

Toward a Phenomenology of the Mistake: A Reading of Plato's *Meno*

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INTRODUCTION

Mistakes are commonly held to be a central part of human learning. As educators we often encourage our students to make mistakes and try to learn from them, portraying them as something important and ultimately advantageous (albeit painful). But what *are* mistakes, and how do we learn from them? In this paper, I will set out to examine the phenomenon of mistakes in learning. I will begin by exploring some of the pedagogical and philosophical challenges in trying to provide a unified definition of mistakes. I will ask what the conditions are for evaluating some form of human activity as a mistake and position the mistake not as a stand-alone thing or object, but rather as a moment embedded within processes of human action, evaluation and learning. I will then offer an analysis of the role of the mistake in Plato's *The Meno*. Drawing on Sharon Todd's reading of the interaction between Socrates and Meno's slave, I will show that from a phenomenological point of view, the mistake is experienced as a confrontation between the learner and the other, whether this other is another subject, the empirical world, or one's own self. Finally, I will argue that the mistake, as a confrontation between self and other, produces an anxiety necessary for movement from a natural disposition into a state of acknowledged ignorance.

ON MISTAKES AND MAKING

As an English teacher for immigrants and newcomers in Vancouver, I used to start my first day of classes by creating a list of classroom guidelines with my students. This was a good way to establish our mutual expectations regarding the upcoming course, and, in addition, it gave the students an opportunity to practice some basic classroom vocabulary and phrases. I would

ask the students what they thought the rules guiding our learning experience should be. Some common answers were “don’t use your cellphone,” “do your homework” or “only speak English.” We would discuss the different suggestions together and vote to decide which ones would enter our list. At the end of this activity, I would always add one rule of my own, much to the surprise of the students: “make mistakes!”

In hindsight, there seems to be something strange, if not disingenuous, about this formulation. The students were surely going to make mistakes, no matter how hard they tried to avoid them; I would have to correct at least some of these mistakes, present examples for correct usage, or expound grammatical principles that would help the students build their sentences appropriately. Asking students in the language classroom to make mistakes is the equivalent of asking them to be students in a language class, which is presumably what they are. I guess what I really meant to convey by making this request is something like, “please do not feel embarrassed or ashamed of your mistakes, they are an essential part of learning a new language, and they can even be fun and educating in their own right.” The imperative “make mistakes!” was used to convey this rather complex meaning through its unconventional positioning within something formal like a list of rules. The students usually seemed to get it (or at least I hope they did).

Even after clarifying the specific performative ambiguities of my request, there remains something quite odd about the collocation “making mistakes.” This strangeness emerges when we try to think about what mistakes actually *are*, and how one would *make* them, or avoid doing so. If we take the expression *making mistakes* at face value, it is as if a mistake were a type of object or thing, and furthermore the type of object or thing one could *produce or create*. While it would be unwise to take it too literally, examining the metaphorical sense of mistake-making helps us highlight the puzzling ontological status of mistakes.

So, do we *make* mistakes in any obvious sense? As I mentioned, the verb sends us to the world of production, fabrication and creation. One can make chairs, tables or paintings. It is also possible to make or create immaterial things, such as poems, essays or even ideas. But does the “making” of

mistakes belong to this broad category of human making, doing, creating and achievement? The obvious answer to this is no. I believe it is safe to say that it is quite rare for someone to intentionally commit an error and then regard the mistake itself as an achievement. Of course, we sometimes talk about “happy accidents,” in which we serendipitously benefit from an unexpected outcome of our mistakes. For example, we can take a wrong turn walking on the street and end up finding a lovely bookstore we had not been aware of or misrecognize someone and end up having an interesting conversation. Indeed, our lives would be much less rich and interesting were it not for these unexpected moments that open new and exciting possibilities for us. However, we do not usually see these “fortunate mistakes” as something we planned or made with any kind of intention. Mistakes, it seems, are not the type of things we *intend to make*.¹

