

# Journal of Cognition and Neuroethics

## The Self-Awareness of Reason in Plato

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### **Biography**

Daniel Bloom's area of expertise is Ancient Western Philosophy, though his interests in philosophy are very broad. He has a book coming out in 2014 entitled *The Unity of Oneness and Plurality in Plato's Theaetetus*. It addresses the relation between a transcendent principle of being and particular beings. Upcoming projects include an article on the relation between artistry and self-consciousness in Nietzsche's *Gay Science*, and an article on false opinion in Plato's *Theaetetus*. Daniel received his PhD from the University of Georgia in 2012. He will be a professor of philosophy at West Texas A&M University beginning in the Fall of 2014.

### **Publication Details**

*Journal of Cognition and Neuroethics* (ISSN: 2166-5087). March, 2014. Volume 2, Issue 1.

### **Citation**

Bloom, Daniel. 2014. "The Self-Awareness of Reason in Plato." *Journal of Cognition and Neuroethics* 2 (1): 95–103.

# The Self-Awareness of Reason in Plato

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## Abstract

Socrates is perhaps most famous for two claims: that the life of inquiry (a life dedicated to the use of reason) is the only life worth living, and that he knows that he knows nothing. These two famous claims appear to be starkly at odds with one another. After all, if Socrates really knows nothing then how can he possibly be sure enough to make the rather serious claim that there is only one kind of life worth living? What gives reason such a lofty position if it is not knowledge?

The solution to this apparent problem not only uncovers the heart of Plato's moral theory, but it also sheds light on what it is that sets reason apart from the other faculties. I argue that the fundamental feature of reason relevant to the resolution of the apparent problem is its self-awareness. More specifically, reason's ability to reflect on an idea without internalizing it, or accepting it as true, allows for an investigation into what is or is not good that does not commit the thinker to any particular conclusion. This ability to investigate without accepting, Socrates argues, is what allows us to navigate the world without harming ourselves (and hence is the only life worth living).

However, reason's self-awareness, while it does solve the Socratic problem raised above, leads to a new problem: how can reason (or the reasoning soul) be both the subject and object of its own investigation? Even if reason can be its own object, then won't self-aware reason differ from itself precisely insofar as it is one part subject and one part object, and since the subject would only be aware of the object it wouldn't really be self-aware? The conclusion of the paper will suggest the method Plato uses to navigate this problem, which includes the recognition of the need for intellection, or *nous*.

## Keywords

Plato, Inquiry, Ignorance, *Nous*, Reason, *Dianoia*, hypothesis, self-reflexivity, self-awareness, *Meno*, *Apology*

This paper is intended to give a general account of the ground of Socratic virtue, identifying both what it means to be virtuous, and how Plato directs us towards recognizing this. This is available to us, I argue, in spite of the fact that Socrates never gives us a definition of virtue, but rather restricts himself to undermining the accounts of virtue offered by others. For the argument in this paper, I will appeal to the *Meno* and the *Apology*, though I think that the account I am offering holds for all of Plato's dialogues.

Two of Socrates' most famous claims are that the life of inquiry (a life dedicated to the use of reason) is the only life worth living, and that he knows that he knows nothing (Plato 2002, *Apology*, 38a; 22d). These two famous claims appear to be starkly at odds with one another. After all, if Socrates really knows nothing then how can he possibly be

sure enough to make the rather serious claim that there is only one kind of life worth living? What gives reason such a lofty position if it is not knowledge?

Resolving this apparent contradiction in Socrates' reasoning is key to understanding Plato's moral theory, and it also sheds light on what sets reason apart from the other faculties. These are the two primary parts of this paper. First, I will raise and resolve the apparent contradiction that Socrates both knows and does not know the right way to live. I will then argue that this resolution posits a way of acting that is grounded in our ability to reason from hypothesis, and that this ability is, in turn, grounded in reasons self-awareness.

### **The Apparent Contradiction**

One of the definitions of virtue offered in Plato's *Meno* is "to find joy in beautiful things and have power." In response to this definition Socrates presents an argument concluding that all people only desire the good.<sup>1</sup> The central assumption in the argument is that no one desires to harm themselves. Since desiring what is bad is wishing to secure something harmful for oneself, and securing what is harmful for oneself is harming oneself, no one ever does desires what is bad. Yet, it is obvious that people do harm themselves (Anytus and Socrates both suggest the other does so [Plato 2002, *Meno*, 91a–95a]). How can this be? How is it that people ever secure what is harmful for themselves when all they ever seek out is what they think is beneficial. The answer is both obvious and key to understanding Plato's conception of human goodness. Individuals only harm themselves by acting for something that they think is good, but is really bad. Only when acting from a false claim of knowledge (of what is good) can people harm themselves. Thus, according to Socrates' argument, all that is needed to avoid harming oneself is to only act from what one knows (to be good).

