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PART I

THE CRITICAL TEXTS OF ANTIQUITY

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INTRODUCTION

This book attempts, through a series of interrelated studies, to give an account of the range of views on memory and its uses during the middle ages. But we must begin with ancient Greek and Roman positions because these would be drawn upon, reinterpreted, even distorted by later, medieval rememberers in order that they might reach working hypotheses that served their own understanding of how men came to know their world and remember their pasts.

Medieval readers believed that the text itself was the self-sufficient object of inquiry and understanding, providing a timeless contribution to the truth of how it is to be a human knower and rememberer. For the most part, when medieval readers confronted ancient texts, they were not troubled by what for us appears to be a major methodological difficulty in understanding the meaning of past texts. Consequently, they rarely, if ever raised the issue of first having to know the social and economic context of a past text as the means of gaining access to its meaning and, so recovering the intentions of its author. Instead, they paid attention to a close analysis of the text, weighing it over and over again in order to elucidate what they took to be its timeless and universal meaning. Only gradually did they come to read a past text in the context of what they took to be the *linguistic* conventions of the time in which it was written. It is hoped that as the present reader confronts the accounts given of how and why attitudes to past texts changed during the medieval centuries, it will become clearer why a twentieth-century account of attitudes to memory and memorials must *try* to consider not only what medieval authors said but also the social, economic, legal and institutional reasons for their analyses taking the form they did. But this is precisely what most medieval readers never did themselves when they read the texts of antiquity. Consequently, the following treatment of the critical texts of antiquity attempts to present the classical arguments 'simply' as a-contextual, philosophical positions,

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which later medieval readers thought to be relevant to questions about how human beings, at any moment of contingent history, learn about the world and then remember what they have learnt. There is no doubt, however, that I have chosen to highlight those aspects of classical discussions which, with hindsight, I know to have been of particular interest to medieval readers so that there is in what follows, an implicit skewing of classical positions towards their medieval future.

During the classical period of Greek thought, the question of what memory is was linked intimately with the problem of how we know what we know, and what the object of knowing essentially is. To know somehow also includes retaining over time information that is not necessarily continuously present to perception. To know implies a more stable and enduring grasp of what the something is than a momentary reception of its visible or audible characteristics affords us. And yet to understand what we believe we know requires that we forget the specificity of different things as they are individually perceived in order to generalise and abstract from details. The generation of meaning entails a destruction of the repleteness of the moment by moment experience of substantive living.

The Greeks were as concerned as we are, if not more so, about what appears to be the paradoxical requirement to forget in order to know. 'Just what are we remembering' and 'how does memory operate', consequently emerged as two primary issues for the Greeks in their search for an adequate theory of knowledge. To determine the contribution of the changing world of experience in men's lives, lives shored up by fixed opinions, beliefs, and stabilised by knowledge, was to become a major theme of the Greek philosophical enterprise. Two powerful, interrelated but contrasting theories emerged, that of Plato and Aristotle, that would dominate the western philosophical tradition. At the heart of each epistemology is an explanation of memory and beneath the surface of each is the fear of forgetting.

That we cannot speak of Plato's or Aristotle's understanding of memory without dealing with their wider epistemologies will become clear in what follows. With Plato, we find a theory of remembering that coincides with a theory of knowing. Aristotle, however, not only distinguishes memory from reminiscence but also treats memory and reminiscence as dependent activities made possible once we know something.

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Chapter 1

PLATO

Plato on memory; his theory of mind, learning, recalling, knowing. 'Meno', 'Phaedrus', 'Republic'.