TOWARD A PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE MISTAKE

For the purposes of this analysis, I would like to examine the question of mistakes from a phenomenological perspective. My intention here is to sketch out some aspects of mistakes as they appear in the context of learning. While my phenomenological description is far from comprehensive or methodologically rigorous, it might help clarify what we mean when we say we have learned from our mistakes, or when we encourage students to do so themselves. The phenomenological question can be articulated thus: how do our mistakes appear to us in the process of learning? In other words, how do we become aware of our mistakes? What are the ways in which we come to realize that an action, an idea or an utterance is wrong, inappropriate, ineffective etc.? Thinking about these questions, it seems that the mistake is always inextricably linked to a second stage that follows the action and entails its *evaluation*. Learning from one’s mistake, I contend, is always the result of having been made aware of the (negative) value of a completed thought, idea or action. Let us try to discern the conditions for the appearance of the mistake in the context of evaluation:

1. Evaluating something as a mistake necessarily entails a *temporal distance*. One would have to first do or think or create or say something and then expose it to evaluation, scrutiny or the test of reality. Surely this succession of events

can happen very quickly, but some sort of temporal separation is necessary for anything to count as a mistake. Even if we can foresee mistakes happening in some projected future, our imaginative capacity would posit a linear progression between the thing we imagine doing, its result, and our evaluation of it.

2. If mistakes are the results of our negative evaluation of certain human actions, *it is necessary to have an evaluator*, someone who takes a position external to the thing in question. This evaluator is someone, either myself or another, who is able to make a judgement. A possible objection to this condition would be us becoming aware of our mistakes by external, empirical conditions. For example, if I were to make a chair from scratch, and then, upon completion, realize that it is unstable, it is the empirical fact of its instability that “shows” me the mistake I had made in the process of making it. I would reply to this objection by arguing that even when we encounter the physical, tangible results of our mistake, there is another interpretive step of assigning responsibility and causality, of positing a mistake somewhere along the line. If I were a very unreflective carpenter, I could perhaps blame the wood manufacturer for the chair’s instability. I would need to have my mistake clarified, either by a master carpenter generous enough to provide me with feedback, or in lieu of that, by my own ability to contemplate my actions.

3. This leads me to the third condition for evaluating something as a mistake, which is that the *evaluation always requires access to an already existing set of criteria for validity, truth or appropriateness*. For example, if I try to talk about the future in French and say “la futur,” there would have to be a standardized body of knowledge that would allow my teacher to correct my mistake and show me the correct grammatical gender (*le futur*).

And even with our chair example, without some access to the basic laws of physics, or to some experience in chair-making, I would not be able to catch my mistake, or identify another's.

This last condition leads us into some problems: if a mistake always entails some set of criteria for evaluation, how can we become aware of mistakes made “for the first time”? Is it possible to make a mistake in matters that are *inherently* true or self-evident (e.g., basic logical inferences)? These questions complicate the notion of the “appearance” of mistakes altogether. To further examine them, I will now turn to one of the most famous philosophical discussions of such topics, Plato's *Meno*.

THE MENO: MISTAKE AS ENCOUNTER WITH THE OTHER

The Meno presents a notable illustration of Plato's doctrine of recollection, which holds that true, eternal knowledge is innate in all humans and the process of learning entails a removal of obstacles that hinder the remembering and recovery of this knowledge.² The dialogue's treatment of the nature of knowledge and the question of the innate capacity for reasoning are inextricably connected to questions of learning and pedagogy. These questions are not peripheral to the main ideas of the text, and in fact much of the weight of the claim that true knowledge arrives from within oneself depends on the validity of Plato's description of the nature of learning in the dialogue.

At the heart of *The Meno*'s depiction of the theory of recollection is the scene of Socrates and the slave boy. In it, Socrates tries to prove to Meno that true knowledge is “recollected” from within one's soul, and that learning requires only the removal of the mind's obstacles from rediscovering the knowledge that is already “there.” To do so, Socrates calls upon Meno's slave boy and, after verifying that he has the sufficient linguistic skills (82b), he proceeds to lead the boy to solving a problem in geometry, all the while insisting that he is “not teaching him anything but instead asking him everything” (82e).³ For Plato, it is crucial to show that the understanding the slave boy achieves at the end of his interaction with Socrates derives from his own innate reasoning skills and

not from some external source, such as Socrates' teaching.

