's mind (see section 3 below on the *Meno*). But to the extent that it is like gestating or germinating, that content is not already present, but prefigured in a potentiality that must be developed and actualized in a proper environment. (See section 4 below on the *Symposium*.)

Thus the Palinode combines dispositional and non-dispositional models of innate ideas. No wonder, when he looks back on this vivid mixture of models (see *kerasantes*, 265b), Socrates warns Phaedrus against taking it too seriously, calling it both playful and potentially misleading (265b–c). While he claims that his complex image of the power of eros somehow “touches upon something true,” he refuses to vouch for any of its details, including of course those wings, but also the prenatal knowledge and earthly recollection. The only element he identifies as not misleading is its hint of the dialectical process of collection and division: “the rest [*ta men alla*] really seems to me to have been made in play.”

Near the end of the same dialogue, when Socrates argues that all writing should be produced and received in play, he repeats his oddly combined themes of remembering and germinating ideas: written words are at best “amusing gardens of letters” that also serve as “reminders to the man who already knows” (276d). The more serious counterpart to writing, namely, the live conversations of the dialectician or true rhetorician, are not called reminders but explained in terms of a mental fertility that requires selectively sowing and cultivating seeds and shoots of knowledge. The dialectician's “genuine sons” are his mental offspring: first the *logos* within himself, if he can find it there, then also *its* offspring and its brothers that grow “at the same time” in others' souls (278a–b). These closing pages about philosophical education begin with the story about the ambivalent value of writing as a “reminder to those who already know,” which repeats part of the Palinode's non-dispositional model of recollection. But they end by describing genuine learning with a model of cultivating ideas that is quite similar to the dispositional image of growing psychic wings. (Note how the feathers too grow as “shoots” from “roots” in the soul.¹³) This should remind us that the earlier mixture of models in the Palinode does not warrant taking what is specific to recollection as Platonic doctrine. The same variety of models is dispersed among dialogues from *Meno* to *Republic*.

¹³ *blastê* at 251d; *rhizê* at 251b.

3. A DEEP RELUCTANCE TO AFFIRM
RECOLLECTION IN THE *MENO*

The *Meno*, which is usually considered either the first of the middle dialogues or transitional to that period, introduces Platonic recollection in the dressing of myth and mystery religion. But the core notion there of learning as recollection is often taken as Platonic doctrine until the *Phaedrus* or even beyond: namely that conscious knowledge in a previous life enables us to learn things like mathematics and morality in this life because the content of that prior knowledge remains in the mind in some explicit but unconscious form, and can therefore be rediscovered there through proper inquiry. Socrates' general disclaimer about the theory (86b–c) is then taken not as rejecting any of that alleged core doctrine, but as denying certainty about it, perhaps because Plato had not yet come to settled conviction about the Forms.¹⁴ But the fuller context of the dialogue reveals the deeper dimension of Socrates' disclaimer: he is not just denying confidence that learning is really recollection, but has reason to reject such a non-dispositional model of innate ideas. (After all, in the *Euthydemus*, a similarly naive notion of eternal knowing had already been associated with comic charlatans and lightly dismissed by Socrates at 296c–d.) In fact, Socrates casts doubt on literal recollection in the *Meno* in a variety of ways. He first ascribes the story vaguely to sources who are disparaged as inspired but unreliable at the end of the dialogue (81a–b, 99c–d). In the geometry lesson that is supposed to illustrate the theory, he repeatedly challenges us to examine whether he is giving away the answer or “just asking questions” (82e, 84c–d; cf. 82b, 85b); then he clearly shows the answer with the most nominal of questions (“Doesn't this line from corner to corner cut each of these figures in two?”, 85a). When the geometry lesson is over, Socrates refuses to affirm anything about recollection except its encouragement to industrious inquiry (86b–c). Later, when Socrates finally revisits the term ‘recollection’ to characterize genuine learning, he no longer mentions the earlier notion of discovering true beliefs within oneself, but identifies recollection with the process of converting true beliefs to knowledge through the ability to give an account of the reason why (*aitias logismôî*, 98a). By the end of the dialogue, Socrates and Meno openly agree that neither knowledge nor true beliefs are innate (98c–d; cf. 99e).¹⁵

I have argued elsewhere¹⁶ that the theory of recollection and the associated geometry lesson figure in a careful coordination of theory and practice throughout this dialogue. The horns of the theoretical dilemma in Socrates' version of

¹⁴ See, e.g., Bluck, *Plato's Meno*, 318; Guthrie, *History*, 4: 258; Hunter and Inwood, “Furnished Soul,” 424–25.

¹⁵ Roslyn Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), chs. 2–3, collects other indications that Socrates in the *Meno* does not really subscribe to the notion that learning is recollection, and concludes that he uses it as a “mask,” “deception,” “myth” and “sham doctrine” to hide from Meno the inconclusiveness of moral inquiry (7). I argue rather that in *Meno*, *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*, Platonic recollection is neither literal doctrine nor deceptive “myth”; it is one of Plato's useful but imperfect, significant yet playful, models for his pioneering advocacy of innate ideas. Its purpose is therefore not to hide a disturbing fact, but to direct others further towards a difficult challenge. See section 6 below.

¹⁶ “Speculative Theory, Practical Theory, and Practice in Plato's *Meno*,” *Southwest Philosophy Review* 17 (2001): 103–12.

