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# Knowledge by Acquaintance: A Note on Plato's *Meno* 71b3-6

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There is a well-known problem in the first part of Plato's *Meno*. Meno, who is the Thessalian, asks Socrates whether virtue (*ἀρετή*) is teachable (70a1-3). Socrates answers that he knows nothing at all about virtue (70a4-71b3) and then explains this case as follows.

T: But how could I know what sort of thing something is, when I don't know what it is? Or do you think that, if someone doesn't know at all (*τὸ παράπαν*) who Meno is, it is possible for him to know whether Meno is beautiful (*καλός*) or rich or even of good birth, or, as it may be, the opposites of these? (71b3-6) <sup>1</sup>

In T, Socrates claims the thesis as follows.

Thesis : A definition of virtue is prior to any knowledge of what it is like.<sup>2</sup>

This so-called “the priority of definition” principle is free from obscurity. However, it is not clear what the phrase “who Meno is” in T means. Bluck suggested the “traditional” interpretation of this problem, which distinguishes knowledge by description from knowledge by acquaintance.<sup>3</sup> The latter is identified with the way of gaining the knowledge of a Form, which cannot be described. Nehamas objected to this interpretation because T only contains knowledge by description. Because many scholars follow this interpretation, it seems that this is the standard view about T. In this paper, I aim to rescue Bluck's interpretation from Nehamas's objections and revise this interpretation

by introducing the process of inquiry.

In the first place, I refer to Robinson's interpretation, which influenced Bluck's. Robinson claims that the Socratic question, "what is X" has a duality. On the one hand, Socrates asks for an equivalent of X. For example, his answer to "what is shape" question is, "which, alone of all things, always accompanies colour" (75b9-10). Moreover, because Meno is an individual, and he does not have an essence (cf. Aristotle, *Metaph.* A 6, 987b4-8, for example), in the "who is Meno" question, Socrates asks whether Meno may be identified (Robinson notes that *ὀρίζειν* means, "distinguish" or "determine"). On the other hand, he asks for the essence of X in the *Meno* (e.g., 74d). Therefore, Robinson concludes that Socrates does not distinguish these questions in the *Meno*.<sup>4</sup> For convenience, in this paper, let the account of an equivalent of X be called "I-definition" and the account of the essence of X be called "E-definition."

Following Robinson's interpretation, Bluck accepts that Socrates's "model" definition in the *Meno* is not E-definition but I-definition. Thus, the definition in T is not E-definition but I-definition. Bluck reinforces this interpretation with some texts (*Smp.* 201d-203c, *Grg.* 447c-448e, *Tht.* 147c, 208d). Moreover, he introduces the distinction between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance, which Robinson does not exhibit. We have to know the individual "Meno" by acquaintance, but not by description; he cannot be defined because he does not have an essence.

Furthermore, given that Form is also a particular (simples), it has to be known by acquaintance, not by the description of its essence (*Tht.* 203a, 207a). Bluck does not claim that Plato had recognized a distinctive feature of Forms, which is found in the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*. However, Plato recognized the analogy between acquaintance with a person and acquaintance with a Form even before the *Theaetetus* (*R.* 477a, 510a). Moreover, although a theory of recollection does not accept the knowledge transmitted by an 'account' of some kind, Socrates states that he would be satisfied if Meno provides him the I-definition (75c). Therefore, in T, responding to the "Who is Meno?" question requires providing the I-definition about him through acquaintance (either by sense-perception or mental apprehension).<sup>5</sup>

Nehamas objects to this "traditional" reading and argues as follows: If Bluck's

interpretation is correct, Socrates's statement about Meno is wrong. For being the acquaintance of Meno is neither necessary nor sufficient for knowing whether he is rich. That is to say, we can know whether he is rich without being acquainted with him, and we do not know whether he is rich while we are acquainted with him.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, Nehamas claims that the point in T is *τὸ παράπαν* at 71b5. Someone who "doesn't know at all who Meno is" does not know all the features that belong to Meno as a function of his social position (Nehamas claims that *καλός* means "noble" but not "beautiful"). Hence, in order to know whether these features belong to Meno, we do not need to suppose intellectual acquaintance; rather it is sufficient to know who Meno is in the everyday sense of the phrase (e.g., his geographical, familial, and social origins). If Meno has an essence, this is his "provenance." Therefore, for Nehamas, "who Meno is" is not a profoundly philosophical question.<sup>7</sup>

Nehamas's interpretation is to be followed by many scholars.<sup>8</sup> We may thus suppose that his interpretation is at present the standard one about T.

However, is Nehamas's objection to Bluck correct? The point of his objection is that becoming an acquaintance of Meno is neither necessary nor sufficient for knowing his features. On the contrary, Nehamas argues that we come to understand the features of X by knowing "what X is," that is to say; the latter is necessary and sufficient for the former. Hence, in this framework, Bluck's interpretation is not correct. However, is this really what Socrates has in mind? He states only "... we wouldn't have considered whether virtue is teachable or not teachable before we had first searched for what it is itself" (86d4-5) or "... before considering in what way people acquire virtue, we first attempt to search for what on earth virtue in and of itself" (100b4-6). These remarks are no more than stating that knowing "what is X" is necessary for knowing the features of X and hence is not equivalent to Nehamas's interpretation.

