

Dialectic, Virtue and Recollection in Plato's *Meno**

Laurence Berns

The first thing that confronts the reader of a Platonic dialogue is its strange form. Philosophic writings, since Aristotle, usually take the form of treatises or essays. But dialogues present themselves as dramas, where actions are equally, or even sometimes more, important than what has been presented as spoken, where what is said must be understood in the light of what is done, and what is done must be understood in the light of what is said. Thus, the validity and meaning of the arguments presented in a dialogue must be worked out and qualified by the imaginative and logical exercise of working out the arguments implicit in the action.

I. Opening Questions

Plato's *Meno* opens with Meno confronting Socrates with what appears to be a fundamental question about virtue, that is, human excellence. The usual Socratic or Platonic preparation or context for the question is absent. That is, we are not told why Meno asks that question or why it is asked of Socrates. It does, however, appear that Meno is very interested in the question of how *to acquire* virtue, or at least how to acquire the benefits that a reputation for virtue might supply. But the latter question, why it is asked of Socrates, is not too difficult: Socrates does have a reputation for being exceptionally knowledgeable about the question of virtue: in Plato's, *Republic*, (358A ff.) Glaucon is speaking to Socrates:

But the argument for justice, that it is better than injustice, I have never heard from anyone, as I would like to hear it. And I would like to hear it praised, itself for its very self. And I think that I can learn it from you, most of all.

*The Anastaplo Works of the Mind Lecture, University of Chicago, 11/15/2009, revised for the Homecoming Lecture at St. John's College, Annapolis, 9/24/2010

Meno, from Thessaly visits the sophisticated metropolis Athens and asks the expert on virtue a “learned” question about the subject of his expertise. Socrates’s response to the question is, on its face, outrageous. To Meno’s surprise, he answers that wisdom must have emigrated from Athens to Thessaly, because if anyone in Athens should be asked such a question he would laugh about being thought capable of answering it, and would insist that, “I happen not to know at all what that thing virtue itself is.” The truth of that assertion by Socrates would seem to depend on the acceptance of his supremely high standard for what “to know” might be. At any rate, he does seem to be very knowledgeable about everything that has been said about virtue, e.g. *Justice-Republic*, *Courage-Laches*, *Moderation-Charmides*, *Knowledge-Theaetetus*, *et al.*

Socrates claims to share the poverty of the rest of the Athenians: “How could I know what sort of thing something is [for example, whether virtue is teachable], if I do not know what [virtue] is?” Socrates turns Meno’s more practical question, about how something is acquired, into a theoretical inquiry about what the thing Meno is asking about is.

What is it about Meno’s question that could provoke such a response? Does Socrates already know that Meno’s character is as questionable, as Xenophon reports it to be in his *Anabasis*?¹ This dialogue tells us nothing about Meno’s later history. We are left by Plato to deduce Meno’s character from what he says and does in this dialogue. The opening question is:

Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue is something teachable? Or is it not teachable, but something that comes from practice? Or is it something neither from practice nor from learning, but comes to human beings by nature, or in some other way?

¹ Xenophon, *Anabasis*, II. vi. 21-29.

If “learning” in this question is only considered as the other side of teaching we are given three distinct alternatives as to what the source of virtue might be. If they can be separated, we have four, with one indeterminate possibility: teaching, or practice, or learning, or nature; they all exhibit themselves throughout the dialogue, either by their presence or by their conspicuous absence. The “some other way” may be an anticipation of the answer, “by divine dispensation”, with which the dialogue ends.

If, as it seems to me, Socrates knew that, as far as human character is concerned, nature provides the capacities, teaching and/or learning set forth the ends, the goals, implicit in the natural capacities, and practice develops the habits that enable one to actualize or defeat those goals. Divine dispensation could be a replacement for nature as the source of the original capacities.

Meno’s question, then, erroneously disjoins, as separated alternatives, factors that can only be properly understood as interrelated parts functioning together in the unified whole of human development. Socrates’ seemingly outrageous response could then be seen as the beginning of an attempt to help Meno get sight of the whole that he has unwittingly dismantled. The vast question of the relations of parts to the wholes that they are parts of manifests itself, but not explicitly, at the very beginning and throughout the whole of this dialogue.

II. Dialectic

Since this dialogue is a dramatic dialogue and not a narrated dialogue like the *Republic*, our only access to the *action* of the dialogue is through the *mode* of the discussion itself. We are not altogether at a loss, however, in this matter, for Socrates has explicitly characterized that mode as dialectical.