Plato's *Meno*,[1] a middle-period dialogue which is thought to report a conversation that took place in the newly restored democracy in Athens of 402 BC, sets out a theory of knowledge as recollection. The wealthy Meno raises the sophistic dilemma about knowledge, that one can never find out anything new so that either one knows it already and one has no need to find it out, or else one does not know and there is no means of recognising it when found. 'How will you look for something when you do not in the least know what it is? How on earth are you going to set up something you don't know as the object of your search? Even if you come right up against it, how will you know that what you have found is the thing you did not know?' (80 D). Socrates tries to answer this question of how it is possible to inquire into anything unknown by attempting to elucidate the nature of knowledge, inquiry and reality.[2] He propounds his theory that knowledge is recollection, rather than something imparted by teaching, basing it on the religious doctrine that the human soul is immortal. Instead of perishing at the body's death, the soul migrates elsewhere and is thereafter born in a new body. Its wanderings here and in the other world have exposed it to *all* there is to know: 'the soul is immortal and has been born many times and has seen all things both here and in the other world, it has learned everything that is' (81 C–D). It therefore follows that when a man recalls a single piece of knowledge he should be able to start from what he knows and be reminded of all the rest of knowledge latently stored in his mind. In ordinary language, Socrates says, we call this 'learning', but actually it is recollecting; 'for seeking and learning are in fact nothing but recollection' (81 C–D). The learning process is the activity of eliciting the knowledge that is already in the mind, recollecting it in order, which is the proper way

1 Plato, *Protagoras and Meno*, trans. W. K. C. Guthrie (Harmondsworth, 1956). *Plato's Meno*, ed. R. S. Bluck (Cambridge, 1961), Greek text and introduction.
2 In general, see J. M. Moravcsik, 'Understanding and knowledge in Plato's philosophy', *Neue Hefte für Philosophie*, 15–16 (1978), 53–69; S. Scolnicov, 'Three aspects of Plato's philosophy of learning and instruction', *Paideai*, Special Plato Issue (1976), 50–62.

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to recollect (82 D), so that one possesses a knowledge of which one was hitherto unaware.

Socrates has evaded the either/or terms of the original dilemma that one either knows something or not, by recognising a process that starts from unconscious knowledge (which ought not to be taken as ignorance because at birth the mind is never completely blank), moves on to opinion or belief, and then on to the latter's conversion into knowledge. The object of cognition at the level of *doxa* (belief/opinion) or at the level of knowledge, is however, the same and unchanging. To know something in an imperfectly conscious, uncoordinated way through opinion, based either on inductive evidence, second-hand information, or trust, must be converted to knowledge by a repetition of a questioning process whereby one works out an explanation for understanding the reason why something is true so that it is firmly fixed in the mind. Reasoning out the cause as accomplished by dialectical question-and-answer over a long period of time is another name for recollection. This recollection process is awakened by skilful questioning. But what is the nature of the knowable? Plato treats this more fully in another middle dialogue, the *Phaedo*.[3]

Here, he asserts that the true objects of knowledge are Forms or Ideas, and these Forms are independent of the particular concrete things that embody them, or images of them, in the sensible world. All sensible things are in a perpetual flow of change so that there can be no knowledge of them. The true objects of knowledge are unchanging and stable. So what we know is not the concrete things around us but the objects of thought known by the mind when it withdraws from the senses to think by itself.[4]

Furthermore, in the *Theaetetus*,[5] Socrates says, against anyone who takes up the position of Protagoras (that man is the measure of all things and therefore, knowledge and perception are the same thing), that one ought not to suppose that in *remembering* what he has experienced, a man is having the same sort of experience (*pathos*) as he had when he was *experiencing* what he now remembers. Socrates wishes to show that memory is not knowledge of the remembered *things*; seeing is not knowing.[6] Indeed, the mind in itself is its own instrument for contemplating the

[3] *Phaedo*, trans. Hugh Tredennick, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato including the Letters*, eds. E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (Bollingen ser. 71) (Princeton, New Jersey, 1973) pp. 40–98 (hereafter *Collected Dialogues*).

[4] G. E. R. Lloyd, *Magic, Reason and Experience, Studies in the Origins and Development of Greek Science*, (Cambridge, 1979); on the unreliability of the senses and observational methods in Plato, pp. 132–3. Only in the later dialogues does Plato point out that in perception it is the soul that grasps sense-objects *through* the senses. eg. *Tht.* 184b-c; *Phlb.* 33c ff.

[5] Trans. F. M. Cornford, in *Collected Dialogues*, pp. 845–919.