“Meno’s Paradox” (neither what you know nor what you don’t know can be learned) nicely recapitulate the two practical failings that Meno had already exhibited (intellectual arrogance and laziness). The notion that learning is really a kind of remembering just begins to question the false dilemma between complete knowledge and pure ignorance, and then the geometry lesson both refutes the theoretical dilemma in practice, and directly addresses the practical failings that caused Meno to raise his theoretical objection. And as Meno’s practical failings are a more genuine threat to successful inquiry than the theoretical paradox, so the geometry lesson contains a practical theory of inquiry that is more successful than the speculative theory of recollection. For the theory of recollection virtually accepts the Paradox’s false dilemma between complete knowledge and pure ignorance, but the geometry lesson introduces a range of cognitive states from ignorance through true beliefs and explanations to full understanding. It distinguishes the understanding of the answer both from true beliefs that express the answer and from true beliefs that imply the answer—and it demonstrates that we can acquire knowledge if we already have the correct information in the form of true beliefs, or if that information is implied by our other true beliefs, or even if someone else gives us that information for the first time, so long as we can also explain why it is true. So what is carefully elaborated in the geometry lesson responds to both Meno’s faulty theory and his faulty practice, and it works independently of the sketchy notion that the learner “recollects” what he learns. Socrates’ subsequent disclaimer applies to the speculative theory of recollection, but not of course to what has been clearly exhibited in practice with the slave.

What does this analysis reveal about Plato’s long-term commitment, first introduced here in the *Meno*, that in *some* fashion “the truth about reality is always in our souls” (86b)? First, it shows that Plato already rejects a doctrine of innate *knowing*. Though Socrates speaks briefly and loosely of innate *epistēmē* in his interpretation of the geometry lesson (85d), he must really deny this: the geometry lesson shows, and Socrates later emphasizes, that *epistēmē* requires the conscious ability to give a proper account, which is rare (85c, 98a). For this reason Socrates more often interprets the slave’s learning as the recovery from within of true *beliefs* that can become knowledge (85e, 86e ff., 98a). But even that cannot be correct, as Socrates explains that true beliefs are inferior to knowledge precisely because they “run away from the soul” and must be “tied down” with an explanation so they stay (97e ff.). He claims that politicians, prophets and poets are sadly unreliable, not because their beliefs remain unnoticed or become hidden or fall asleep, but because they “run away.” He thus clearly indicates that true beliefs are *not* always in the mind, available for recollecting. This is no unintended implication of the metaphor. While Socrates stays in character here by emphasizing that he does not have full knowledge about the difference between knowledge and true belief, he does claim unusual confidence that there is such a difference:

If I would claim to know anything else—and I would make that claim about few things—then this I would put down as one of the things I know.

Rightly so, Socrates (98b3–6)

Surely the characterization of true belief as something that comes and goes, though it is somewhat conjectural (*eikazôn*, 98b1), must be part of the reason for Socrates’

confidence that it is inferior to knowledge. He and Meno then agree that “neither of these two are in men by nature, neither knowledge nor true belief, but they are acquired” (98c–d).¹⁷ No wonder Socrates had refused to insist upon the recollection that he had expounded in terms of innate knowledge or innate true beliefs. Rather, just as he says (86b–c), recollection in the *Meno* is a provisional and encouraging model, somewhat like the truth, for the purpose of directing Meno back from his frustration¹⁸ to the difficult work of actively summoning his own best resources for the inquiry into the nature of virtue.

The *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, and *Republic* do of course maintain that genuine learning requires some kind of innate ideas; that while all true beliefs and knowledge must be acquired, this is possible only because *something* of “the truth about reality” is “always in our souls.” This must be the basic point of the recollection story that Socrates calls “true” (81b).¹⁹ But as other dialogues explore innate resources other than knowledge or beliefs, none will attempt to sustain the extravagant suggestions that we have already learned all things (*Meno* 81c) or that our minds are already in possession of all correct explanations (*Phaedo* 73a).²⁰

4. DISPOSITIONAL NATIVISM IN THE SYMPOSIUM AND REPUBLIC

Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium* works on the epistemological promise of the *Meno*, and it may be the dialogue Plato wrote next.²¹ It explains again the essential difference between knowledge and true belief, and explores the role of innate cognitive resources in acquiring genuine knowledge. Its account goes further by including both a Platonic Form and a dispositional model of innateness as a kind of mental pregnancy rather than a kind of recollection.²²

¹⁷ The unfortunate textual difficulty at 98d1 does not affect the current point. Even if we exclude rather than emend the impossible *out’ epiktēta*, Socrates still clearly denies that knowledge or beliefs are innate. See Bluck’s and Sharples’ notes, as well as 99e.

¹⁸ Recollection is here used also to direct Meno away from his tendency to rely upon remembering what *others* say; see section 6 below.

¹⁹ *Gorgias* 524a–b provides clear precedent for Socrates calling a story “true” not because of any specific information in it, but because of a more general, and literally true, point that those false or figurative details would support if they were true.

²⁰ Throughout this section and elsewhere, I translate *doxa* as “belief” and *epistēmē* as “knowledge.” *Doxa* is sometimes better translated “judgment,” as at *Theaetetus* 187a ff. and *Symposium* 202a. While “judgment” would also suit *Meno* 98a if taken separately, I choose to translate *doxa* consistently throughout, and *Meno* 85c requires the state or disposition of “belief” rather than the act or experience of “judgment.” Similarly, while *epistēmē* often means “understanding,” I use here the standard translation “knowledge,” because the traditional juxtaposition of “knowledge” with “belief” serves my discussion of Plato’s models in terms of more modern epistemological categories of innate ideas. See Jon Moline, *Plato’s Theory of Understanding* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), and Myles Burnyeat, *The Theaetetus of Plato* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1990), 68–70.