But if, being friends as both I and you are now, . . . [we] should want to have a discussion with one another, then surely a somehow more gentle and more dialectical way of answering is required. And it is perhaps more dialectical to answer not only

with the truth, but also through those things which he who is being questioned could agree that he knows. (Speech 82² [75C-D])

But *dialectical* means a variety of interrelated things in the Platonic writings. The word is derived from the Greek *dialegein*, to converse, to discuss. The word *dia*, connected to the word for two, *duo*, in composite words like this, signifies connections between two or more separated things. It is a linking prefix. Consider the Greek word *diabainein*. The word *bainein* means to walk. When you prefix *dia* to it, it means to cross a bridge. The *dia* links the two sides of a bridge. The word *logos*, part of the word *dialogos* (*dialogue*, a noun connected with the adjective dialectical) means a number of things: some primary meanings are speech, meaning and reckoning.

Dialectical then does often mean gentle and friendly conversation, where the interlocutors accommodate themselves to, and try to understand each other's views, in contrast to unfriendly and contentious conversation. Dialectic in this personal sense suggests that the meaning of what is being said is to be understood primarily with reference to the characters and capacities of the speakers including their limitations or talents. If the situation, or the character, or capacity of an interlocutor makes theoretical questioning no longer appropriate, the conscientious dialectician can aim at furthering some salutary opinion or belief, some communal agreement that could be beneficial for society as a whole. This form of dialectic frequently appears, as in the case of the *Meno*, near the end of a dialogue.

Aristotle, in his discussion of dialectical reasoning, in the first chapter of his *Topics*, distinguishes dialectical reasoning from the most perfect form of reasoning, demonstrative reasoning. Demonstration reasons from premises that are "true and primary". The types of persons holding those premises need not be mentioned

² The translations, notes and speech numbers referred to are those to be found in *Plato's Meno*, translated with annotations by George Anastaplo and Laurence Berns, (Focus Publishing, R. Pullins Co., Newburyport, MA: 2004).

because the premises produce conviction or belief “through themselves”. But dialectical premises, it seems, require reference to those holding them. Dialectical premises are generally accepted opinions (*endoxa*) “held by all people, most people, or by the wise, and of these, all of the wise, or most of the wise, or the most notable and illustrious of the wise.”³ Here, in dialectic, where even true and primary premises might be subject to question, reference to the kind of people holding the premises is appropriate.

In this personal sense, for example, Plato’s treatment of moderation in the *Republic* can be called dialectical.⁴ It ascends from how moderation exists in all, or rather most, people, as control over one’s desires, pleasures and pains with respect to food, drink and sexual satisfaction, to its highest and most rare form as a beautiful harmony of cooperating and interpenetrating powers of the soul, each power functioning smoothly as it was naturally meant to function. It should not come as a surprise that Plato’s treatment of dialectic is itself dialectical: it is certainly spoken about in a number of different ways in the dialogues.

In the *Republic*, *dialegesthai* and *dialektikê*, both usually translated as *dialectic*, refer to that highest form of inquiry by which reason (*logos*) ascends from sense perception, experience, opinion and what is changeable and opinable, to seek what is purely intelligible, knowable and unchangeable, that is, the forms, or ideas, what each thing is, its very being (*ousia*), and finally to the governing principle of the whole (literally, of the all, *to pan*, 511B). Aristotle, Plato’s foremost student, put this last point as follows: “Dialectic . . . being investigative, has a way to the principles of all pursuits, (all methods, *methodôn*).”⁵

³ One is almost tempted to add, “or by all of the most notable, or most of the most notable, or the very most notable of the most notable; or . . . etc.”

⁴ See the note on Speeches 26 and 28 [73A-B], and *Republic*, 389D-E and 430D-432B.

⁵ *Topics*, 101b2-4

These two meanings of dialectical, the personal and the theoretical, come together when two or more friends are genuinely disposed through discussion to seek an adequate response to a serious “What is . . .?” question, like, “What is virtue?”⁶ Or, if a response is not forthcoming, they can search for a better understanding of the question itself, by refining it.⁷ In Plato’s *Cratylus* (390C) the dialectician is referred to as one who knows how to ask and to answer questions.

