

Tacit Knowing in Plato's *Meno*: Assessing Polanyi's Interpretation

*Timothy L. Simpson*

*Morehead State University, Morehead, KY*

**Introduction**

This paper examines Michael Polanyi's interpretation of Plato's *Meno*, particularly his use of Meno's paradox and the theory of recollection in support of tacit knowing. In the *Meno*, the paradox appears as a fundamental challenge to inquiry: if one already knows what one seeks, inquiry is unnecessary; if one does not know it, inquiry appears impossible, since one would not recognize the answer when it is found. Socrates responds by introducing a theory of recollection, seemingly illustrated through his exchange with the slave boy, suggesting that learning involves drawing out knowledge that is in some sense already present.

Polanyi interprets Plato's *Meno* as revealing insights into the basic structure of human knowing. He argues that the paradox and recollection show that inquiry depends upon tacit knowing that guides the search even in the absence of fully articulated knowledge. This paper argues, however, that Polanyi construes Plato's use of paradox and recollection as anticipations of tacit knowing when they function primarily as pedagogical strategies rather than as expressions of Plato's final epistemological position. Clarifying this distinction helps illuminate both the significance and the limits of Polanyi's appeal to Plato.

### **The *Meno* in the Development of Tacit Knowing**

To assess Polanyi's appropriation of *Meno*, it is necessary to situate the dialogue within the development of his account of tacit knowing. Polanyi's mature articulation of tacit knowing emerged gradually. In *Personal Knowledge*, it received fuller expression through his distinction between focal and subsidiary awareness, a distinction he regarded as central to his epistemology. In the years that followed, he continued to refine his position with special emphasis on scientific inquiry.

Within this trajectory, Polanyi's explicit engagement with Plato's *Meno* appears to mark a significant development. The 1962 Terry Lectures provide the earliest extant instance in which he draws directly on the dialogue to illuminate the structure of inquiry. Whether this turn to Plato emerged independently or through the influence of Marjorie Grene—who at the time was preparing *The Knower and the Known*, whose opening chapter is titled "The Legacy of the 'Meno'"—remains uncertain. What is clear, however, is that from this point forward Polanyi repeatedly returned to the *Meno* as a resource for both explaining and justifying tacit knowing.

This sustained engagement is clear across several lectures and publications. Polanyi revisited the *Meno* in his 1964 Duke Lecture, "The Commitment to Science," in his 1965 Bowdoin lecture, *The Creative Imagination*,

his 1965 Wesleyan Lectures, and again in his 1966 essay of the same title published in *Chemical & Engineering News*. Most significantly, *The Tacit Dimension* (1966) incorporates his most mature reflections on the dialogue. There he remarks that it took him three years to become confident that his response to Meno's paradox, first formulated in the Terry Lectures, was correct. This retrospective comment suggests that Polanyi's engagement with the *Meno* was not incidental but formed part of an ongoing effort to clarify the structure of scientific inquiry. The question, then, is not simply why Polanyi cites Plato, but what role the *Meno* comes to play within the larger architecture of tacit knowing.

### **The *Meno* and the Structure of Inquiry in Polanyi**

Plato's *Meno* plays a strategic role in Polanyi's effort to articulate and defend tacit knowing, particularly as an account of scientific inquiry. In *The Tacit Dimension*, Polanyi explains the origins of his philosophical concern with the nature of science and what led him to his distinctive account of human knowledge. After what he describes as an extended and "abstract argument," he concludes by turning to what he considers a "most striking concrete example" of an experience that cannot be fully captured by explicit theory: the scientist's experience of seeing and pursuing a problem. For Polanyi, scientific discovery presupposes the ability to recognize a problem before its solution can be clearly articulated. To see a problem is already to apprehend a hidden coherence that

cannot yet be fully specified. This gives rise to a fundamental difficulty: how can inquiry proceed toward what is not yet clearly known, and how can a solution be recognized in advance of its explicit formulation? At the beginning of an investigation, as Polanyi observes, “we can know only vaguely what we may hope to discover.” Yet the actual practice of science demonstrates that such inquiry is not only possible but pervasive. We continually search for solutions without fully knowing what we seek. The question, then, is how such inquiry can be intelligible at all.