²¹ Most commentators date both *Symposium* and *Phaedo* after *Meno* and before *Republic* and *Phaedrus*, while agreeing that it is impossible to decide on external or linguistic grounds whether *Symposium* or *Phaedo* was written first. On philosophical grounds, some have argued that *Phaedo* precedes *Symposium*, and some now argue that *Symposium* probably came first: see Nehamas and Woodruff, *Plato: Phaedrus*, xlv, and Malcolm Schofield, “Plato,” in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Craig Edwards (New York: Routledge, 1998).

²² Sheffield, “Psychic Pregnancy,” is very useful on mental pregnancy as a model of innate ideas, and the only treatment of the subject I have found. She argues that psychic pregnancy, as a teleologically directed rational potentiality (12–13), is an alternative to recollection, and recognizes that “what

When Diotima first introduces mental procreation in her account of the purpose of eros, she elaborates the conclusion from the *Meno* that neither knowledge nor beliefs are innate. In a passage that may even deny the immortality of the human soul, because “mortal nature” can share in immortality only through reproduction (207d ff.), she explains that all human parts are constantly passing away and being replaced, in soul as well as in body (*kata to sōma alla kai kata tēn psuchēn*). Desires, beliefs, even knowledge change no less than flesh and blood:

none of these things are ever the same within an individual, but some come into being and others pass away...Each of the kinds of knowledge undergoes the same thing...[F]orgetting is the departure of knowledge, and by putting a new memory in place of what goes away, study preserves knowledge such that it seems to be the same. (207e–8a)

Socrates claims to be amazed, and we should be too, if the theory of recollection is Platonic doctrine. This passage specifically denies the continuous possession of knowledge, beliefs, memories and more. We should at least expect some indication of how any version of non-dispositional innateness could still obtain, when none of the contents of our minds abides.

Diotima later closes her speech with the ambiguous claim that “if it belongs to any human to become immortal, it would be that man” who, after a long philosophical education through eros, apprehends the Form of Beauty (212a). Does she intend that anyone really is immortal, or just that the successful philosophical lover gets as close as any individual can? Scholars disagree according to different interpretations of her earlier claim that “mortal nature” cannot achieve immortality as individuals.²³ Plato could quickly have disposed of this obvious obscurity by writing here that when it finally apprehends the Form of Beauty, the immortal soul recollects what it had already known. But the *Symposium* seems to avoid that model quite deliberately. Consider the poignant moment when Socrates’ alleged former teacher is supposed to have alluded years ago to a story told just that evening by Aristophanes:

Now there is a certain story, she said, which tells that lovers are those who seek their own other halves. But my account says that the lover seeks neither half nor whole, unless, my friend, it proves to be good...I do not think each takes joy in what is his

is at stake here is the richness of the psychic endowment and the extent of its contribution to knowledge” (14). Essential to her interpretation is that the character of the mental offspring depends upon the quality of the activity that develops its potential (5–11). I pursue similar conclusions here with a different interpretation of the ladder of love. But Sheffield in the end underinterprets the essential difference between the models, writing not just that the pregnant learner actualizes a determinate potentiality for knowledge, but also that “the soul is already informed with the specific knowledge which experience elicits” (25) and that the learner “has no need to generate anything . . . and so needs rather to elicit the knowledge which he already carries” (16). On my interpretation here, the pregnancy model persistently denies that kind of non-dispositional innateness, which goes rather with the model of recollection.

²³ Alternative interpretations were detailed in the debate between R. Hackforth, “Immortality in Plato’s *Symposium*,” *Classical Review* 64 (1950): 42–45 and J. V. Luce, “Immortality in Plato’s *Symposium*,” *Classical Review* 66 (1952): 137–41. The debate continues: see, e.g., C. J. Rowe, “Socrates and Diotima: Eros, Immortality, and Creativity” and David Konstan “Commentary on Rowe: Mortal Love,” *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* XIV (1999): 239–68; see also Sheffield, “Psychic Pregnancy,” 25–26.

own unless he calls “belonging to me” and “my own” what is good, and he calls “belonging to another” what is bad. Because what people love is really nothing other than the good. (205d–e)

If recollection is Platonic doctrine, here is the perfect place to use it. For Aristophanes’ point was that love is our innate desire to recover our lost wholeness in reunion with our original other halves (*erôs emphutos*, 191d ff.). Diotima appropriates his idea that eros is a desire for what naturally belongs to us (203c, 204b), but she modifies it with Agathon’s more recent suggestion that eros is always of what is beautiful and good (196b, 197b). Now she could easily infer that what satisfies eros is not the recovery of a lost partner, but the recovery of a prior relationship with absolute beauty or goodness—in other words, in the recollection of a Form that we had already known before.²⁴ She does not do that.

Instead, her claims about vicarious immortality and mental discontinuity occur in an extended discussion of innate conceptions as a certain kind of natural potentiality, like an embryo rather than a complete entity. By analogy with physical pregnancy, Diotima asserts that all humans are pregnant in body and in soul (*kuousin...pantes anthrôpoi kai kata to sôma kai kata tên psychên*, 206c), some even more in soul than in body (209a); they have been pregnant ever since they were young, and when they reach the right age they desire to give birth, which requires a kind of intercourse with someone or something beautiful (209b). As in physical pregnancy, the soul has its own appropriate conception to bring to birth, which is a conception of “wisdom and the rest of virtue” (209a). This influential notion of mental procreativity strikingly explains the purpose of eros on a (modified) feminine model of gestation and delivery; as is often noted,²⁵ while *tiktein* and *gennan* can mean either male begetting or female giving birth, Diotima’s frequent term *kuëin* would normally apply only to female pregnancy—not to a sometime ancient notion of a male “seed-pregnancy” which he delivers into the womb.²⁶ While Diotima herself clearly applies her model in part to the male physical experience of arousal and ejaculation, she never refers to a physical or mental *sperma*, but interprets that male experience and its mental counterpart in terms of the female experience of carrying a conceptus, embryo or fetus—a *kuêma* (206d; cf. *egkumôn*, 209b, and *kuëin*, throughout). Diotima says nothing explicit about the origins of these mental *kuêmata*, but her claims that “all humans” are pregnant in soul (206c), that we are in this way pregnant long before puberty (209b–c), and that at the right age it is “our nature” that desires to give birth (*hêmôn hê phusis*, 206c)—all indicate that the mental conceptions are innate.²⁷