Thus, only by acting from knowledge can a person be sure to avoid self-harm. Entailed in this argument is the assumption that every action is a claim about goodness. The pursuing of one thing over another (or the avoidance of one thing over another) is a claim about the value of things. For example, I choose to eat the banana because I think it is both pleasurable and will give me the energy I require to finish my task. I take both pleasure and energy to complete my task to be goods. That is, in choosing to eat the banana I am making a claim about the "goodness" of eating the banana. So too, if I choose to smoke the cigarette I am making a knowledge claim about the cigarette—specifically,

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1. The argument identifies beauty and goodness. See: Plato 2002, *Meno*, 77b.

I am claiming the cigarette to be (a) good, either because of the pleasure it gives me, or because I think it makes me look like a character in a gangster film. In both cases (eating the banana or smoking the cigarette) I am asserting the goodness of the action, and in so doing I am making a knowledge claim. What I fail to see in the case of the cigarette is that (most likely) in the long run the good that I attribute to smoking (say pleasure) will be outweighed by the harm (poor health and its attendant pain). Thus, in the case of the cigarette my action was determined by a false assumption of knowledge, i.e., that smoking the cigarette is good. It was thinking I knew what was good when I really did not that lead me to harm myself.

There are really two different kinds of assumptions being made in these actions. The first is that a particular action will lead to a particular end, i.e., that the cigarette will give me pleasure. The second is that pleasure is a good thing to seek. In other words, each action assumes something worth acting for, *and* a means of acquiring that something. In either case, it is easy to see how thinking we know what is good when we really do not know will lead to harm; acting for the wrong end means the direction you are trying to move in is harmful, while using the wrong means to a good end will lead you away from the good end towards something else.

Thus, every action is a twofold assumption of knowledge (of what is good), and the only way to avoid harming oneself is to only act from genuine knowledge. Here we arrive at the problem of Socrates mentioned above. He is a man that claims that all he knows is that he does not know, and yet he still chooses one action over another, often times with remarkable conviction. For example, in the *Apology* Socrates is ready to give his life for his conviction that the life of inquiry is the only life worth living. How can Socrates possibly

choose one action over another, let alone be willing to put his life on the line for such a choice, while knowing that he does not know?<sup>2</sup>

### **Inquiry as the highest human good (several versions)**

The only knowledge Socrates has is that he does not know. We have just seen that the only way to avoid harming oneself is to act only from knowledge. Since the only knowledge Socrates possesses is the knowledge of his lack of knowledge, it follows that the only way for Socrates to not harm himself is to act from the knowledge of his lack of knowledge. But what action follows from the awareness of the need for, and lack of, knowledge? It can only be seeking knowledge! Inquiry is the only action that cannot be harmful to the person who knows only that he does not know, for it is the only action that follows from knowledge (of a lack of knowledge).

In fact, *only* the person who knows that he does not know is capable of inquiry.<sup>3</sup> If knowledge is present there is no need or impetus to seek knowledge. Inquiry is the one activity that can *only* be done by the person who does not know. Every other activity

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2. Here is an outline of the argument from the *Meno* (Plato 2002, *Meno*, 77b–78b) that concludes that all (self) harm comes from thinking one knows when they do not know.

To desire beautiful things is to desire good things.

Some people desire good things and some people desire bad things.

A person can either desire bad things believing them to be good or believing/knowing them to be bad.

To desire something is to wish to acquire it for oneself.

Those who desire bad things believing them to be good actually desire good things.

To acquire something bad is to harm oneself.

Thus, to knowingly desire something bad for oneself is to desire to harm oneself.

Therefore, to knowingly desire what is bad is to wish to harm oneself.

No one wishes to harm themselves.

Therefore, no one desires what is bad, neither by thinking it is good nor by thinking it is bad.

Therefore, everyone desires what is good.

Therefore, the only way to harm oneself is to acquire what is bad believing it to be good. Or in other words, the only way to harm oneself is to believe one knows what is good when they really do not know what is good.