One objection that has been raised to this portrayal is that throughout his conversation with the boy, Socrates is assumed to have used empirical stimuli in the form of diagrams drawn in the sand in order to analyze the boy's answers. The boy does not engage in pure reasoning by himself but rather interprets the visual data provided to him by Socrates to reach the correct conclusion.⁴ A possible reply to this objection is that even if Socrates used visual aids to illustrate the different stages of the proof, without the boy's reasoning skills it would have been impossible for him to understand the different steps, recognize his mistakes, and proceed on a different path.⁵ Indeed, much of the mental work required of the boy consists in abstract mathematical inferences that would not derive directly from visual aids.

Another, more serious concern about the theory of recollection emerges from examining Socrates' pedagogy. Despite the claims of not engaging in any teaching, upon close inspection it is clear that Socrates is not only a teacher, but an extremely skilled one. For even though Socrates "only asks questions," his line of questioning leads the slave boy through a complex path which includes positing hypotheses, examining, refuting and revising them. As Sharon Todd notes, Socrates' performance, far from a mere exercise of facilitation or "midwifery," proves to be a sophisticated pedagogy, and Socrates himself emerges as "a skilled wordsmith, who carefully scaffolds the possibilities of response."⁶ In her reading of Socrates' conversation with the slave boy, Todd identifies "three movements of learning that Socrates' narrates—naïve certainty, acknowledged ignorance, and certainty of knowledge recollected."⁷ These are components of a complex "pedagogical event" that takes place in the dialogue.⁸ In what follows, I would like to explore how Socrates' brings about the boy's error, and how it in turn participates in the movement of learning as described by Todd.⁹

In the beginning of the conversation, Socrates asks the boy questions in order to elicit the first step of solving the geometric problem, calculating the area of a two-by-two-foot square. Following Socrates' prompts, the slave boy arrives at the correct solution (82d). Next, Socrates asks the boy what an area twice that size would be, to which the boy replies eight. At this point, Socrates'

line of questioning leads the boy into error (82d-e):

Socrates: Well now, try to tell me how long each line of that [square] will be. The line for this one is two feet long; what about the line for that one which is twice the size?

Boy: Clearly it'll be twice the length, Socrates.

What Socrates is doing here is deliberately leading the boy astray, using his natural attitude derived from the first geometrical operation to let him erroneously assume that if the area of the new square is twice as big, it follows that the lines in this square are twice as long. At this point, Socrates even tells Meno that the boy is in error and does not yet know (82e). As Todd points out, Socrates' questions can be seen "as provoking a crisis . . . a state of anxiety, [indicating] not merely an ignorance on the part of the subject but an *acknowledged* state of ignorance."¹⁰ Todd rightly claims that this crisis is an essential component in the process of learning, "an alteration of the subject" necessary for the process of learning.¹¹ She emphasizes Socrates' use of the boy's error to usher him into the state of acknowledged ignorance. But what exactly is the nature of this crisis, and how is it connected to the experience of learning from one's mistake? Let us try to examine how the conditions described above can help us understand the movement into learning.

In leading the boy into error, Socrates has a plan: to show the boy that a side of four feet would produce a square area of sixteen square feet, by sketching out what follows from the boy's initial position. When the boy is confronted with his error, he quickly realizes he was wrong (83c):

Socrates: So what's four times the size is twice the size?

Boy: No, by Zeus.

Socrates: But how many times the size is it?

Boy: Four times.

Socrates: So it's not a figure *twice* the size that comes from a line twice the length, my boy, but one *four times* the size.

Boy: What you say is true.

I want to suggest that the abovementioned conditions for the appearance of the mistake can help us grasp the crisis described by Todd, i.e., the traumatic movement from “naïve certainty” to “acknowledged ignorance.”¹² The first condition, that of temporal distance, is fulfilled: the boy's erroneous claim must be uttered before it is evaluated. But what about the second and third conditions (an evaluator and a set of evaluative criteria)? How does the boy come to realize he has committed an error? Does he simply take Socrates' word as truth? Is it the empirical data presented to him in the form of a diagram sketched in the sand? Or is the mistake made clear through the boy's own innate logical inferences that cause him to understand? And, if so, what is the role of Socrates?

This question is indeed at the core of Plato's doctrine of recollection, which the boy's education story is supposed to prove. Whether or not one accepts the idea of learning as recollection, I suggest that from the perspective of the boy as a learner, the mistake is experienced as an interference coming from outside his natural attitude and naïvely held beliefs. This view of the mistake challenges both the empirical and the rational accounts of the slave boy's learning. Tying the process of learning solely to one source (either the “self-evident nature” of reason or the observation of empirical data) misses the complex, dialectical unfolding of the mistake.