²⁴ To my knowledge, this particular possible connection is noted only by Kenneth Dover, *Plato: Symposium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 114.

²⁵ See Dover, *Plato: Symposium* on 206b–7a; R. G. Bury, *The Symposium of Plato* (Cambridge: Heffer and Sons, 1932) on 206c; E. E. Pender, “Spiritual Pregnancy in Plato’s *Symposium*,” *Classical Quarterly* 42 (1992): 72–86, at 73; Sheffield, “Psychic Pregnancy,” 14–15.

²⁶ Contra Pender’s interpretation in “Spiritual Pregnancy.”

²⁷ Cf. the growth of psychic wings in the *Phaedrus*, whose “roots” are innate (see section 2 above). Sheffield, “Psychic Pregnancy,” 30, cites some of the same evidence in the *Symposium*, and seems to find the main strength of the pregnancy model in the fact that it does not imply knowledge possessed in a previous life. I agree that this is a point in favor of the model; but note that Plato could try to explain our innate mental potentiality as the result of some kind of knowledge in a former life, as in the (especially playful) image of psychic wings of the *Phaedrus*.

That first description of mental pregnancy might give the initial impression that knowledge or true beliefs about virtue already exist in actuality in every lover's mind, like a fully developed mental fetus that is ready to be delivered, for when the lover finds someone beautiful in body and soul he "right away has plenty to say about virtue" (*euthus euporei logôn peri aretês*, 209b). But the subsequent explanation with the "ladder of love" will soon correct that impression: it turns out that a first encounter with a beautiful youth produces *logoi* about virtue that are far from adequate, and mere images or phantoms of true virtue (*eidola*, 212a). After Diotima turns to the "higher mysteries" of eros, we see that her earlier example achieved only something like a first or second stage on the ascent to genuine knowledge of Beauty.²⁸ To finish at the level of beautiful bodies or souls is (to express it in terms of Diotima's model) to miscarry long before the pregnancy has come to term. The ultimate goal of all loving (210e, 211e) is giving birth to genuine virtue and knowledge of absolute beauty (212a), and so the gestation of "wisdom and the rest of virtue" is completed only after a kind of mental intercourse with the Form of Beauty (*sunontos, ephaptomenôi*, 212a). So the mental *kuêma* with which the young lover begins is comparable to the beginning of embryonic development, the "conception" rather than the fully developed fetus. As Aristotle writes in *Generation of Animals*, "by *kuêma* I mean the first mixture of male and female" in the production of the new individual.²⁹

In fact, Diotima's description of the complete mental gestation (210a ff.) comprises a *series* of successive "births," at each stage begetting or delivering beautiful *logoi* that enable conceiving anew and proceeding with ever more adequate conceptions of beauty. As Ferrari explains: "the mark of the suitable initiate is that he does not take the nature of the beautiful for granted...but is prone to become more deeply fascinated by the beauty that issues from his love than by the beauty that first attracted it. This displacement of attention is what motivates his climb to each new level of the upward path."³⁰ The lover thus climbs through ascending cycles of desire, mental birth, recognition of a higher beauty, and further desire. For example, after one recognizes the beauty common to all beautiful bodies (210a–b), one becomes dissatisfied with that type of beauty and desires a beautiful soul (210b), then gives birth to *logoi* that concern the beauty of good activities and laws (210b–c); after that he can come to desire the beauty of knowledge, and give birth to yet more beautiful *logoi*, which is a necessary stage before recognizing the Form of Beauty (210d). At each stage, the recognition of a more adequate conception of beauty is associated with begetting or delivering a *logos* (210a7, c2, d5); reflection upon, or mental intercourse with, that beautiful product enables the eventual delivery of another, until in the end we are capable of delivering complete understanding.

²⁸ Sheffield, "Psychic Pregnancy," 7–11, argues that the haphazard lover at 209b has not really begun to climb the ladder at all, because he is motivated by love of honor rather than love of wisdom, and does not follow the necessary method.

²⁹ 728b34–35. But Aristotle also sometimes uses *kuêma* of later stages of the fetus, and analogous stages in eggs and larvae.

³⁰ Giovanni Ferrari, "Platonic Love," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 256.