3. Edward Halper's excellent article, "A Lesson from the *Meno*," presents Socrates' argument for the life of inquiry in these terms. (See: "A Lesson from the *Meno*," *Gorgia-Menon: Selected Papers from the Seventh Symposium Platonicum*, edited by Michael Erler and Luc Brisson, 234–42. Sankt Augustin, Germany: Academia Verlag, 2007).

is improved (Plato argues that it is made good [Plato 2002, *Meno*, 87d–88d]<sup>4</sup>) by the presence of knowledge. Inquiry, on the other hand, is undermined by the presence of knowledge; it is fundamentally connected to ignorance.

There is something obvious about all of this. Plato suggests that knowledge is the highest good (insofar as it means we will never harm ourselves). As the highest good knowledge is the ground for the worth of everything else (i.e., money is good if one knows how to use it, bravery is good if one knows how to use it, etc. [Ibid.]). Thus, until one has knowledge, the acquiring of knowledge must be the one goal that trumps all others, for all things besides inquiry are only made good through knowledge. Thus, inquiry is the highest human good for as long as we do not know what the highest good is. The danger of assuming the wrong highest good is circumvented by choosing the *seeking* of the highest good as the highest human good.

Here is yet another version of the argument that the life of inquiry is the highest human good. All action is action for a supposed good end. Knowing that I do not know what the good is means that I have no way to act, for I am aware that I have no way of determining what is or is not a good end. However, if I act for the sake of seeking knowledge (i.e., inquiring), I can act for the sake of something that does not commit me to any particular end, for what it commits me to is investigating, which itself is not tied to any conclusion.<sup>5</sup> To say this in yet another way, the highest good is knowledge, for it is knowledge that ensures all actions are good/beneficial. Without actually knowing what is good, the only way I can act so as to be certain I am not acting in opposition to what is good is to act for the sake of knowing. Inquiry is precisely this acting for the sake of knowledge. Thus humans, insofar as we do not have knowledge, have a kind of surrogate highest good. We cannot act in a way that we know is good (since we do not have knowledge), but we can act in a way that we know is not bad, by seeking after the knowledge that makes everything good. This negative principle, not doing harm (as opposed to doing good), is the ground of Socratic morality.

### **Inquiry/reason as the method of choice**

So, inquiry is the highest human good. What, however, are we to understand by inquiry? Couldn't anything be considered an inquiry into what is good? After all, we

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4. In this argument Plato uses multiple terms for “knowledge,” concluding that all things are made beneficial by *phronesis* (often translated as practical wisdom) instead of *episteme* (the typical word for knowledge). Nonetheless, I think for the purposes of the paper the point still holds.

5. This is grounded in the claim that inquiry requires lack of knowledge.

have just recognized that every act entails an assumption of good. Isn't the acting on any assumption, therefore, an investigation into whether or not that assumption of what is good is true or false? In other words, the Socratic knowledge of ignorance would seem to entail an ignorance of what inquiry is in just the same way that it entails ignorance of what the highest good is. If we pick an incorrect method (or means) of inquiry we are just as likely to harm ourselves as if we had chosen an incorrect highest good.

What we need is a way to choose particular actions that does not commit us to an assumption of knowledge. We can find a parallel to this kind of action in thought: we are able to think without committing ourselves to believing what we are thinking. In Plato this type of thought is exemplified by mathematics.<sup>6</sup> Proofs are based on some initial set of assumptions in the form of axioms and theorems. The conclusions generated from the initial assumptions (i.e., the hypotheses) are true only insofar as the hypotheses are true. This allows us to undertake a meaningful investigation while all the while recognizing that the truth of everything that follows from the initial assumptions is entirely dependent upon the truth of the initial assumptions. In short, we can think without necessarily accepting whatever we think as true.

The question is if there is an analog to this in action? Can we act without assuming that we know the proper way to act, in the same way that we can think without committing ourselves to what is thought? The answer to this question is almost too simple; we act without assuming we know the right way to act by acting from reason instead of desire. Desire, because it lacks the self-awareness of reason, unwaveringly asserts an action as good. Reason, because of its ties to the hypothetical, is able to act in a way that maintains the possibility of recognizing its own error. Or, to put this another way, because reason is able to be aware of its own assumptions it is never unshakably bound to any of them. Thus, every action from reason remains open to its own faults, and hence, the actor is always in a position to recognize that his action opposes inquiry, and to alter it.

In summary, both types of assumptions made in action—assuming an end (or good) towards which the action is directed and assuming a means of achieving that end—can either be made while recognizing their hypothetical character or by falsely claiming knowledge. To falsely claim knowledge is harmful. Thus, if we are to avoid harming ourselves we must act while recognizing the hypothetical character of both the means to the end, and the end itself. The life of inquiry is the end that necessarily recognizes its own lack, for inquiry is only possible with the realization that one lacks knowledge.