But sometimes these two modes of dialectic can be at cross purposes. Socrates, from the beginning of the dialogue up to Speech 354 [86C], has been trying to get Meno to seriously address the question, “What is virtue?”. Meno, in Speech 355 [86C-D], reverts, as if nothing had happened during the intervening discussion, to his opening question (with two important omissions).⁸ At this point, Socrates, by dialectically accommodating himself to being “ruled” by Meno, gives up trying to engage Meno in the ways of the higher dialectic, adopting instead what he calls a “hypothetical” approach. Something similar happened earlier in the discussions of shape and color. Socrates seeks definitions rooted in our primary experience of the things defined, but Meno finds such definitions too simple.⁹ Socrates dialectically accommodates himself to Meno by producing an overgeneral, fancy, materialist (“Empedoclean”) definition of color that undialectically ignores the primary experience, the primary cognition, from which any definition of color, or definition of the object of sight, would have to begin, that is, *looking*.

Just before giving up on Meno, Socrates invites him to join with him in putting into practice what has just been exhibited in the Slave Boy scene¹⁰ But, one might

⁶ See note for Speech 194 [81E].

⁷ Leo Strauss uses the word “zetetic”, seeking or searching (from the Greek verb, *zetein*), to describe the fundamental characteristic of Socratic philosophizing. *On Tyranny*, Victor Gourevitch and Michael S. Roth, eds. (New York: The Free Press/Macmillan, 1991), p. 196.

⁸ To use Biblical language, this speech, an important turning point, could be regarded as Meno’s Fall. He repeats his opening question leaving out the two things he needs most: learning and practice.

⁹ See Plato’s *Sophist*, 243A-B.

¹⁰ Speech 354, [86C].

object, in the entire Slave Boy episode no “What is . . .?” question is ever raised. How then does the Slave Boy scene relate to the higher dialectic? Both the mode of presentation and the subject-matter of the Slave Boy scene put a premium on looking, looking inside one’s self and looking outside at what one can learn only by looking. The Slave Boy scene is an exhibition for Meno’s sake of how one can be *prepared*—here with the aid of a master teacher-- for higher dialectic. The preparation consists of an honest, careful and critical review of what one thinks one knows, in order to come to understand what one does not know. One cannot understand that one does not know without understanding what one does not know. Mathematical illustrations have been traditionally, and are here, models of clarity and precision. The Boy enthusiastically swears when he fully realizes that he does not know from “what sort of line” the eight-foot squared area comes to be.¹¹ Socrates remarks to Meno and even more to us: “For now he, not knowing, can even carry on the search gladly . . . do you think that before he would have tried to seek for or to learn that which he thought he knew while he did not know --before he fell down into perplexity and want and came to believe that he did not know, and longed to know?”¹² - But Meno, although he acquiesces politely, does not seem to see what Socrates is getting at. His vanity may not allow him to become a slave of learning.

III. *Eidos*

Socrates’ major complaint with Meno’s different accounts of virtue is that Meno continually gives him swarms of many different virtues, and not that “one and the same form (*eidos*) through which they are virtues, and upon which one would somehow do well to focus one’s gaze.”¹³ After Meno introduces the ability to acquire

¹¹ Speech 275 [84A]

¹² Speeches 282 and 284 [84B-C]

¹³ Speech 16 [72C]. *Eidos* is often translated as “form” or “idea”. It is also sometimes translated as “class”, as “character” and as “pattern”. The elementary meaning of the word is “looks”, that by which someone or something is recognized as being who or what he, she or it is. It is connected to the verb *eidenai*, “to know”, the original meaning of which is “to have seen”.

wealth into the virtues, Socrates characterizes Meno's enumerations of the different virtues, like justice, moderation and piety, as breaking up or changing the whole of virtue into small coin, pieces of small change. This whole, as *eidōs*, as class character, constitutes the whole class of virtues, and each virtue as what it is, according to Socrates; but what kind of whole are we being urged to think of? The old tried and true, natural, if not even childlike, method would be to try to reason to the less known from what seems to be better known. Are justice, moderation, courage, piety and wisdom related to virtue as small change is to gold coin; or as two, three, four and five, are related to number; or as the different kinds of bees are related to their hive; or as the different classes of human beings are related to political society as a whole; or as the organs of a living body are related to the whole living body? Is "virtue" by itself the organism of the different virtues? There is one passage in the dialogue that seems to favor the organismic model. In Speech 112 [77A-B] Socrates urges Meno to tell him what virtue is, "leaving it whole and healthy." While "health" as an analogous term can apply to a number of things, its primary reference is to an animal organism.