The dialogue shows us that the slave boy becomes aware of his mistake only after Socrates *confronts* him with its results, thereby making manifest the criteria for evaluation (condition three). Socrates is no doubt aware of these criteria, for he possesses both the knowledge of geometrical proofs and the logical method that allows him to proceed with his lesson. But what about the slave boy? Does he know in advance the criteria for evaluating his error? While he does seem to be employing a basic common-sense approach, it is yet un-

clear whether he possesses “the perception of logical relationships” that allow him to comprehend the geometrical problem, or whether he simply follows Socrates’ lead.¹³

Let us imagine for a moment that Socrates stopped the conversation just when the boy had made his erroneous claim. The boy, left in his error, would return to his daily routine in Meno’s household. Would he ever be able, or even motivated, to regard his hypothesis as false and proceed to learn the correct solution? What would make him do so? Would it be some other teacher he met? Would it be through some engineering task that would require him to confront his mistake? Or would it simply “emerge” out of his mind, or soul, as a natural outcome of some eternal knowledge stored inside of him? The only thing we know is that the slave boy becomes aware of his mistake because Socrates shows him the failure his initial answer produced. As such, the criteria against which the mistake can be evaluated are only disclosed to the boy as a result of his error. To gain understanding, the boy must acknowledge his own ignorance, thereby engaging in a form of self-othering. On the other side of this traumatic movement, he will become more like Socrates, i.e., a step closer to fulfilling the second condition, to becoming an evaluating subject. Socrates’ pedagogy, Todd notes, “acts as an instantiation of subject formation, of learning to become, for both Meno and the boy, a becoming that is fundamentally about the asymmetry between self and other, between teacher and student, in this case.”¹⁴ By leading the boy into error, by allowing him to fail and witness the outcome of his mistake, Socrates inaugurates the intimate and violent movement of learning and becoming. The conditions for the mistake are met, but in the course of the encounter we learn that the mistake does not merely appear to the boy; it also reveals knowledge hitherto undisclosed, and in so doing constitutes the boy as a subject. Perhaps more than we make mistakes, our mistakes, in some sense, *make us*.

MISTAKES, ANXIETY AND DESIRE

As we have seen, the slave boy’s mistake marks the transition into the acknowledged state of ignorance, which Todd describes as a “falling into perplexity, into a crisis, or into a state of anxiety.”¹⁵ This reading emphasizes the dramatic

and even traumatic nature of the pedagogical encounter, a movement full of anxiety and tension. One possible difficulty with this account is that in the *Meno* we do not find explicit evidence for such tumult. On the contrary, it seems that the interaction between the slave boy and Socrates seems to have been overall positive and productive for both sides—the slave having acquired an important skill in the realm of geometry and Socrates having (arguably) shown the process of “recollection” in action. One might object that the reading suggested so far projects very modern philosophical and psychological concerns onto the text. Could the account of anxiety be something carried into the text, unjustifiably?

I would like to suggest that the evidence for a “learner’s anxiety” does in fact appear in *The Meno*. However, it does not arise from the slave boy’s geometry lesson. Instead, we can find an account of this anxiety in the interaction between Socrates and Meno himself. Earlier in the text, in response to Meno’s question, whether virtue can be taught, Socrates engages in a similar pedagogy he later uses with the slave boy. By forcing him to realize the logical fallacies that plagued his reasoning, Socrates leads Meno into the state of acknowledged ignorance. Here, we witness a full-blown crisis (80a):

Meno: I think that what you’re just exactly like, both in looks and everything else, is that flat-fish the sea torpedo. The torpedo fish always torpifies whoever comes near and gets into contact with it, and I think you’ve done something of the same sort to me now too . . . I’ve spoken a great many words about virtue in front of many people on thousands of occasions, and did it very well too—at least, so I thought. But now I can’t even say what virtue is at all.