Furthermore, even if Nehamas's objection to Bluck is correct, and the essence of Meno has the explanatory power that is sufficient for knowing his features, his understanding of essence (or definition) will have two problems. First, although in Nehamas's interpretation the individual Meno has an essence and the E-definition also applies,<sup>9</sup> as mentioned above, the particular cannot have an essence (according to Robinson and

Bluck). Second, even if the particular can have an essence, the term “provenance” is obscure. Provided that the meaning is similar to “family guest-friend of the Great King” (78d2-3), many peoples including Meno will have this essence. It is true that Nehamas asserts the definition in T is E-definition but not I-definition, but since the former implies the latter,<sup>10</sup> it will be wrong to apply the definition to many objects. In addition, if the provenance of Meno is his being the son of his parents,<sup>11</sup> the definitions of Meno may have uniqueness. However, in this case, this definition does not differ significantly from the I-definition, so that it is not necessary to prefer the E-definition to the I-definition. Therefore, Nehamas’s interpretation is incorrect.

Then, how should we interpret “who is Meno”? Nehamas would argue that being the acquaintance of X must automatically elicit knowledge of the features of X. However, as mentioned above, Socrates does not claim in the *Meno* that we will be able to know the features of the virtue as soon as we know what virtue is. Moreover, in Plato’s other works too, knowing what X is is not equivalent to knowing the features of X (*Prt.* 360e6-361a3, *R.* 354c1-3, *La.* 189e3-190b1). Then, we should suppose that, although we cannot know whether Meno is rich as soon as we are acquainted with him, the inquiry of his features would start from becoming acquainted with him. Namely, there is a time lag between both of them. Becoming an acquaintance of Meno is not sufficient for knowing his features because the processes of the inquiry have to lie between both of them.

Furthermore, in this framework, since it is necessary to have the I-definition of X before inquiring about the features of X, becoming acquainted with Meno is necessary for knowing his features. In fact, the inquiry (after T) in the *Meno* starts from of the enumeration of various virtues (the virtue of a man, a woman, a child, or an older man) by Meno (71e1-72a4). This process of inquiry implies that there is no consensus on the I-definition of the virtue before Socrates and Meno start to inquire whether virtue is teachable. Therefore, I claim that we can revise Bluck’s interpretation by introducing the processes of the inquiry, so that the acquaintance with X is necessary for the inquiry of the features of X.

Perhaps, if we were to criticize to Bluck, it would be as follows. He recognizes that

the knowledge by acquaintance in T relates to the distinction between a correct opinion and knowledge as defined in the examples of the way to Larissa (97a-b) or of the jurymen (*Tht.* 201a-c). That is to say, according to Bluck, the distinct mark of the knowledge for Plato is the “personal acquaintance” with the truth.<sup>12</sup> In this paper, I suggest reminding the reader what the problem is. However, since many scholars criticize Bluck’s interpretation of this problem,<sup>13</sup> further considerations are needed in order to show whether his interpretation is correct.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I use Long’s translation.

<sup>2</sup> Irwin 133.

<sup>3</sup> Although Bluck does not explicitly state it, this distinction originated in Russell 72-92. According to Russell, knowledge by acquaintance is the foundation of all knowledge, and does not need to be restricted to the particular.

<sup>4</sup> Robinson 53-56.

<sup>5</sup> Bluck 209-213.

<sup>6</sup> Nehamas 280-281.

<sup>7</sup> Nehamas 283-284. Sharples 124-125 contends “who Meno is” is not philosophically pressed, too. For, for him, pressing this question is equivalent to providing the I-definition about Meno, but he seems not to accept this definition. On the contrary, Kanayama 3-4 claims that to know “who Meno is” is to know he is a human being and thus to examine the state of his soul. That is to say, for him, “who Meno is” is profoundly philosophical. Moreover, Kanayama cites 76b4-c1 of the *Meno* and claims that we cannot know whether Meno is beautiful (namely, whether his soul is beautiful) by having a glimpse of him. This interpretation is of great interest. For, Kanayama’s interpretation is similar to my interpretation that emphasizes the process of inquiry.

<sup>8</sup> Klein 41-42, Sharples 124-125. cf. Kahn 159n12, Scott 20-22.

<sup>9</sup> Nehamas 283 carefully states that it is unclear whether some sensible objects (e.g., Meno) could be known or defined. Nevertheless, as stated above, we should suppose that since Meno has an essence, the E-definition also applies to him.

<sup>10</sup> Robinson 54.

<sup>11</sup> As Kripke 110-114 suggested.

<sup>12</sup> Bluck 32-33.

<sup>13</sup> E.g., Fine 225-226n42. cf. Burnyeat.