It is at precisely this point that the *Meno* enters Polanyi’s argument. He interprets Meno’s paradox as exposing a difficulty inherent in all inquiry if knowledge is understood exclusively in explicit terms. Either one already knows what one seeks, in which case inquiry is unnecessary, or one does not know it, in which case inquiry appears impossible. Polanyi therefore argues that the paradox reveals a fundamental limitation within objectivist accounts of knowledge. As he states, “if all knowledge is explicit, i.e. capable of being clearly stated, then we cannot know a problem or look for its solution.” Yet both ordinary experience and scientific practice demonstrate that human beings do, in fact, recognize problems and pursue discoveries. Inquiry itself therefore points beyond purely explicit theories of knowledge. According to Polanyi, inquiry is possible because it depends upon a tacit foreknowledge of realities not yet fully articulated. To

recognize a problem is already to rely upon an inarticulate awareness of a hidden coherence toward which inquiry is directed. The paradox arises only if one assumes that all genuine knowledge must be fully explicit. Once tacit knowing is acknowledged, the paradox dissolves, since inquiry can proceed through forms of subsidiary awareness that anticipate discoveries prior to their complete articulation.

Polanyi further argues that tacit knowing helps explain not only how problems are recognized, but also how they are solved. At this point he turns to Plato's theory of recollection as a proposed solution to Meno's paradox. Although Polanyi acknowledges that the theory of recollection has rarely been accepted in its literal form, he nevertheless regards it as pointing toward an important insight into the structure of discovery. Inquiry proceeds through the integration of clues, intimations, and anticipations that guide the investigator toward a solution. The scientist relies upon subsidiary awareness, hunches, and a tacit sense of coherence that cannot yet be fully specified. As Polanyi states, the "quest is guided throughout by feelings of a deepening coherence." He therefore reinterprets recollection not as the recovery of forgotten propositional knowledge, but as an anticipation of tacit knowing itself. Scientific inquiry can proceed without explicit foreknowledge because the investigator is guided by an emerging sense of

coherence that directs the search and eventually permits the recognition of discovery.

Within the architecture of Polanyi's thought, the *Meno* therefore functions as more than an illustrative example. It articulates the very problem that tacit knowing is intended to resolve, while the theory of recollection provides a suggestive account of how such resolution may occur. In this way, Polanyi presents Plato as anticipating, in a preliminary form, the structure of tacit knowing that underlies scientific inquiry and discovery.

Polanyi's interpretation of the *Meno* depends upon several interconnected assumptions about inquiry, recollection, and discovery. First, he treats Meno's paradox as articulating a genuine and enduring problem inherent in inquiry itself: how one can search for and recognize what is not yet fully known. Second, he interprets the myth of recollection as revealing that inquiry depends upon a tacit awareness or anticipation that guides discovery despite the absence of explicit knowledge. Finally, Polanyi approaches these episodes primarily through their epistemological significance, abstracting them from much of the dramatic and pedagogical context in which they occur. These assumptions allow him to present Plato as anticipating the structure of tacit knowing that underlies scientific discovery. Whether the *Meno* ultimately supports this interpretation,

however, depends upon how one understands the dramatic function of the paradox, recollection, and the slave-boy episode within the dialogue as a whole.

### **Reconsidering the *Meno*: Drama, Inquiry, and the Limits of Polanyi's Reading**

Polanyi's appeal to Plato's *Meno* is both suggestive and limited. Although he identifies Meno's paradox and the theory of recollection as philosophically significant, he does not offer a sustained interpretation of the dialogue as a whole. Instead, these elements are largely extracted from their dramatic context and redeployed in support of tacit knowing. Such a selective reading risks obscuring the broader pedagogical and philosophical setting in which the paradox and recollection occur. If their meaning is inseparable from their place within the unfolding conversation between Socrates and Meno, then their significance cannot be adequately assessed in isolation. A fuller interpretation therefore requires approaching the *Meno* as a unified dramatic inquiry rather than as a collection of detachable epistemological claims.