[6] *Tht.*, 163 D-164 B, pp. 869–870: Socrates: 'Suppose someone were to ask: "Is it possible for a man who has once come to know something and still preserve a memory of it, not to

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common terms that apply to everything, for example, existence/nonexistence, likeness/unlikeness, sameness/difference, unity and numbers in general. Thinking is discourse and judgement is a statement inwardly pronounced.

But what happens when someone judges falsely? Plato provides the following physiological analogy to show how some have thought false judgements come about, an analogy that would exert considerable influence not only on Aristotle[7] but on generations of medieval thinkers,[8] and which continues to be defended in certain twentieth-century schools of psychology and neurophysiology.[9]

Socrates asks Theaetetus to imagine for the sake of argument that the mind contains a block of wax which in this or that individual man may be larger or smaller, comparatively pure in some, murky in others, harder in some and softer in others. Some will possess a wax of just the right consistency. We might call this block of wax a gift from the Muses' mother, Memory. When we wish to remember something that we see, hear or conceive in our own minds, we hold this wax under the perception or ideas and imprint them on it, thereby stamping the impression as we do with a seal ring. What is imprinted we remember and know so long as the image remains. False judgements can occur when, for instance, I, who know Theaetetus and Theodorus and possess imprints of both like seal impressions in the waxen block, see you both at a distance indistinctly and am in a hurry to assign the proper imprint of each to the proper visual perception, like fitting a foot into its own footprint to effect a recognition, and then make the mistake of interchanging them. Therefore, in the field of objects both known and perceived, judgement can be false by bringing

know just that thing that he remembers at the moment when he remembers it?" This is, perhaps, rather a long-winded way of putting the question. I mean, can a man who has become acquainted with something and remembers it, not know it? . . .' The conclusion is that a man who has come to know a thing and still remembers it, does not know it since he does not see it, *if* knowledge and perception are the same thing, which Socrates says they are not.

7 See below, chapter 2.

8 See below, ch. 15, on the *Prose Salernitan Questions* and on Arabic commentaries on Aristotle's *De Anima* and on ancient medical tracts.

9 The literature is vast. See R. Edgley, 'Innate ideas', in *Knowledge and Necessity*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures, vol. 3, 1968/9, (London, 1970), pp. 1–33, a critical discussion of among others N. Chomsky, 'Recent contributions to the theory of innate ideas', *Synthese*, 17 (1967), in contrast with various empiricist theories. Chomsky has said: 'The child who acquires a language . . . knows a great deal more than he has learned', *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, Mass. 1965), pp. 32–3. Rationalism usually claims not only that we have ideas that are not derived from experience but that at least some of these ideas are ideas of reason or understanding. The ambiguity here centres on what precisely is innate: knowledge or a disposition of some sort? This would be recognised by Avicenna. See below, ch. 15

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wrong imprints to match perceptions (191 D–6D). Socrates goes on to note that 'they' say when a man has in his mind a good thick slab of wax, smooth, kneaded to the right consistency, the impressions that come through the senses are stamped on the tables of the 'heart' – Homer's word hints at the mind's likeness to wax[10] – then the imprints are clear, deep enough to last. Such people are quick to learn and also have good memories and do not interchange the imprints of their perceptions but think truly. But those with muddy wax blocks which are over-soft or over-hard, are quick to learn (if their wax is soft) but forgetful; if their wax is hard they are slow to learn but retain. Impressions in soft wax are indistinct because they melt together and some become blurred. If they overlap through being crowded together into some wretched little narrow mind, they are still more indistinct. All these types of minds are likely to judge falsely.

Socrates, however, will reject this explanation that false judgement is simply a misfitting of thought to perception. Seeing is not knowing.