Aristotle, who appears to be more practical than Plato, approves of Gorgias' and Meno's way of enumerating the virtues.¹⁴ But Aristotle too indicates, near the end of his treatment of courage in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, (1117b9-13), that no particular virtue possessed in isolation from the other virtues fully deserves the name "virtue": "the more a man possesses virtue in its entirety (*tên aretên pasan*), and the more happy he is, the more will he be pained by death; for life is most worth living for such a man."

How does the elementary notion of "sensible looks" become transmuted by Plato and Aristotle into the idea of "intelligible (*noetic*) looks"? It has something to do with the fact that that by virtue of which a being is what it is, is also that by virtue of which it belongs to a class. When we say, "This is a dog.", we also mean, "This belongs to the class of dogs." What gives a being its character has the attribute of a class character. See *Republic*, Books VI and VII.

¹⁴ See *Politics*, 1259b21-1260b7, especially 1260a25-28.

There are Platonic dialogues devoted to different virtues, such as Justice—the *Republic*, Moderation—the *Charmides*, Courage—the *Laches*, and Piety—the *Euthyphro*. The organismic hypothesis might help account for why none of these inquiries by itself is said to be successful.

IV. Cloaking Unknowns As Knowns

In Speech 172 [79B-C] Socrates tells Meno that “when you were requested by me to talk about virtue as a whole, you fell far short of saying what it is, but you declared that every action is a virtue whenever it is done with some piece of virtue, *just as if you had said what the whole, virtue, is and it was immediately recognized by me*, even if you were to change it into pieces of small change.”¹⁵ But, Jacob Klein argues, in commenting on these passages,¹⁶ that what Meno is charged with doing (see italics in the previous sentence) is what we all do every time we express an opinion about someone possessing or not possessing some particular virtue.

To hold an opinion about that which is under consideration means to take—or, at worst, to pretend to take—the *zêtoumenon* [the thing sought], the “unknown,” as if it were “known.” To test an opinion means to follow it up through necessary consequences until a patent absurdity (a “contradiction”) or something incontrovertibly true comes into sight.¹⁷

Klein’s use of the mathematical term “unknown” alludes to what he has described (on p. 83 of the same text) as the “analytic” tradition of ancient mathematics, where

¹⁵ See Speeches 152-166 [78C-79A (especially Speeches 161 [78E] and 164 and 165 [78E-79A]).

¹⁶ Jacob Klein, *A Commentary on Plato’s Meno*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1965), p. 84.

¹⁷ Klein adds, “Depending on whether the former or the latter happens, the opinion is either refuted or vindicated. To vindicate (or verify) an opinion means to transform a *zêtoumenon* into an *homologoumenon*, into something one has to agree to, to transform the hitherto ‘unknown’ into a truth now indeed ‘known.’ However seldom, if ever, such vindicating occurs in a Platonic dialogue, the ‘dialectical’ process, which is ‘analytical’ in its very conception and structure, tends toward that end.”

proofs begin by assuming that one already has the unknown being sought, the *zêtoumenon*, and then, by following up the necessary consequences of that assumption, one either arrives at a contradiction, proving the impossibility of the assumption, or one arrives at some agreed upon truth which establishes the truth of the assumption. “All mathematics today is an outgrowth of this [‘analytic’] tradition,” Klein says. He alludes to, among other things, the ubiquitous x of algebra. A very simple example: What is the number that multiplied by two equals six? *Let us assume that we have it and call it x .* Therefore $2x = 6$. Divide both sides by 2, then $x = 3$. Three is the number. But not only modern mathematics, the argument goes, but all testing of opinions, including the testing of opinions in the dialectical process of a Platonic dialogue, follows some such analytic procedure.

This bears on the consideration of wholes and their parts as follows:

Generally, any opinion on any subject can be understood to catch some “partially” true aspect of the subject under investigation. This means that, however mistaken each of us may be about that subject as a “whole,” we are talking together about “the same thing” or, at least, are making an effort to talk about “the same thing.” . . . But that, in turn, indicates a common, if usually hidden, ground along which the conversation proceeds and where the “whole” is really “located.” This “back-ground” is the *zêtoumenon* [thing sought] and its continuing presence manifests itself in our ability to opine, that is, to cloak what remains “unknown” with the guise of the “known.” The dialectical-analytic process thus tends indeed through “parts” toward a “whole.” That is why it is not at all impossible to talk about “properties” of something of which we do not know what it is.¹⁸

The continuing presence, then, often inexplicit, of a background idea of “the same thing” holding the conversation together manifests itself in dialectical differences of opinion, each interlocutor is arguing about that which he or she does not fully know, assuming the “unknown” as if it were known. If those who converse are genuinely