This broader interpretive approach becomes especially important once the dramatic character of Plato's dialogues is taken seriously. In many dialogues, Plato stages a contest between competing ways of thinking and living embodied in the interlocutors themselves. The arguments of the dialogue therefore cannot be separated entirely from the dramatic circumstances in which they emerge. In

the *Meno*, this dramatic dimension is particularly important because Meno is not merely a passive participant in an abstract discussion, but a historically recognizable figure whose confidence, impatience, and intellectual habits shape the course of the inquiry. Indeed, the problem of the *Meno* is, in important respects, Meno himself.

The opening exchange between Socrates and Meno immediately establishes the central tensions that structure the dialogue. Meno abruptly asks whether virtue can be taught, acquired through practice, or obtained in some other way. Beneath this question lie two more fundamental issues: what virtue is and what it means to learn. The dramatic irony of the exchange is significant. Historically, Meno was known for political ambition and moral unreliability, traits that the dialogue itself subtly reinforces. Moreover, Meno approaches virtue through assumptions associated with sophistic education, particularly the influence of Gorgias, from whom he claims to have recently learned about virtue. Meno is surprised when Socrates professes ignorance concerning the nature of virtue despite Gorgias' presence in Athens. This reaction reveals an important assumption governing Meno's understanding of learning: knowledge is something possessed by a teacher and transmitted to a student. Learning, in this view, consists primarily in receiving and repeating authoritative instruction.

Meno's assumptions about learning shape the course of the dialogue and illuminate the deeper significance of the paradox that later emerges. When Socrates asks Meno to give an account of virtue, Meno responds confidently but merely reproduces conventional and sophistic opinions. His answers repeatedly collapse under examination because they consist less in genuine understanding than in the repetition of inherited formulations. Socrates' method therefore does more than expose defective definitions; it gradually reveals the inadequacy of Meno's conception of learning itself. Meno assumes that knowledge can simply be acquired from those who already possess it, whereas Socratic inquiry requires active self-examination and does not require a teacher who knows. In this respect, the dialogue's early failures perform an important pedagogical function. By dismantling Meno's confidence in secondhand opinions, Socrates attempts to loosen the hold of unexamined assumptions and prepare him for genuine self-guided inquiry.

This dramatic and pedagogical setting significantly reframes the meaning of Meno's paradox. The paradox does not emerge in a philosophical vacuum as a detached epistemological puzzle concerning inquiry in general. Rather, it arises at a specific moment of frustration after Meno has repeatedly failed to define virtue and has become unsettled by Socratic examination. Through the Socratic elenchus, Socrates has exposed the inadequacy of Meno's inherited opinions and

undermined his confidence in the sophistic assumptions he brought to the conversation. Yet Socrates does not terminate the inquiry at this point. On the contrary, he invites Meno to continue the search together. Meno, however, recoils from the experience of aporia. Feeling disoriented and intellectually exposed, he compares Socrates to a torpedo fish that stings and numbs those who approach it. The comparison is not merely playful. It reflects both Meno's discomfort and his growing hostility toward the inquiry itself.

Meno's paradox emerges from a moment of resistance and frustration within the dialogue. In part, it functions as an attempt to escape further examination altogether. At the same time, it expresses Meno's inability to understand why inquiry should continue with someone who openly professes ignorance concerning the very subject under investigation. More fundamentally still, the paradox challenges the viability of Socratic inquiry itself, particularly the elenchus through which Socrates exposes inadequate opinions without simply replacing them with authoritative instruction. The paradox therefore appears not merely as an abstract problem concerning the possibility of knowledge, but as a dramatic expression of Meno's perplexity regarding how Socratic inquiry can proceed at all. If neither Socrates nor Meno possesses knowledge of virtue, and if Socratic examination only results in the collapse of inherited certainties, then what justification remains for continuing the search? The paradox thus places

Socrates in a genuine pedagogical predicament. Unless he can defend the value of Socratic moral inquiry in the absence of certainty, he risks losing not only the conversation, but the possibility of drawing Meno toward the examined life itself.