Meno’s exclamatory remarks undoubtedly reflect a state of crisis, induced by the (painful) transition into the state of acknowledged ignorance. We can perhaps imagine the slave boy experiencing a similar sentiment, (even though he does not articulate his feelings as explicitly as Meno does): after coming to realize he was wrong, he is exiled from his previous natural attitude. However,

the boy does not stay in limbo for long, and by relinquishing his old disposition, he gains knowledge, and the power to use it.

What does Meno receive in exchange for discarding his previous convictions? In this case, something much less comforting (80d):

Socrates: . . . It's not that I myself have the solutions when I make other people perplexed, but that I'm utterly perplexed myself and that's how I come to make other people perplexed as well. That's how it is with virtue now; I on my side don't know what it is, while you on yours *did* know, perhaps, till you came into contact with me, while now your just like someone who *doesn't* know.

At first glance, it seems that Socrates presents Meno with a rather rotten deal: as opposed to the slave boy, he does not provide Meno with increased powers and capacities, with the access to knowledge, but rather with the exact opposite—acknowledged ignorance, perplexity and confusion. The movement of learning is halted in this tense moment. When Socrates summons the slave boy to demonstrate the validity of recollection, he is trying to remedy the injurious pedagogical move he enacted on Meno, as if promising that at the end of the process, some knowledge will arise. But 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 of the realm of geometry, learning ceases to resemble recollection, seeming more like a journey into the unknown. Anxiety, on this account, is the state into which we are thrown when we realize that our desire for certainty cannot be fulfilled. Perhaps the doctrine of recollection, exemplified by the successful endeavor of the slave boy's education, is offered by Plato as a hopeful promise, as if the gift of knowledge awaits at the end of every journey of learning. Whether or not this promise can be kept is a serious question, one that *The Meno* leaves us grappling with.

CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have tried to propose an initial phenomenological account of mistakes in learning. In situating mistakes in the complex realm of evaluation, I set out to establish three conditions for the appearance of the mistake. Drawing on Sharon Todd's reading of Plato's *Meno*, I tried to show that in the dialogue between Socrates and the slave boy, the mistake plays a crucial role in the movement of learning and the process of becoming an evaluating subject. Mistakes, I have argued, are experienced as a confrontation with something other than myself, or with myself as an other, thus disrupting the naïve certainty at the beginning of learning. As such, mistakes, like the ones made by the slave boy, produce a certain kind of anxiety that fuels our desire to learn and propels us toward the attainment of knowledge. What *the Meno* shows us, however, is that such attainment is never fully guaranteed. Plato's Socrates expresses two contradictory movements that are central to the project of philosophy (and perhaps also education): the desire to achieve knowledge and certainty, and the undermining of that very attempt by exposing the limits of our commonly held truths. It seems that the canonical question, "how can we attain certain knowledge?" one around which the entire dialogue revolves, is haunted by a secret pedagogical anxiety, namely, "what do we do when we realize we were wrong?"

1 In fact, the status of mistakes and errors is an elusive and contentious topic in the philosophical literature, and far beyond the scope of this paper. See Deborah G. Mayo, *Error and the Growth of Experimental Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Nicholas Rescher, *Error (On Our Predicament When Things Go Wrong)* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009); John Roberts, *The Necessity of Errors* (CITY: Verso, 2011).

2 Jane M. Day, "Introduction," in *Plato's Meno in Focus*, ed. Jane M. Day (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 22.

3 Plato, "The Meno," trans. Jane M. Day, in *Plato's Meno in Focus*, 48.

4 Gregory Vlastos, "Anamnesis in the Meno," in *Plato's Meno in Focus*, 88.

5 Vlastos, “Anamnesis in the Meno,” 94.

6 Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other: Levinas, Psychoanalysis, and Ethical Possibilities in Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, YEAR), 24.

7 Todd, *Learning from the Others*, 23-24.

8 Todd, 22.

9 In the context of Plato’s *Meno*, it is common to refer to the boy’s failure as an *error*, rather than a *mistake*. While acknowledging that there may be significant differences between the two concepts, in this analysis I will treat them as synonymous. For an interesting discussion on the distinction between errors and mistakes, see Giora Hon, “Going Wrong: To Make a Mistake, to Fall into an Error,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 49, no. 1 (1995).

10 Todd, 22 (emphasis in the original).

11 Todd, 23.

12 Todd, 22.

13 Vlastos, 97.

14 Todd, 22.

15 Todd.