Plato separates the sensible from the thinkable, and through his interest in mathematics and geometry he shows that a system of truths obtains, truths which do not hold good of visible, tangible things of sense and whose proofs could not be demonstrated by reference to such things. Instead, mathematical and geometrical truths pertain to a supersensible world that is only accessible to intelligence. Material bodies only approximate the ideal objects of geometry and the latter are exempt from time and change. These eternal objects and necessary truths comprise reality and the real objects of thought are not found in the physical world, nor can they be extracted from it. Knowledge comes out of the mind itself and recollection is the process by which this knowledge is raised to awareness. Not only mathematical but also moral concepts, as the eternal objects of thought knowable without the senses, are recovered out of a memory latent in the soul. It is, then, the power of thought that pierces the surface of changeable appearance to disclose beyond it an objective, unchanging 'nature of things' knowable to mind alone. Knowledge is as much an eternal, immovable structure as is the nature of things. Plato's theory of recollection (*anamnesis*) is therefore based on a prior ontology.[11] There can be no knowledge of the natural world of material, concrete entities itself because the natural world is always in flux, coming to be and passing away. The world of experience leads only to opinion and belief, and when beliefs are false they can only be shown to be such through being shown *logically*

[10] *Iliad*, 2. 851; 16. 554.
[11] J. M. Moravcsik, 'Recollecting the theory of forms', in W. H. Werkmeister, ed., *Facets of Plato's Philosophy*, *Phronesis*, supplement 2 (Assen, 1976), pp. 1–20.

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inconsistent with other beliefs accepted as more certain. True belief can be confirmed as knowledge, but this, once again, occurs only from repeated *logical* demonstrations of, for instance, how propositions necessarily follow from one another.[12] Opinion or true belief is converted into knowledge by repeated reflections on the *reasons* for something being the case. This work of repeated reflection binds a set of true beliefs into a coherent system and it is this repeated reflection which is recollection. Indeed, recollection of this kind is an endless process by which we move towards uncovering the whole, fixed, logical structure of truth by recovering it from our memories.[13]

In the *Meno* Socrates tries to demonstrate that an uneducated slave-boy can be shown to know implicitly geometric truths merely by being asked the right questions. He concludes: 'a man who does not know has in himself true opinions on a subject without having knowledge ... At present these opinions, being newly aroused, have a dream-like quality. But if the same questions are put to him on many occasions and in different ways, you can see that in the end he will have a knowledge of the subject as accurate as anybody's ... This knowledge will not come from teaching but from questioning. He will recover it for himself ... And the spontaneous recovery of knowledge that is in him is recollection' (85 C–D). The truth about reality has always been in our souls, and this demonstrates the soul's immortality. In effect, what the activity of recollection does is 'tether' true opinions, which are apt to run away from our minds, by repeated reflection. Knowledge, like right opinion, is acquired through the searching activity of recollection.

But let us note that it is only knowledge of a certain type that can thus be recovered. Historical knowledge in the sense of individual facts and events of human or natural history, is not contained in this inner consciousness or latent memory. Because particular facts are sensibly experienced and stored in what we might call a personal, individual, subjective memory, Plato does not consider this knowledge. Plato recognises that we have the capacity to preserve in the memory sensible instances but he says there is no *understanding* involved in this sense memory. Permanent, knowable reality, on the other hand, does not alter and it is immaterial. As such it is only accessible to pure thought. This means that Plato is talking of an impersonal memory of mankind.[14] Differences between individuals

12 H.-P. Stahl, 'Beginnings of propositional logic in Plato', trans. Gertrud Weiler, in *Plato's Meno, Text and Essays*, ed. Malcolm Brown (New York, 1971), pp. 180–97.

13 In general, see Jon Moline, *Plato's Theory of Understanding* (Madison, Wisc., 1981).

14 F. M. Cornford, *Principium Sapientiae: The Origins of Greek Philosophical Thought* (Cambridge, 1952), chapter 4, part I, 'Anamnesis', pp. 45–61. Also in *Plato's Meno, Text and Essays*, ed. Brown, pp. 108–27; p. 120. This apparent dual memory, one related to

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consist only in the degree to which knowledge has been elicited (or not) and made conscious (or not).