The challenge facing Socrates becomes clearer once the structure of the paradox is examined more carefully. Meno's formulation raises two related but distinct questions: how can one begin searching for something one does not know, and how can one recognize the object of inquiry upon finding it? Socrates appears relatively unconcerned by the first difficulty. He dismisses Meno's formulation as an eristic trick, and his conduct throughout the dialogue already demonstrates why. The inquiry into virtue begins despite the acknowledged absence of knowledge concerning its nature. Neither Socrates nor Meno claims to possess knowledge of virtue, yet the conversation proceeds through the examination of Meno's opinions about it. Socratic inquiry therefore does not require prior possession of knowledge, but only some provisional orientation toward the subject matter and the willingness to submit one's opinions to examination. Indeed, Socrates repeatedly suggests that inquiry is most necessary precisely where knowledge is lacking, for without examination false confidence and error remain unchallenged.

At the same time, Socrates' reliance upon opinion is philosophically significant. Inquiry may begin without explicit knowledge, yet it does not begin from complete emptiness. One must still possess some initial apprehension, expectation, or orientation toward the object sought in order for inquiry to proceed meaningfully at all. In this respect, Socrates' account bears at least a partial resemblance to Polanyi's later claim that inquiry depends upon forms of tacit foreknowledge that guide discovery prior to full articulation. Although Plato does not develop a theory of tacit knowing as such, Socrates' confidence that inquiry can proceed from opinion alone suggests that human beings may possess forms of awareness that are not yet reducible to explicit knowledge. More on this potential convergence between Polanyi and Plato below.

The second question, however, poses a deeper difficulty, especially in matters concerning virtue and moral knowledge. As will be demonstrated later in the *Meno*, in geometrical inquiry, one may arrive at determinate conclusions capable of demonstration. Moral inquiry, by contrast, does not culminate in the possession of comprehensive and fully explicit knowledge. Socrates consistently denies possessing such wisdom concerning the greatest human things. Yet this recognition does not lead him to abandon inquiry. On the contrary, it is precisely because human beings lack complete moral knowledge that examination remains

necessary. Socratic elenchus therefore aims less at delivering final certainty than at purifying opinion, exposing error, and cultivating more reflective judgment.

This understanding of the paradox sharpens the pedagogical challenge confronting Socrates. Meno desires instruction from an authoritative teacher who already possesses knowledge and can simply transfer it to a passive learner. Socrates, however, neither claims nor offers such authority. He repeatedly denies possessing comprehensive knowledge of virtue and rejects the assumption that moral understanding can be transmitted ready-made from one person to another. Instead, Socratic inquiry begins not with certainty, but with opinion, and proceeds through examination, refutation, and renewed searching. What Socrates can offer is therefore not the direct transmission of knowledge Meno desires, but participation in a way of life grounded in self-examination and the continual testing of one's beliefs. Yet this is precisely what Meno resists. Unsettled by aporia and frustrated by the collapse of inherited opinions, he seeks release from inquiry rather than deeper engagement with it. Socrates must therefore do more than answer an abstract paradox concerning knowledge. He must persuade Meno that inquiry remains possible and worthwhile even in the absence of future certainty. It is this pedagogical challenge that occasions Socrates' appeal to recollection and the slave-boy demonstration to which we now turn.

## **Recollection and the Slave-Boy Demonstration**

It is within this pedagogical and dramatic context that Socrates introduces the myth of recollection. Rather than offering a strict dialectical refutation of the paradox, Socrates turns to a mythic account concerning the immortality of the soul and its prior acquaintance with all things. Meno, whose attraction to authoritative teachers and impressive stories has already been made evident throughout the dialogue, eagerly requests that Socrates explain the account further. Human learning, Socrates suggests, is ultimately a form of recollection. At first glance, the myth appears to provide a direct solution to Meno's paradox: inquiry is possible because the soul already possesses the knowledge for which it searches.

