

# THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Debate Group

## The Epistemological Egg, or the Metaphysical Chicken?

by Amanda Bartley

In Plato's *Meno*, Meno asks Socrates if virtue can be taught. Socrates responds that to know if virtue can be taught or not, one must first know what virtue is. Meno responds, "He cannot search for what he knows – since he knows it, there is no need to search – nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for." Meno's question is one of epistemology. Epistemology is the theory of knowledge: what knowledge is, how we get it, what we can or cannot know, or if we really have knowledge to begin with. In Meno's case, it is the question of how we are able to transmit the knowledge of virtue from one person to another. Socrates realizes that Meno's very question makes a significant assumption: that he knows what virtue is in the first place. This is a question of metaphysics.

Metaphysics studies the nature and principles of being, or reality. When he engages in metaphysics, Socrates engages in the study of "what is". He insists that one must know virtue in the metaphysical sense before one can ask any questions about it. The metaphysical and

epistemological questions posed by Meno and Socrates tend to blend together, partly due to the fact that neither of these categories – epistemology and metaphysics – has been created at this point. This blending is also due to the fact that every metaphysical question tends to have epistemological assumptions hidden in it and vice versa.

To Socrates (and by extension Plato), the first question to be asked is that of metaphysics, "What is virtue?" The epistemological aspect does not arise: that we have the capability to know and understand virtue is self-evident to Socrates. Today this is not so. Descartes' *Discourse on the Method* started what today we call the "epistemological turn" in philosophy. Since Descartes, the primary questions of philosophy have been epistemological in nature, not metaphysical, as they had been in the past, for the *Discourse* focuses not on what we know, but how we know. It is thus a forerunner of the scientific method. Science itself, though it seeks to tell us about reality and its laws, is an epistemological discipline. That is, science first affirms that the scientific method is how we know, so that it can then tell us what we know.

But is the Cartesian-scientific approach correct? Should we start with epistemology, or should we oppose this method and begin with metaphysics? If we start

with epistemology we may arrive at the conclusion of what we may or may not know, but is this the pursuit of truth or the pursuit of something else? By restricting our range of knowledge we may cut out the possibility of knowing ultimate truth. If we are incapable of knowing ultimate truth, it is pointless to continue to search for it regardless if it exists or not. Thus the only truths we can come to know are the little truths that we are capable of, the "truths" of a given epistemology. If, however, we start with the metaphysical question, then by not knowing what we are capable or incapable of knowing we may be pursuing an unattainable goal. From the pragmatic (and also today's commonsense "scientific") view the obvious choice would be to choose epistemology. At least then, most people would say, we would know something, even if it is the negative knowledge of what we can't know. Perhaps, but by pursuing this course we have done so at the expense of any philosophy in the true Socratic sense. Seems as though Meno has won after all.

When searching for knowledge about reality, should we first ask the epistemological question of knowledge, or the metaphysical question about "being in general?" We will discuss this question at our next meeting. The question should be particularly interesting for those with an inclination towards science, as science is the dominate

force in modern times that investigates reality. Should science re-think its starting point, or is it even possible for it to do so? Finally, what truths do we get from such observations of reality? Does science give us “ultimate truth”, or the little truths of its particular discipline?

*Please join the PDG on Monday, February 17, at 7:00 p.m. for our profound reflections on this metaphysico-epistemologico-presuppositional discussion. We will meet in the Honor's Lounge on the second floor of Gamble Hall.*

## A Polemical Addendum

by Ernst Virklick

Instead of permitting me to write the lead article, which is what he should have done, Eric informed me a week ago that Amanda Bartley was writing an essay for the acclaimed *Philosopher's Stone* on a topic dear to my heart, or at least on a topic near to the topic dear to my heart. I believe – as I have not yet seen her article – that Bartley is writing on whether epistemology should precede ontology, or whether ontology should precede epistemology in philosophical inquiry. I would like, however, to write about the half-witted haughtiness of scientists who think that science is purely epistemological, or, to bring my polemic closer to Bartley's topic, on the thoughtlessness of those who maintain that science does not involve an ontological perspective, and thus begins with epistemology.

I was recently at a conference in which an overconfident scientist argued for the epistemological purity of science, that is, that science attempts only to provide an epistemological method for looking at and manipulating the world and, therefore, assumes no ontology, which he proceeded to condemn as “a blind groping in the dark.” Aside from his assertion about the absence of ontology in science and his startlingly unoriginal metaphor, this analytical monster had nothing to say about ontology. His assertion, however, reveals his base foolishness, a trait of which many scientists partake.

For science – this epistemological discipline – assumes an ontological perspective without which science and the scientific method fail to have meaning. The scientific method is based on the repeatability of experiments. It proves the “reality” of gravity by the repetition of experiments that confirm past experiments: so long as the ball drops down to the ground instead of soaring into the air, gravity is assumed to be actual. But is it not evident to scientists that this method of proof assumes an ontological belief, namely that the future will be like the past, that nature is uniform? The scientific belief that generalizations about the future can be made on the basis of past experiments presupposes that reality is uniform, or regular, and this presupposition, without which science could not logically function, though it could, and does, illogically function – this presupposition is ontological in character.

Moreover, scientific fops also fail to notice that scientific procedure involves the

conjunction of observation and mathematics. That is, the scientist compiles a table of data, then looks for a pattern in her data that she can represent by means of a formula. The problem with this procedure is that it relies on mathematics, which by nature deals with static entities, to describe a dynamic world. Thus, in order for scientific procedure to work logically, the scientist must assume that reality is not a continuous flow or process, but a succession of physical or energetic events, or that reality is a succession of fragmented moments in time. I have not the fragments of time, or space, to point out the problem to which this perspective on reality entails; my task is gently to remind scientists that this perspective on reality is an ontology, that science is not epistemologically pure.

If you have any questions, criticisms, or comments, please contact either Eric Verhine or Dr. Nordenhaug. Anyone interested in writing a brief article for *The Philosopher's Stone*, please contact either of us.

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