What has been put forward in the *Meno* and more explicitly in the *Phaedo* is the belief in the separateness of intelligence and objects known by it from the material world. This assumes the coherent logical necessity of the real and its truth, and represents a view of the sources of knowledge that is much older than the alternative medical-empirical doctrine that knowledge comes through the senses.[15] Aristotle was later to say that this Platonic theory of Forms or Ideas was a variety of the older Pythagoreanism on to which were grafted modifications by the Socratic influence.[16]

The end of the *Meno* returns to an issue raised in the beginning, whether virtue can be taught, by arguing that it probably cannot be taught, and therefore comes to man by means of a mysterious intuition, a divine dispensation achieved without thought and therefore, without knowledge. In the democracy of Athens during the fifth century, knowledge has not been a guide in practical public life; it is evident that virtuous public figures have been unable to impart their virtue to their sons although they must have desired to do so. Rather it appears to be

> well-aimed conjecture which statesmen employ in upholding their countries' welfare. Their position in relation to knowledge is no different from that of prophets and tellers of oracles, who under divine inspiration utter many truths, but have no knowledge of what they are saying ... We are right therefore to give this title to the oracular priests and the prophets that I mentioned, and to poets of every description. Statesmen too, when by their speeches they get great things done yet know nothing of what they are saying, are to be considered as acting no less under divine influence, inspired and possessed by divinity. (99 D)

We shall have occasion to return to this divine intuitionism later on.[17]

Although the doctrine of knowledge as recollection has been set forth in the *Meno*, the dialogue ends as do many of the earlier dialogues, in an

perception, another related to thought, will later be interpreted by neo-Platonists and later medieval philosophers as indicative of a division between corporeal and intellectual faculties. Aristotle also proposes a 'lower' and 'higher' memory.

15 *Plato's Meno, Text and Essays*, ed. Brown, p. 127.

16 The mid sixth-century BC Pythagoras and his followers in Crotona, southern Italy, practised mathematics and studiously avoided literacy since writing was believed to be a source of error. They taught the doctrine of the transmigration of souls and their separability from body. Herodotus said Pythagoreans learned this doctrine in Egypt.

17 'So I soon made up my mind about the poets too: I decided that it was not wisdom that enabled them to write their poetry but a kind of instinct or inspiration such as you find in seers and prophets who deliver all their sublime messages without knowing in the least what they mean'. *Apology*, 21B–22E. For an extraordinary and controversial account relating ancient texts and modern psychological theories, see Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Harmondsworth, 1982).

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inconclusive manner, Socrates saying that we cannot really know how virtue is acquired unless we first examine the essential nature of virtue, and this has not been done here. Plato's *Republic* will pursue this issue not only to show that virtue is equivalent to knowledge, but also to set out the political consequences for individuals and the state where abstract truth is sought for its own sake by those naturally capable of what is, in effect, near absolute recollection of the Form or Idea of the Good. Society no longer need rely on divinely inspired well-aimed conjecture when the ideal state is established and ruled over by philosopher kings.

For Plato, then, all knowledge is latent in the mind and is never, strictly speaking, forgotten. The process of recollection merely elicits knowledge, raising it to consciousness. If anything is forgotten by thought, it is the changeable appearances of the concrete world of things of which there can be no knowledge, only opinion and belief. The *nature* of things, known to mind, is never lost to mind although it may remain implicit. The fixed, logical structure of truth is there to be recovered from our memories. The intricate tapestry of our inner experience is not derived out of mere matter, because consciousness and memory are not properties of the material. The Platonic process of recollection requires no explanation of how we interact with our environment precisely because the particularity of this world is forgotten in the recollective process. In discussing memory Plato forgets sense data as such and therefore implies that any conscious recollection is not the retrieval of images but rather of what, logically, must have been the essence of an earlier situation of which one was previously aware and then the reworking of these elements into a rational pattern. Reasoning out the explanation of what must have been is recollection. Aristotle will refer to this logical exercise of recollection as reminiscence, the conscious exercise of which need not rely on sense memory but which may end in remembering. But Aristotle denies the possibility and the desirability of editing out the world of particular experiences from our memories, thereby complicating the picture and opening up the discussion to what will later be seen as the insoluble paradoxes concerning the relation of intellect and brain, which endure to our own times. In effect, Plato is more assertive about the disjunction between thinking of our past experiences and the actual experiencing of them. The asserted disjunction is not, however, in the service of a theory of subjective, relativistic, creativity of thought. The presumed stability of being merely confirms the logical stability of reasoned recollection over and against a world of inconstant mutability. And by extension, concepts as classes of things exist in the mind, are prior to any sensual experience of an extramental individual belonging to a class, and are best raised to

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