Yet the dramatic and rhetorical features of Socrates' presentation suggest that recollection serves a broader pedagogical purpose. Socrates introduces the account not as demonstrated knowledge, but as a story he has heard from priests, priestesses, and wise men. The account is therefore presented in a tentative and mythic form rather than as the kind of rigorous argument Socrates ordinarily demands in dialectical inquiry. Moreover, Socrates himself consistently refrains elsewhere from claiming detailed knowledge concerning the soul, death, or the afterlife. These features caution against treating recollection in the *Meno* as

simply a settled epistemological doctrine. Whatever its metaphysical status, the myth functions within the dialogue less as a systematic epistemological doctrine than as a response to Meno's growing resistance to inquiry.

This pedagogical purpose becomes clearer when one considers why this particular story might appeal to Meno. The account of recollection preserves several assumptions already attractive to him. Learning still appears connected to latent possession, memory, and intellectual acquisition, themes congenial to Meno's admiration for sophistic instruction and intellectual mastery. The myth therefore begins with assumptions Meno is already inclined to accept while gradually redirecting him toward a vastly different understanding of inquiry. Most importantly, Socrates shifts the emphasis away from the possession and transfer of knowledge toward the moral necessity of continued searching. If one accepts Meno's paradox, Socrates argues, one will become idle, fainthearted, and unwilling to inquire. If, however, one believes inquiry remains possible, one becomes more courageous and more willing to undertake the difficult labor of examination. The practical function of recollection is therefore less to provide certainty, or even to resolve directly the paradox as an abstract epistemological puzzle, than to sustain the moral and intellectual conditions necessary for inquiry itself.

Meno's response reveals that Socrates has only partially succeeded. Although Meno now appears willing to continue the conversation, he still understands learning primarily in terms of instruction from a knowledgeable teacher. He therefore asks Socrates to demonstrate that recollection is true. This request places Socrates in a difficult position. Socrates must persuade Meno that inquiry need not depend upon the transmission of knowledge from an authoritative teacher, yet he cannot establish this point through the question of virtue itself, since moral inquiry does not yield the kind of definitive demonstration Meno demands. More fundamentally, Socrates must begin loosening Meno from the assumption that learning consists merely in receiving doctrines from someone who already knows. It is precisely this pedagogical predicament that frames the transition to geometry and the subsequent slave-boy demonstration.

The transition to geometry is especially important. Socrates does not attempt to demonstrate recollection through moral inquiry into virtue itself, where definitive knowledge remains elusive. Instead, he turns to geometry, a subject capable of yielding determinate and demonstrable conclusions through guided reasoning. The shift is philosophically significant because geometry allows Socrates to stage a visible example of productive inquiry without relying upon straightforward didactic instruction from an authoritative teacher. In this respect,

the slave-boy episode should be understood less as a decisive proof of recollection than as a demonstration of the fruitfulness of inquiry itself, particularly inquiry conducted through Socratic questioning. Significantly, although Polanyi devotes substantial attention to the paradox and the doctrine of recollection, he largely passes over the slave-boy demonstration that ostensibly serves within the dialogue as the concrete demonstration of recollection. This omission is revealing. Rather than offering a comprehensive interpretation of the *Meno*, Polanyi appears to extract from the dialogue those elements most conducive to his own account of tacit knowing while neglecting the pedagogical drama through which Plato develops them.

Because Socrates intends to persuade Meno to adopt his customary mode of inquiry, the structure of the demonstration deliberately mirrors the elenchus already practiced throughout the dialogue. Socrates is not merely attempting to demonstrate a doctrine of recollection. He is attempting to persuade Meno that Socratic inquiry itself is worth undertaking. Accordingly, Socrates begins not by transmitting a finished doctrine, but by questioning the slave boy concerning matters already within his experience. The boy must already possess certain forms of prior understanding in order for the inquiry to proceed at all: he knows Greek, recognizes the basic shape of a square, and can follow simple numerical relations. Through a sequence of questions and answers, the boy confidently

offers opinions, falls into error, experiences perplexity, and gradually arrives at a clearer understanding. The movement of the episode therefore closely parallels Meno's own earlier encounter with Socratic examination.