¹⁸ See Speech 2 (71B) of Plato’s *Meno*, and Klein, *A Commentary on Plato’s Meno*, p. 85.

interested in getting to the truth of the matter, and if each presents evidence and arguments that make sense, they may come to see that the oppositions they find indicate that they have not been talking about the same thing. The “cloaking” process of opining had at first kept them from seeing, but then made it possible for them to see, that they had been talking about different things. Through the saving grace of the principle of non-contradiction, the oppositions are resolved by distinctions, and opinions move closer to knowledge.¹⁹

If, as Klein argues, Socrates misrepresents, in this and other dialogues, the illegitimacy of our ordinary use of “cloaked” eidetic unknown wholes in order to talk about properties of particulars participating in them, his primary motive would seem to be to open up the question “as to what underlies our ordinary speaking and thinking” on any subject, “as a precondition for looking at the ‘wholeness’ of things.”

Does the Slave Boy scene exhibit what it purports to exhibit, that all so-called teaching is really recollecting? It appears that Socrates simply gives, or “teaches,” the Boy the sought-for line. The scene does exhibit a perfectly natural series of errors, brought out and clarified by a master teacher. The clarification of those natural errors, as errors, also exhibits how one can come to learn, and to benefit from learning, what one does not know. In this simpler case, at least, the question is answered: the Boy does move from false opinions to a true opinion about the sought-for line.²⁰ Meno had complained before the Slave Boy episode (Speech 179 [79 E-80 B]) that Socrates, unlike anyone he has ever spoken with, numbs him both in soul and mouth, so that he is not able to join him in his search for whatever virtue is. Meno, to forestall being recruited into the search, presents in the form of questions an argument that he thinks is beautiful which would undermine any such Socratic

¹⁹ See Plato's *Republic*, 430E-431A, especially 436B-441C.

²⁰ See Speeches 322-332 [85B-D].

search.²¹ To rescue his kind of searching from Menonic oblivion, Socrates introduces his recollection story.

V. The Whole and the Surface

He claims to have heard -Meno is much more attentive to things heard than to things seen- the story “from both men and women wise about things divine,” from priests and priestesses and divine poets “able to give an account (*logon*) of those things they have taken in hand.” What they say is that the human soul is immortal, it appears to die and be born again many times, but is never destroyed. Because it is immortal, has been born many times and “has seen all things . . . there is nothing it has not learned and therefore is able to recollect²², about virtue and about other things, which it already knew before.” Since part of that time it was without a body and sense organs, that seeing cannot simply be seeing in the normal sense; presumably it was some kind of seeing with the mind’s eye. “Inasmuch as all nature is akin (or, connected in kinship, *syngenous*) and the soul has learned all things, there is nothing to prevent someone who recollects (which people call learning) one thing only from discovering all other things, so long as he is brave and does not grow tired of seeking.” Since all nature is connected (*syn-*) -in kinship (*-genous*) “every bit the soul recollects can be understood as a ‘part’ of a ‘whole’.”²³ The implication is that that whole is an ordered and knowable whole, *the* knowable whole.

We spoke earlier of the description, in the *Republic*, of the ultimate or highest object of dialectic being knowledge of the governing principle (*archên*) of the whole: the recollection story of the Meno, then, points to the ultimate object of, the ultimate zêtoumenon, thing sought, by, our natural inclination to know. To know a whole means to know its parts, and to know how those parts fit together to make a whole.

²¹ See Speeches 185-188 [80D-81A].

²² “Remembering”, *mnêsis*, is distinguished from “reminding”, or “recollecting”, *anamnêsis*. Prefixing *ana-* to the ordinary word for memory or remembering suggests setting out to recall, or to bring something back up to memory.

²³ Jacob Klein, *A Commentary on Plato’s Meno*, p. 96.

But if the whole of any particular subject is only a part of the all-comprehensive whole, one cannot have full and perfect knowledge of any particular subject without knowledge of the all-comprehensive whole that it fits into. In any literal sense this is not possible.

What then could Plato mean by philosophy, and what is he recommending to us upon reading the *Meno*? Do not opinions, different opinions, about the ultimate thing sought, zêtoumenon, shape or influence the ways we go about seeking knowledge of those parts of the whole that we think we can learn, the different “sciences?” Is the governing principle of the whole corporeal, mathematical, noetic (an object of intellect), organic, or something else ---or all or a few of these together? Seeking to understand fundamental problems, or alternatives, is not solely a theoretical matter. Theory and practice come together as one seeks to understand the principles shaping one’s own most cherished opinions.