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6. For examples see Plato 2002, *Meno*, 86e–87c; *Republic*, 509d–511e; and, *Theaetetus*, 148d (where Socrates requests a definition of knowledge along the lines of a previously given mathematical definition).

Rationally choosing a means to the life of inquiry allows us to be ready to abandon an action as soon as we recognize that it is in any way opposed to the life of inquiry.

There are many issues and difficulties that arise out of this account of Plato's Socratic moral theory. For example, reason's ability to hypothesize requires its maintaining a separation from its object. This separation, however, may well preclude the possibility of actually acquiring any knowledge—indeed, for Plato, knowledge seems to require overcoming any distinction between the subject and object, but this very distinction is the one required for hypothetical inquiry. Nonetheless, even if knowledge is never attained, the argument for the life of inquiry still holds, for as I have argued, the value of inquiry is not merely instrumental, but rather, the life of inquiry is the good human life even if that inquiry never leads us to knowledge. And this, I believe, is where the real beauty of Plato's account lies; it shows how reason gives us a moral compass even in the face of its inability to provide us with knowledge.

### **The need for a higher faculty**

We see from the above that reason's ability to maintain distance from its object (i.e., to treat it hypothetically) gives humans a way to act without assuming knowledge, and thus provides us with a way of living that is not harmful to ourselves. The distance between reason and its object, however, also has significant epistemic repercussions. The ability to know, Plato suggests,<sup>7</sup> is directly connected to our ability to overcome the distinction between the subject and the object. In brief, to know an object is for that object to be present for the subject in the same way that the object is present in itself. Yet, the possibility of reason's self-awareness depends upon the separation between the subject and the object. The thinker cannot fully take on the object while still maintaining the hypothetical character of the investigation.<sup>8</sup>

The issues involved in reason's distinction between the subject and object are difficult to parse. The following is a brief introduction into what the distinction entails for Plato. The subject/object distinction is necessary for inquiry. When a subject grasps an object as distinct from itself the subject must view the object as multiple; merely to grasp the object as distinct from the subject, and as distinct from other objects, requires attributing a multiplicity to the object, for, after all, the distinct object requires characteristics that

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7. This is a somewhat controversial claim in Platonic literature. For the sake of this paper I will hypothesize it here.

8. The above assumption regarding knowledge overcoming the distinction between subject and object really amounts to the hypothesizing of the non-hypothetical.



both distinguish it from, and relate it to, other objects. Yet, in order for the grasp of an object to be of *one* object, it must be the case that the plurality necessary for that object to be can somehow be grasped as one thing. This is true of all grasps for Plato. If the grasp of an object is distinct, then that object must have parts that distinguish it from other objects (if something were entirely one it would be identical to anything else entirely one). Yet, to *be* at all, an object must be one. Thus, every grasp is both of the object as one thing, and of the object as a collection of parts. I have suggested that the grasp of the object as a collection of parts is the work of reason. What we now see is that in order for this type of work to take place there must be a higher faculty at work as well, a faculty responsible for the oneness of our grasp. This higher faculty (Plato called it *nous*), because it is responsible for grasping the oneness of an object, must overcome the separation of subject and object.

This distinction between reason<sup>9</sup> and the higher intellectual faculty (*nous*) is very slippery terrain, in large part because the act of differentiation can only be undertaken by reason, and hence never fully capture *nous*. I will conclude this paper by pointing to an experience in thought that illustrates this distinction. When thinking through a problem one must take the parts being considered and grasp how they fit together. An impasse is the inability to reconcile distinct ideas. The reconciliation comes in the form of an insight that overcomes the difference between the parts being considered. That moment of insight when the impasse is reconciled is the operation of *nous*, and in that act (so this position claims) both the opposition between the parts of the object, and the subject and object, is overcome. The feeling that we experience with an insight (i.e., the feeling connected to the “aha!” moment) is the feeling of oneness between the subject and object. Yet, as soon as we begin to inquire into this new insight we once again fall back into the separation between subject and object required for reasoning, and we are once again engaged in inquiry.

### References

Plato. 2002. *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*. Translated by G.M.A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.

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9. Reason, in this paper, refers mostly to *dianoia*, though Plato uses several different terms in the dialogues in relation to the kinds of judgments I am talking about in this paper.