Particularly important are the moments in which Socrates pauses to address the slave boys' condition. Explicitly, these comments concern the slave boy's condition. Implicitly, however, they apply even more directly to Meno himself. Socrates emphasizes that the boy's perplexity has not harmed him but improved him by freeing him from false confidence and preparing him for further inquiry. Aporia is thus presented not as intellectual paralysis, but as a necessary condition for genuine learning. These remarks directly reinterpret the very condition Meno had earlier treated as humiliating and debilitating. The demonstration reenacts, in a more concrete and successful form, the very process Meno had resisted in his own conversation with Socrates.

At the same time, the episode complicates any straightforward interpretation of recollection as wholly independent self-discovery or as the mere recovery of fully formed knowledge already contained within the soul. The inquiry depends throughout upon Socrates' guidance, sequencing of questions, and direction of attention. The boy does not spontaneously recover complete geometrical truths from within himself, nor does he simply "remember"

information previously deposited in his mind. Rather, understanding emerges gradually through disciplined examination under Socratic guidance. The demonstration therefore vindicates the practice of guided inquiry by someone who sees more clearly, even if it also leaves open broader questions concerning recollection, latent understanding, and the conditions that make discovery possible.

The conclusion of the episode confirms this pedagogical emphasis. Socrates ultimately expresses greater confidence in the moral value of inquiry than in the precise details of the myth itself. What matters most is that human beings not surrender the search for truth out of laziness or despair. Recollection and the slave-boy demonstration therefore function less as definitive solutions to an abstract epistemological paradox than as a defense of the examined life of inquiry. Their primary aim is to persuade Meno that inquiry remains both possible and worthwhile even in the absence of complete certainty. In this respect, Socrates does not finally accept the paradox as a decisive refutation of inquiry but dismisses its skeptical force in favor of the continued search for understanding.

### **Reconsidering Polanyi's Reading of the *Meno***

Polanyi's interpretation of Plato's *Meno* rests upon a distinctive understanding of the relationship between inquiry, recollection, and discovery. He treats Meno's paradox as articulating a universal epistemological problem concerning the possibility of inquiry itself. He further interprets the myth of recollection as Plato's solution of how inquiry can proceed through a kind of tacit foreknowledge that guides the search for discovery. Finally, he understands the paradox and recollection together as revealing and supporting the operation of tacit knowing. Each of these assumptions possesses a certain plausibility. Yet when the paradox, recollection, and the slave-boy episode are situated within the dramatic and pedagogical movement of the dialogue, Polanyi's interpretation becomes considerably less secure.

The first assumption is that Meno's paradox expresses a decisive epistemological problem concerning the very possibility of inquiry. On the surface, the paradox appears profound: if one already knows what one seeks, inquiry is unnecessary; if one does not know it, inquiry appears impossible. Polanyi understandably sees in this formulation a striking account of the structure of discovery. Yet within the dialogue itself, Socrates appears remarkably untroubled by the paradox. By the time Meno introduces it, Socrates and Meno have already been engaged in inquiry despite their acknowledged ignorance concerning the nature of virtue. Rather than offering a systematic refutation,

Socrates dismisses the argument as an eristic trick that would render human beings intellectually passive and unwilling to inquire. More importantly, the dialogue has already demonstrated through dialectical practice that inquiry can proceed without prior possession of knowledge. Meno's inadequate definitions of virtue nevertheless provide material for examination, criticism, and revision. Inquiry therefore begins not from knowledge already possessed, but from opinions submitted to dialectical testing.

At the same time, Socrates does not simply deny the tension identified by the paradox. The difficulty of searching for what one does not yet fully understand remains real. Yet Socrates treats this difficulty as non-fatal to inquiry because human beings are capable of proceeding from partial and provisional apprehensions that guide investigation without constituting full knowledge. The paradox therefore functions less as the central epistemological crisis of the dialogue than as a dramatic expression of Meno's frustration following the experience of *aporia*. Socrates has already shown that inquiry may continue despite ignorance. The paradox serves primarily to deepen the pedagogical movement of the dialogue rather than to formulate an explicit theory of tacit knowing.

