

For Philosophy, Mistakes are Enough

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There are many salutary features in Itamar Manoff's paper on Plato's *Meno* and the phenomenology of the mistake.¹ While I cannot discuss all of them here, several deserve, in my view, special consideration. The first of these appears so obvious that it would seem, at first glance, not to warrant any mention whatsoever. However, this is precisely why I think it so important. Here I am referring to the intuition which seems to prompt Manoff's entire inquiry—the observation that the predominant view in educational circles is that mistakes, notwithstanding our natural inclination to avoid them, are essential to the learning process and, as such, ought to be encouraged in educational settings. Such a view of the educational value of mistakes is in fact central to the major developmental, pedagogical, and epistemological theories of the twentieth century. Here I refer most notably to the work of Jean Piaget, John Dewey, and Karl Popper.² Whether formulated as “disequilibrium” in Piaget, “problematic situation” in Dewey, or “falsification” in Popper, mistakes are deemed foundational whether for cognitive development, growth of experience, or advancement of knowledge. By intentionally launching his inquiry from such a familiar vantage point, Manoff reminds us to take special notice of those tenets which can often go unnoticed in our received pedagogies.

Of course, given such a positive valuation of mistakes, it is no surprise that educators will find themselves encouraging their students to make them. And again, Manoff entices us to pay closer attention to what all too often goes unnoticed. Here, I refer to Manoff's brief but insightful analysis concerning the quirkiness of the idea that we can actually “make mistakes.”³ Manoff offers a convincing argument for why considering mistakes as something which can be made renders the ontological status of mistakes ambiguous. Furthermore, the phrase itself is semantically ambivalent. Clearly, says Manoff, mistakes are not things which are made in the same sense in which a work of art is made, or even in which we might posit an idea. Mistakes are, patently, not actions

or thoughts which we intend for to happen. And it is this insight which leads Manoff to raise the question, how do mistakes appear to us to begin with? And, given their self-evident appearance in the process of learning, how is it that we can learn from them?

Because mistakes are not something we make, nor are they the products of our own volition, they must appear to us as something other. This insight helps Manoff form the clue to how we can be said to learn from them. Mistakes act as something other than ourselves, something other than who and what we are, and thus they disrupt the naïve state of certainty which we inhabit at any given time. Mistakes appear to us in the form of a confrontation. Nowhere is this sense of the confrontational nature of mistakes made more manifest, as Manoff demonstrates, than in the dialogues of Plato, where we find Socrates perpetually leading his interlocutors to that anxiety fueled state of perplexity known in the philosophical tradition as *aporia*. It is at the moment when Socrates' interlocutor becomes so gripped by *aporia* that the desire to learn and for knowledge is ignited. However, as Manoff points out, the story that Plato presents of the learning process is more complicated. The demonstration with Meno's attendant is seemingly meant by Socrates to help ease Meno's concern about the very possibility of arriving at knowledge, but while the pedagogical event with the attendant is a success and leads to certainty, the inquiry that follows with Meno falls far short of attaining any satisfactory knowledge whatsoever.

For Manoff, this juxtaposition of the attendant's anxiety—which from the text itself can barely be adduced—with the more intense aporetic anxiety experienced by Meno, is problematic. When the attendant is confronted with his mistake, he is awarded with knowledge; when Meno is confronted with his mistake, no such knowledge is guaranteed. It seems to me that, for Manoff, the main difference in these two instances lies with the substance of the respective inquiries. He eloquently puts the matter this way:

[The] concept of virtue is not the area of a square, and Socrates knows that he cannot provide Meno with the same results. What Socrates is offering Meno is a life of endless

inquiry, a life in exile. The anxiety emerges from a promise that cannot be kept, from a pursuit of certainty that cannot be satisfied. Outside the realm of geometry, learning ceases to resemble recollection, seeming more like a journey into the unknown.⁴

It is at this point, however, that I begin to part ways with Manoff's reading. For while it is certainly reasonable to suggest that the truth of Plato's theory of recollection hinges on whether or not knowledge can be attained, my sense, however, is that what matters most for Socrates in the context of the dialogue is not so much the offer of the "hopeful promise" that "the gift of knowledge awaits at the end of every journey of learning." In other words, it is not so much the promise of knowledge that is being offered but the opportunity for Meno to turn his attention to the soul and not to the reputation for knowledge that any alleged teacher (Gorgias, for example) might possess. We must remember that the implication of Plato's theory is not only that learning is nothing but recollection, but that precisely because learning *is* recollection can there be no such thing as teaching. If Socrates knows anything with certainty at the outset of his demonstration it is not only that, given a geometry problem, the attendant will arrive at knowledge, but rather that he will demonstrate to Meno that in arriving at knowledge the attendant was not instructed by Socrates. What seems to convince Meno most of all regarding the success of the theory of recollection is not the knowledge outcome at the end of the demonstration, but that neither Socrates nor anyone else had taught the attendant geometry. While knowledge may be necessary for learning, the point that Socrates wishes to make at this moment in the dialogue is that teaching, in the sense of teaching as *didaskalos*, or instruction, is not required for knowledge. He makes no such negative claim, however, about the role of his manner of dialectic. Indeed, the practice of dialectic, whether in partnership with an external facilitator like Socrates, or as an internalized cognitive process, is part and parcel of recollection, and thus learning, itself. As Socrates puts it:

These opinions have now just been stirred up like a

dream, but if he were repeatedly asked about these same thing in various ways, you know that in the end his knowledge about these things would be accurate as anyone's. . . . And he will know it without having been taught but only questioned, and find the knowledge himself . . . (85c-d).⁵

In closing, I would like to pose a question to Manoff and see what he thinks. His final sentence suggests that the question, "how can we attain certain knowledge?" is the "canonical question" (of the *Meno*, certainly, but perhaps also the entirety of Plato's Socratic dialogues); whereas the question, "what do we do when we realize we were wrong?" serves instead as a "secret pedagogical anxiety," a question that, like an apparition, haunts the philosophical tradition.⁶ My question then is whether Manoff might entertain the possibility that it is instead the problem of pedagogical anxiety that is central to Socrates' project and not the possibility or promise of knowledge. Whether with the young politician *Meno*, or the insatiable *Alcibiades*, could it be that the goal of Socrates, and thus of philosophy itself, is not primarily the attainment of certainty, but rather to learn to care for the self and to pay attention to the soul? Awareness of one's mistakes, then, brings one to greater awareness of the condition of one's soul, and thus leads to the learning of what prevented one from realizing their mistakes in the first place. In other words, could it be that the point of philosophy is simply the awareness of our mistakes, and not the attainment of knowledge?

1 Itamar Manoff, "Toward a Phenomenology of the Mistake: A Reading of Plato's *Meno*," *Philosophy of Education* 76, no. 2 (2020).

2 For discussion see, Henry J. Perkinson, *Learning from Our Mistakes: A Reinterpretation of Twentieth-Century Educational Theory* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984). Interestingly, Perkinson expels Dewey from his list of the major theorists and educators who have advanced this "Darwinian"

view of learning, which includes Piaget, Popper, Skinner, and Montessori. However, any close reader of *Democracy and Education*, and especially Dewey's chapter, "Play and Work in the Curriculum," would have to conclude that, for Dewey, experiences which incite the need for active modification and reconstruction (i.e., correction) are essential to learning. See, John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The New Press, 1916), 194-206.

3 Manoff, "Toward a Phenomenology."

4 Manoff.

5 Plato, *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002)

6 Manoff.