

## Readings Tutorial 2

Plato  
Meno

Plato's Meno presents his argument for innate ideas. Basically his contention seems to be that, because Socrates doesn't provide the slave boy with new information, the slave boy must have known all of the information to begin with. The argument does make sense, but I don't think that it's as strong as Plato makes it out to be.

To clarify: I think that Plato's argument goes (to place it in somewhat syllogistic form):

1. The slave boy has not studied any maths.
2. Socrates asks questions, and does not explicitly teach the boy anything
3. The boy ends up deducing Pythagoras' theorem.

Therefore, the boy must have known the maths before the whole affair. I don't know if this is a correct summary or not, but that is how the argument seems to me.

It also seems to me that the argument hinges on the second proposition. If you want to argue for innate ideas, you can accept that Socrates doesn't teach the boy anything, because that gives you the argument. However, if you are against innate ideas, all you have to say to seriously undermine the argument as support for innate ideas is say that you think Socrates' questioning is merely a method of teaching the boy.

With respect to the rest of Plato's story, that is, the forms and so on, I think that it is a very interesting idea indeed. There's something about the notion of the form of things being separate to the actual things themselves that's very compelling, leaving aside questions of religion, something that fits the non-physical in the world view along with the physical. Of course, that was a lot of the reason for the revival of Plato in the Renaissance, with Kabbalists liking the mysticism of numerology and so on. But I think that Plato, or at least a version of Plato, is so fundamental to physics now that, as you say, it is very illuminating to study him and then look at debates in the current sciences, and realise that it's all been done before.

Aristotle  
De Anima

I found the idea of formulable essences very interesting indeed. It fit very well with my training in and interest in computers. I thought that the idea that the form of an object could not exist without the object itself, while still being separate entity, is a strangely simple idea once you understand it, but one that is very difficult to explain without using an analogy. A subtle and powerful idea.

I did, however, find Aristotle much harder to read than Plato. The much more scholastic style of the writing made it sometimes difficult to understand exactly what Aristotle was trying to say.