This whole complex mental gestation begins not with actual knowledge or beliefs about beauty, but with an uninformed desire to procreate (209b) or an inarticulate recognition of something physically beautiful (210a)—that is, with some incipient innate resources that can become beliefs, then knowledge, through successive stages of development. Diotima is of course not really conducting embryology, but her imaginative sketch of a mental pregnancy bears comparison with Aristotle's "epigenetic" theory of the potentiality in the human embryo. He rejects the possibility that all parts of the whole organism are actually present from the start, and argues that what is "already present in the *kuêma* itself" (GA 734a5) is a sort of "innate motion" (*hê enousa kinêsis*, b15), received from the *sperma*, that is not a definite substance or complete individual (*ouch houtôs de hôs tode ti, oud' enuparchon hês tetelesmenon to prôton*, b18). The embryo has soul and life potentially, not in actuality (737a17), and the development of the complete being requires successive actualizations (736a31 ff.), first of the parts pertaining to nutritive soul, then those of perceptive soul, then those of rational soul, for "it must have every kind of soul in potentiality before it does in actuality" (b15). So for much of the pregnancy, much of the organism exists only in potentiality. Similarly, in Diotima's model the content of the knowledge to be delivered is far from actually present in the mental *kuêma* from the start. Rather, this inarticulate innate potentiality, expressed in the beginning as a confused desire rather than as a belief about beauty, is developed or actualized through successive stages (recognizing physical beauty, then beauty of souls and customs, then beauty of knowledge, then the Form).³¹

It may be useful to continue the comparison a bit further. The development of Diotima's mental *kuêma*, while beginning from innate resources, is not so invariant as that of Aristotle's physical *kuêma*, and is more dependent upon the external environment. Aristotle argues that the development of the embryo is almost completely determined by its own inherent motion, and fully matures under normal circumstances, without being shaped by changes in its environment. But the development of Diotima's mental *kuêma* requires success in seeking out (209b) a variety of beautiful things. Complete maturation almost never occurs, because it requires successive reflection upon specific kinds of experiences. Proper appreciation of beautiful bodies, noble souls and customs, and many kinds of knowledge or study are prerequisites for apprehending the Form of Beauty, and the whole ascent requires a properly ordered approach or method (210a, 211b–c). Consequently, very few humans get to deliver fully developed intellectual offspring, namely genuine knowledge of virtue.

Diotima's account of mental pregnancy is thus a model of innate ideas that implies at every turn a specific innate potentiality for certain kinds of beliefs and knowledge, rather than the innate possession of actual knowledge or beliefs. It persistently denies the provisional suggestion in the *Meno* that the content of the knowledge to be learned is already in the learner's mind.³²

³¹ Contrast the interpretation by Sheffield; see n. 22 above.

³² According to Myles Burnyeat, "Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration," in *Essays on the Philosophy of Socrates*, ed. Hugh Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 53–65, at 60–61, Plato's failure to address explicitly the origins of the mental *kuêmata* indicates a sort of blind spot in his

The *Republic* is largely about education, and it occasionally repeats the *Symposium*'s themes of learning through desire, mental intercourse and procreation—for example—just after it defines the ideal philosopher-kings:

the philosopher neither loses nor lessens his desire until he grasps the being of each nature itself with the part of his soul that is fit to grasp such a thing, because of its kinship with it. Approaching and having intercourse with what really is, and begetting understanding and truth, he knows, truly lives and is nourished, and then but not before is relieved of birth pains. (490a–b)

This is recalled in a passage near the end of the dialogue about the difficulty of understanding the nature of the human soul in its pure state:

to see it we must look...to its love of wisdom [*philosophian*], and recognize what it grasps and what it longs to have intercourse with, because of its kinship with what is divine and immortal and what always is...then one could see its true nature. (611d–12a)

These passages say nothing specific about innate mental conceptions or embryos; the only pregnancy alluded to results from intercourse with Forms. But they are similar to Diotima's model in positing an innately determined desire that can be fully satisfied only by apprehension of Forms. "Philosophical natures" are identified as those in whom this kind of desire is strongest (485a–d).

In an attempt to characterize the ideal satisfaction of this natural desire and philosophical potential, the *Republic* provides Plato's most famous figures of knowledge and education: the Sun, Divided Line, and Cave—none of which mentions recollection or innate beliefs. Then Socrates uses yet another figure to sum up an essential lesson of those three:

If these things are true, then the following is what we must think about them: Education is not really the kind of thing that some proclaim it to be. They say that when knowledge is not in the soul, they put it in, as if putting sight into blind eyes...But our account indicates that this capacity [*dunamis*] present in the soul of each person and the organ he learns with—as if it were an eye that couldn't be turned from the darkness to what's bright other than with the whole body—this must be turned away from becoming together with the whole soul, until it can bear to behold what is and the brightest of what is. And this we say is the good, don't we?...Then there would be an art of this thing, of leading it around, of what way it will most easily and most effectively be turned around; not of putting sight into it, but on the assumption that the sight it has is not turned rightly or looking where it should, accomplishing *that*. (518c–d)

The *Republic* staunchly opposes the notion that education is putting knowledge into an ignorant mind, but *not* by arguing that the content of that knowledge is already unconsciously present, available for recollection. Instead Socrates argues

understanding of his own creativity and sexuality. Burnyeat may be right, but Plato does have Diotima explain that these incipient innate resources are first expressed as a *desire*, and that their fulfilment or actualization requires experiencing proper kinds of external beauty and mental activity in order to produce *logoi* that can become knowledge. If a further Platonic model or metaphor may be introduced at this point, as a possible explanation of the others, Plato seems to believe that this natural desire for beauty and truth is grounded in a "kinship" (*suggeneia, oikeiôtês*) between the human soul and what is fully real or good. Plato mentions such a kinship in connection with each of the models identified in this paper. See, e.g., *Phd.* 79d, *Resp.* 490b, 518d–e, 611e, *Symp.* 205e, *Phdr.* 247d, 248b–c.