The second assumption is that Plato's myth of recollection offers a substantive epistemological account of how inquiry becomes possible. Recollection can certainly appear to provide such an explanation. If the soul already possesses knowledge in latent form, then inquiry becomes a process of recovering what has been forgotten. Polanyi accordingly interprets recollection as evidence of an implicit reservoir of knowledge that guides discovery. Yet the dialogue itself presents recollection in a far more tentative and pedagogical manner. Socrates introduces recollection not as demonstrated doctrine, but as a story intended to encourage inquiry in the face of uncertainty. Indeed, Socrates largely dismisses the paradox as a serious obstacle to inquiry before introducing recollection at all. He repeatedly distances himself from full confidence in the literal truth of the myth, emphasizing instead its practical effect: belief in recollection makes human beings more willing to search courageously for what they do not know. Recollection therefore does not so much resolve the paradox theoretically as neutralize its skeptical and demoralizing effects. Its function within the dialogue is motivational rather than strictly epistemological. It addresses Meno's reluctance to continue the inquiry, not an unresolved theoretical impasse. Whatever epistemological implications the myth may contain, its primary function within the dramatic movement of the *Meno* is pedagogical rather than theoretical. Its central purpose is not to establish a

comprehensive doctrine of innate knowledge, but to sustain the moral and intellectual conditions necessary for continued examination despite uncertainty and ignorance.

This does not mean the myth lacks epistemological significance altogether. Indeed, Polanyi is correct to perceive that recollection gestures toward the idea that inquiry involves some prior orientation toward what is sought. The dialogue repeatedly suggests that inquiry does not emerge from complete emptiness or absolute ignorance, but from partial apprehensions, anticipatory awareness, and opinions that direct the search despite the absence of full knowledge. In this respect, Plato's account bears at least a limited resemblance to Polanyi's later claim that discovery depends upon forms of tacit awareness that guide inquiry prior to explicit articulation. Yet Polanyi elevates this secondary epistemological implication into the primary meaning of the episode. Within the dialogue itself, Socrates' emphasis falls less upon explaining the mechanics of discovery than upon cultivating in Meno the courage, persistence, and willingness necessary to continue the search for virtue.

The third assumption is that the paradox and recollection together demonstrate the existence and operation of tacit knowledge. This assumption fits naturally within Polanyi's broader account of scientific discovery, particularly his

claim that inquiry is guided by forms of awareness that cannot be fully articulated. Yet Polanyi's interpretation is striking in part because it gives comparatively little attention to the slave-boy episode itself, despite the fact that the episode constitutes Plato's most extensive dramatic treatment of recollection and inquiry within the dialogue. This omission is significant. If recollection genuinely functions as evidence for tacit knowing, the slave-boy episode should provide the clearest demonstration of it. Yet a closer examination of the episode points in a more complicated direction.

At first glance, the slave-boy episode appears to support Polanyi's conclusion by suggesting that knowledge can emerge without direct instruction. More importantly than demonstrating recollection, however, the episode deliberately mirrors the structure of the elenchus itself: opinion, refutation, perplexity, and renewed inquiry. The demonstration is therefore staged as much for Meno as for the slave boy. Its dramatic purpose is not merely to exhibit geometrical discovery, but to persuade Meno that inquiry can yield genuine progress even in the absence of an authoritative teacher who simply transfers knowledge to a passive learner.

The slave boy does not independently recover geometrical knowledge from within himself. Rather, Socrates carefully guides the inquiry through a structured

sequence of questions, corrections, and reformulations. The boy's progress depends upon prior familiarity with language, ordinary spatial concepts, and the dialectical direction supplied by Socrates himself. What the episode demonstrates is therefore not self-sufficient discovery arising independently from a hidden reservoir of tacit knowledge, but the disciplined practice of guided inquiry through examination and reflection. The slave-boy episode consequently supports the broader pedagogical claim that learning requires active participation rather than passive reception.