One simple and straightforward consequence of holding to the recollection doctrine is that anyone seeking to discover what virtue is should first look inside oneself, to examine just what it is that one thinks one knows. It may seem immodest, Leo Strauss once remarked, to speak about “all objects of human knowledge,” but “we all really have opinions –and sometimes very strong opinions-- about all objects of human knowledge, and it is perhaps better to confess that to oneself and to try to clarify that than just to leave it at the amiable appearance of modesty.” Socratic philosophy, then, would be zetetic,²⁴ ready to seek; openly skeptical in the original sense of the word skeptical: that original sense is derived from the words skopein and skeptesthai, to look carefully, which occur many times in this dialogue. To be a skeptic in this sense of the word is to be a thoughtful “looker.” A zetetic skeptic, then, is a thoughtful “looker” seeking and searching for the truth, including the truth about the unavoidable, but elusive, principle or principles governing the whole.

²⁴ See *Plato’s Meno*, cited in note 1, the notes for speeches 12 [72A] and 194 [81E], pp. 50 and 61.

Speaking generally from what relates to human cognition, the whole and its parts becomes accessible to us through sense experience as sensible heterogeneity: its intelligible (or noetic) underpinnings through intellection as noetic heterogeneity and through counting and mathematics as noetic or dianoetic homogeneity. Sensible heterogeneity refers to the things we all know, dogs, cats, trees, tables, human beings, men women, *etc.*: they come in *different* kinds. Noetic or dianoetic homogeneity refers to numbers, that is, multitudes of units or monads of the *same* kind: if we want to count seats, or humans, or men, or women in this room, we have to specify first the kind of unit we are using in our count. Both of these modes of cognition, sensible heterogeneity and dianoetic heterogeneity, presuppose divisions into, and relations between, different kinds, or classes, or to use the Platonic Greek term, different *eidê*, that is, they presuppose noetic heterogeneity.

I will quote Leo Strauss to sum this up:

The “what is” questions point to “essences,” to “essential” differences –to the fact that the whole consists of parts which are heterogeneous, not merely sensibly (like fire, air, water and earth) but noetically: to understand the whole means to understand the “What” of each of these parts, of these classes of beings, and how they are linked with one another. Such understanding cannot be the reduction of one heterogeneous class to others or to any cause or causes other than the class itself; the class, or the class character, is the cause *par excellence*. Socrates conceived of his turn to the “what is” questions as a turn, or return, to sanity, to “common sense”: while the roots of the whole are hidden, the whole manifestly consists of heterogeneous parts. One may say, that according to Socrates the things which are “first in themselves” are somehow “first for us”; the things which are “first in themselves” are in a manner, but necessarily, revealed in men’s opinions.²⁵

²⁵ Leo Strauss, *The City And Man*, (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1964), p. 19, and Jacob Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*, (Cambridge & London: The M. I. T. Press, 1968), pp. 89-91.

I find it comforting, comforting, but also puzzling, that with all these unusual expressions we have been talking about the “surface” of things. What might be called *the sentence* of Leo Strauss is about that surface. It goes as follows: “The problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things.”²⁶ I have found it instructive to think about how Strauss leads up to that sentence. It is from his book *Thoughts on Machiavelli*²⁷:

We shall not shock anyone, we shall merely expose ourselves to good-natured or at any rate harmless ridicule, if we profess ourselves inclined to the old-fashioned and simple opinion according to which Machiavelli was a teacher of evil.

Strauss then lists nine examples of Machiavelli’s “maxims of public and private gangsterism.” The central one is: “not virtue, but the prudent use of virtue and vice leads to happiness”. Such maxims were said to be devilish. Strauss goes on:

To recognize the diabolical character of Machiavelli’s thought would mean to recognize in it a perverted nobility of a very high order. [He refers to Marlowe’s remark that according to Machiavelli, ‘there is no sin but ignorance.’ and then goes on:] Not the contempt for the simple opinion, nor the disregard of it, but the considerate ascent from it leads to the core of Machiavelli’s thought. There is no surer protection against the understanding of anything than taking for granted or otherwise despising the obvious and the surface.

I leave you repeating once again, the final sentence of that statement: “The problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things.”

²⁶ *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, (The Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois: 1958), p. 13.

²⁷ The Introduction, p. 9.