that what is “present in the soul” is a natural capacity or potential (*dunamis*) for knowing certain things after a process of “turning” the mind’s eye and the rest of the soul—which turning is of course the long process of emotional and intellectual education described in Books II, III, V, VI and VII.³³ Socrates frequently claims that only naturally well-endowed souls can succeed in that rigorous education,³⁴ and insists that students develop their natural potential through active inquiry summoning their own intellectual resources.³⁵ But no actual knowledge or beliefs are mentioned among the innate resources. Instead the *Republic* discusses natural dispositions like curiosity, facility at learning and remembering, and capacity for puzzlement at contrary appearances. Along the way, it provides these rather thin dispositional models of innate desires and mental vision, according to which not the actual content of knowledge but a specific potential is present since birth.³⁶

5. HOW NAIVE AND EXTRAVAGANT IS THE *PHAEDO*, AFTER ALL?

How does the argument about recollection in the *Phaedo* fit with these broader observations about Platonic dispositional nativism? If my interpretations so far are roughly correct, then this passage (72e ff.) is the only significant evidence for ascribing non-dispositional innate ideas to Plato. The *Phaedo* alone presents Platonic recollection in straightforward argument, not directly infused with mythical elements, and beginning with the conditions of everyday, literal recollecting. Socrates is portrayed trying to prove that our minds have lived and known before, as part of a series of arguments to the cumulative effect that we can continue living and knowing after death. Since the setting of this dialogue is the imminent threat to the survival of Socrates’ own mind, it is possible that Plato was especially tempted here by the notion that the mind retains the content of its knowledge through all time. But since the *Meno*, *Symposium*, *Republic* and *Phaedrus* are all aware of that extravagant option and either ignore it or refuse to affirm it, I would like to explore the indications that even in the *Phaedo*, Plato resists it.

(1) The passage about recollection in the *Phaedo* begins with an apparent allusion to the one in the *Meno* (at 73a–b), and so would seem to be elaborating upon what was suggested there. But we have seen that even the *Meno* retracted the sug-

³³ See especially 401d ff. and 533d.

³⁴ E.g., 374e ff., 415a ff., 455b, 485a–87a.

³⁵ Especially 522e ff.

³⁶ An anonymous reader has suggested the following sort of comparison. The model of recollection implies that genuine learning is an activation or exercise of knowledge that is already actually possessed—what Aristotle would call a transition from knowing as a first actuality to knowing as a second actuality. But the model of mental pregnancy implies that genuine learning includes the change from the potentiality for some kind of knowledge to the possession of that kind of knowledge—what Aristotle would call a transition from potentiality to first actuality, or from first potentiality to second potentiality. Accordingly, the model of mental pregnancy might be well understood as an attempt to incorporate both stages of learning in an imaginative account of the natural capacities and intellectual maturation of human beings, thus accommodating the full range of senses in which human beings are creatures who are by nature knowers of certain kinds of things. Plato demonstrates his awareness of such different senses of “knowing” and “learning” when he exposes the eristic arguments of *Euthydemus* 275d ff., esp. 277e–278a. See also Aristotle’s *De Anima* 417a22 ff. and 412a22 ff.

gestion of innate knowledge or beliefs that it had initially made. Both *Meno* and *Symposium* explicitly deny that knowledge or beliefs are innate, and the *Phaedo* reminds us of the scarcity of real knowledge in the course of this argument (76b ff.).

(2) It is appropriate therefore that the scope of the “recollection” that is actually argued for in the *Phaedo* is quite restricted. Although Cebes introduces recollection by suggesting that we already possess, concerning all things, “knowledge and right explanations within us” (*panta... etunchanen autois epistêmê enousa kai orthos logos*, 73a), Socrates does not pursue that extravagant position. Rather he treats Cebes’ suggestion like a misinterpretation of what had really been intended overall in the *Meno*.³⁷ For Socrates immediately tells Simmias that they should try a different approach (73b), and argues only for the innateness of certain concepts like perfect equality, beauty and goodness—and not for specific innate knowledge or beliefs even about those. He gives a classic “poverty of the stimulus” argument that is vague on details but roughly well known (73c–75c): since the experience of any number of equal sensible objects cannot by itself inform us that they are all somehow deficient in equality, we must have “prior knowledge” of absolute equality, not acquired through sense experience, which makes that kind of judgment about sensible things possible.³⁸ But among the slippery points of that argument is Socrates’ use of the terms ‘knowing’ and ‘knowledge.’ Though at first he speaks loosely as though everyone has knowledge of such things throughout life (*eidenai, epistêmê*, 74e ff.), he soon clearly denies this, emphasizing that to most of us the knowledge remains lost (*epistamai, epistêmê*, 76b ff.).³⁹ Socrates does not try to explain what form the allegedly innate idea of equality would take in order to make the rare recovery of lost prenatal knowledge possible, but since the *Meno* and *Symposium* explicitly deny that beliefs are innate, it ought to be something like an unconscious possession of such concepts without unconscious actual beliefs about them. (Other famous poverty of the stimulus arguments, from Descartes’s Third Meditation to Chomsky’s universal grammar, comparably infer innate dispositions and general concepts rather than specific beliefs.) All “knowledge and right explanations” would then have to be derived or constructed from these, rather than actually present in our minds, contrary to Cebes’ initial interpretation of the notion that learning is recollection.

(3) It may therefore be relevant that in this passage Plato even chooses to have Simmias suggest an alternative to prenatal conscious knowing that is much too quickly dismissed. After that poverty of the stimulus argument for certain innate concepts, Socrates argues further that these innate ideas were consciously known before we were born, then forgotten at birth (75c–77a). But Simmias suggests the

³⁷ Commentators often interpret this passage as amplifying or correcting the version of recollection offered in the *Meno*, rather than as moving beyond a narrow interpretation of the geometry lesson in the *Meno*, as I argue here. See, e.g., Hackforth, *Plato’s Phaedo*, 74; David Gallop, *Plato: Phaedo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 115; David Bostock, *Plato’s Phaedo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 102; Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave*, Appendix I.