### **Tacit Knowing and Recollection: Points of Convergence in Polanyi and Plato's *Meno***

Polanyi nevertheless captures something important about inquiry in Plato's *Meno*. He rightly perceives that discovery involves forms of anticipation, orientation, and partial awareness that cannot always be reduced to explicit formulations. At the deepest level, however, Polanyi and Plato are ultimately concerned with different questions, even if their discussions occasionally converge. Polanyi approaches the *Meno* primarily as a philosophical resource for explaining the structure of inquiry and discovery, especially within scientific investigation. His central concern is epistemological: how human beings are able to pursue and recognize solutions that are not yet fully known or explicitly

articulable. Plato's concern in the *Meno*, however, is broader and more fundamentally pedagogical. The dialogue is not principally an attempt to construct a theory of discovery. Although epistemological questions concerning inquiry and knowledge clearly arise within the *Meno*, they remain embedded within and subordinate to the dialogue's larger dramatic concern with moral and intellectual formation. Socrates seeks less to explain how hidden knowledge is tacitly possessed than to cultivate in *Meno* the courage, humility, and persistence required to continue examination despite uncertainty, frustration, and ignorance.

Nevertheless, Polanyi's interpretation may illuminate dimensions of the dialogue that Plato himself leaves only implicit. Even if Plato is not attempting to formulate a theory of tacit knowing, the dialogue arguably supplies metaphysical and epistemological assumptions capable of supporting something like it.

Socrates repeatedly suggests that inquiry does not require fully articulated knowledge in advance. At several points within the dialogue, right opinion appears sufficient to initiate and sustain the search. Yet opinions themselves occupy an ambiguous position. They are not identical with knowledge, but neither are they wholly empty nor directionless. They possess enough orientation toward truth to guide inquiry meaningfully prior to explicit understanding. In this respect, Plato's account of opinion may point toward a form of partially possessed but not yet fully articulated awareness analogous to tacit knowing.

A similar possibility emerges through the practice of Socratic questioning itself. The elenchus functions largely by exposing false confidence, contradictions, and superficial understanding. Socrates repeatedly dismantles inadequate formulations not merely to leave his interlocutors in confusion, but to prepare them for clearer apprehension. The movement of the dialogue therefore suggests that genuine insight may already exist in some latent or obscured form within the soul, awaiting proper conditions for its emergence into articulation. Plato's language of recollection naturally reinforces this possibility. If questioning can draw forth truths not previously available to conscious expression, then recollection may be understood less as the recovery of explicit propositions than as the gradual bringing-to-light of meanings dimly possessed prior to articulation. Read in this way, Plato's metaphysics of the soul and Polanyi's account of tacit knowing begin to exhibit genuine points of contact, even if Plato himself never develops them into a formal epistemological theory.

By abstracting the paradox and recollection from the larger dramatic structure of the dialogue, Polanyi transforms moments within a pedagogical encounter into components of an epistemological theory. In doing so, he identifies genuine insights within the *Meno* concerning the anticipatory character of inquiry, yet ultimately interprets episodes ordered toward moral and intellectual formation as evidence for tacit knowing and scientific discovery. The dialogue

itself, however, suggests that these episodes cannot be separated from Socrates' attempt to reshape Meno's understanding of inquiry, virtue, and the examined life. Plato's central concern is therefore not merely how knowledge is acquired, but what kind of person must be formed in order genuinely to pursue truth.

### **Conclusion**

Plato's *Meno* neither fully anticipates nor simply refutes Polanyi's account of tacit knowing. Polanyi rightly perceives that inquiry depends upon forms of anticipation, orientation, and partially articulated awareness that guide discovery prior to explicit knowledge. Yet the dialogue ultimately situates these conditions of inquiry within a broader account of moral and pedagogical formation. The search for truth in the *Meno* is inseparable from the transformation of the soul required to sustain philosophical questioning itself. In this respect, Plato and Polanyi converge in recognizing that inquiry begins from resources not wholly reducible to formal method or explicit knowledge. They diverge, however, in the ultimate horizon of that inquiry. For Polanyi, tacit knowing illuminates the structure of discovery; for Plato, the drama of inquiry remains ordered toward the cultivation of the philosophical life. The *Meno*

therefore suggests that epistemological questions cannot finally be separated from the moral conditions that make the pursuit of truth possible.