³⁸ All details of this early and ambitious poverty of the stimulus argument are subjects of controversy. See, e.g., Bostock, *Plato’s Phaedo*, 60–101; Gallop, *Plato: Phaedo*, 115–30; Lloyd Gerson, “The Recollection Argument Revisited,” *Apeiron* 32 (1999): 1–15; Hunter and Inwood, “Furnished Soul,” 426–27; Scott, *Recollection*, 53–73; Williams, “Two Aspects of Recollection,” 141–47.

³⁹ Scott, *Recollection*, offers a comprehensive argument that recollection is nowhere intended to explain ordinary “knowledge,” that is, concept formation or empirically grounded beliefs.

possibility that the relevant knowledge is acquired “at the same time that we are born” (76c). Socrates objects that the knowledge would then have to be acquired and forgotten at the same moment, and Simmias quickly infers that his suggestion comes to nothing (76d). He misses the fact that the possibility of innate resources acquired at birth challenges the whole notion that they are something learned and forgotten at all; this possibility should open the discussion to other models of innateness—such as the dispositional kinds proposed in the *Symposium* and *Republic*. This striking moment in the *Phaedo* is sometimes seen as an indication that Plato is not really able to consider an alternative to prenatal knowledge,⁴⁰ or that after all he assumes prenatal knowledge in his attempt to prove it.⁴¹ But we have seen alternative accounts and models explored from the *Meno* to the *Phaedrus*; could these lines in the *Phaedo* be an invitation to consider such possibilities here, too?

(4) In any case, Socrates is portrayed throughout the *Phaedo* with at best provisional confidence in his arguments, including the one concerning recollection. After the first set of arguments, Socrates agrees that they “still contain many doubtful points and many objections, if anyone wants to work through them sufficiently” (84c). Though Simmias and Cebes express confidence in recollection again after that (91e ff.), Socrates later reminds them that “we must examine our first hypotheses more clearly, even if they are convincing to you” (107b).⁴² Then he ends the conversation with a long “charming” or “incantatory” (114d) story about the posthumous judgment of souls—an innovative myth-based tale of disembodied souls and reincarnation, but one that includes no figure of recollection.

Early in the dialogue, Socrates had already called the whole discussion to come a kind of storytelling (*muthologein* 61d–e), a term he had just applied to the writings of Aesop (61b).⁴³ Within the *Phaedo*’s series of stories and arguments, the argument about recollection is fitted to an image that runs through the first half of the dialogue. First is the comment that:

there is the story or account (*logos*) that is put in the language of the mysteries, that we men are in a kind of prison, and that one must not free oneself or run away. That seems to me an impressive doctrine and one not easy to understand fully. (62a–b)

Then there is the claim that:

those who established the mystic rites for us were not inferior persons but were speaking in riddles long ago when they said that...he who arrives there purified and initiated will dwell with the gods. (69b–c)

The recollection passage (72e–76e) is closely surrounded by this “riddling” theme: the alleged philosophical “recollection” would provide the soul a measure of escape to find knowledge in what is pure and “akin” to itself, apart from the physical

⁴⁰ E.g., R. S. Bluck, *Plato’s Phaedo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), 63; Bostock, *Plato’s Phaedo*, 102. Cf. Hunter and Inwood, “Furnished Soul,” 427.

⁴¹ E.g., Gallop, *Plato: Phaedo*, 134.

⁴² Weiss, *Virtue in the Cave*, 188, observes: “against the backdrop of Simmias’s and Cebes’ ready endorsement of these Socratic offerings, Socrates’ own restraint and circumspection are all the more striking.”

⁴³ For Plato’s striking use of *muthologein* together with *diaskopein* here, see Rowe, *Plato: Phaedo* on 61e1–2; cf. Rowe, *Plato: Phaedrus* on 276e3.

world to which it is tied or nailed by deceptive association with impure bodily sensations (78b–84b). Having taken his point of departure from Orphic- and Pythagorean-style mysteries, and continuing to use their language in his expositions, Socrates returns to similar stories after all his arguments, recognizing that his confidence in the face of death is not fully warranted by reason (107a ff.). In this context of provisional arguments mixed with stories designed to persuade like incantations (77e–f, 114d), it seems that the *Phaedo* too uses recollection as a provisional model of philosophical learning—one that suggests immortality as part of an explanation of our ability to think of certain concepts that transcend sense experience, but one that does not establish prenatal conscious existence with the confidence of Cebes, nor the epistemological extravagance that our minds already possess all knowledge and correct explanations.

6. CONCLUSION

In writings from the *Meno* to the *Phaedrus*, Plato often employs dispositional models of innate ideas, and he provides reasons to question the non-dispositional model of recollection when he uses it. The *Phaedo*'s neighbors in the Platonic corpus repeatedly indicate that neither knowledge nor beliefs are innate, and repeatedly represent philosophical learning as the actualization of an innate potentiality that requires a long series of specific kinds of experience. It therefore seems unlikely that Plato ever subscribed literally to the distinctive details of the model of recollection, which would require that the content of the knowledge to be acquired be innate.

Why then would Plato sometimes choose to employ a model that he knows can be misleading on this point? For one thing, the relative merits of dispositional and non-dispositional models of innateness would not have been obvious to his contemporaries. Plato is a pioneering advocate of innate ideas, and the analogy with a kind of remembering is certainly an approachable way to introduce his innovative approach to epistemology and education. The pedagogical force of this striking model seems appropriate to Plato's searching, epitreptic, and literary middle-period dialogues, especially as it is combined with a variety of warnings against taking its details too seriously, and with equally imaginative dispositional models of innateness.

In this pedagogical connection it is worth noting that Socrates introduces the model of recollection in the *Meno* after a series of little jokes about remembering⁴⁴ that are directed to a student of Gorgias, a powerfully influential orator who encouraged his students to memorize his own compositions.⁴⁵ And it is presented with dramatic flourish in the *Phaedrus* to an admirer of Lysias who is bent on memorizing a rhetorical showpiece. In each of these cases, the interlocutors are portrayed as trusting in memorization more than explanation, and needing to be

⁴⁴ 71cd, 73c, 76a–b, 80d. Compare 88a, where memory is coordinate with various alleged virtues that are not beneficial unless directed by *epistēmê* or *phronêsis*. Socrates comparably belittles Hippias's "art of memory" at *Hippias Major* 285e–86a.

⁴⁵ See Aristotle, *Sophistici Elenchi* 183b35 ff.

drawn to more philosophical pursuits.⁴⁶ In both cases, moreover, the model of learning as a special kind of philosophical remembering serves as an attention-grabbing introduction to the more rigorous dialectical investigations that follow. This is clear enough in the case of getting Meno to inquire seriously into the essence of virtue instead of giving speeches that rehearse conventional examples (71e–72a, 80b), or getting Phaedrus to admire precise dialectical collections and divisions in place of the rhetorical hackings of Lysias’s speech (265c ff., 264b ff.). Thus a further reason for the occasional model of recollection may be that Plato thinks it especially useful for reorienting certain misguided students, so that they will seek genuine understanding through active reflection upon native resources, rather than relying upon their ability to remember the claims of others. This is the kind of approach that Plato describes as essential to good education at the heart of the *Republic* and elsewhere.⁴⁷

Arguing that learning is analogous to “recollecting” or *anamimnêiskesthai*, rather than just any kind of remembering, serves this approach. *Anamimnêiskesthai* is grammatically the passive of a Greek verb for “reminding,” and so can mean just “being reminded.” But Plato and Aristotle typically use *anamimnêiskesthai* specifically for the process of remembering that involves an active search for what is forgotten. So Aristotle concludes in *De Memoria* 453a4 ff. that while many animals can remember (*mnêmoneuein*), only humans can recollect, because recollection requires a kind of inquiry (*zêtêsis*) and a kind of reasoning (*sylogismos*). Aristotle inherited this orientation to “recollection” in part from Plato. The *Meno* introduces Platonic recollection as a provisional solution to a puzzle about successful inquiry (*zêtein*, 80d). Both the *Meno* (98a) and the *Phaedrus* (249b–c) identify recollection with a certain process of reasoning (*logismos*), and the *Phaedrus* adds in the same passage that this distinguishes humans from other animals. In the *Meno*, Socrates emphasizes in the demonstration with the slave that recollection requires proceeding in a proper (rational) order.⁴⁸

The *Phaedo* is particularly interesting on this point because its initial examples of “recollecting” do not require active inquiry or reasoning—like being reminded of Cebes when we happen to see Simmias (73d). But of course the model is employed here as elsewhere to introduce and advocate the ambitious kind of learning that seeks to give an account of things like pure equality, beauty and justice (78c–d), a kind that requires long training or practice (*meletê*) in philosophical investigations (*skopein*) that rely as little as possible on sense experience. So here, too, the model of recollection is used to orient its audience toward a more demanding conception of learning through active inquiry that employs innate resources. After all, it is presented here to followers or associates of the Pythagorean

⁴⁶ *Meno* 76e, 80b with 84b–c; *Phdr.* 228a ff., 242a ff., 275c ff. Cf. Nehamas and Woodruff, *Plato: Phaedrus*, xlv; Mary Louise Gill, “Plato’s *Phaedrus* and the Method of Hippocrates,” *The Modern Schoolman* 80 (2003).

⁴⁷ *Resp.* 518b ff., 521c ff. Cf., e.g., *Meno* 84a ff., *Phdr.* 275a–b.

⁴⁸ *Theô dê auton anamimnêiskomenon ephexês, hôs dei anamimnêiskesthai* 82e; cf. Aristotle, *Mem.* 451b16 ff.

tradition,⁴⁹ whose basic philosophical tendencies were warmly received and richly developed by Plato,⁵⁰ but whose founder was revered *before* Plato's time⁵¹ largely for an unphilosophical doctrine of reincarnation, and for alleged memories from past lives that are remarkably unphilosophical.⁵² The limited notion of recollecting special knowledge that would have been familiar to people like Simmias and Cebes involved an extraordinarily naive, non-dispositional notion of being born with knowledge. But in Plato's hands, even in the *Phaedo*, "recollection" becomes a much more subtle form of nativism, and much like his dispositional model of mental pregnancy.⁵³

⁴⁹ See especially *Phd.* 61d. But for warnings against taking Simmias and Cebes as fully devoted Pythagoreans, see Rowe, *Plato: Phaedo* on 59c1.

⁵⁰ For evidence in addition to the *Phaedo*, see *Resp.* 530d and Aristotle, *Metaph.* A.6.

⁵¹ On the subject of Pythagoreanism before and after Plato, see, e.g., Charles Kahn, *Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans: A Brief History* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2001).

⁵² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, VIII.4–5.

⁵³ This article was written while I was a Visiting Scholar in the Classics Department at Brown University in academic year 2003–4. I thank Kent Appleberry, Mary Louise Gill, David Konstan, and Paul Woodruff for helpful discussions and comments on earlier drafts