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CAN YOU SEEK THE ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION?

Amber Carpenter and Jonardon Ganeri

Plato articulates a deep perplexity about inquiry in ‘Meno’s Paradox’—the claim that one can inquire neither into what one knows, nor into what one does not know. Although some commentators have wrestled with the paradox itself, many suppose that the paradox of inquiry is special to Plato, arising from peculiarities of the Socratic *elenchus* or of Platonic epistemology. But there is nothing peculiarly *Platonic* in this puzzle. For it arises, too, in classical Indian philosophical discussions, where it is formulated with great clarity, and analysed in a way that casts it in a new light. We present three treatments of the puzzle in Indian philosophy, as a way of refining and sharpening our understanding of the paradox, before turning to the most radical of the Indian philosophers to tackle it. The Indian philosophers who are optimistic that the paradox can be resolved appeal to the existence of prior beliefs, and to the resources embedded in language to explain how we can investigate, and so move from ignorance to knowledge. Highlighting this structural feature of inquiry, however, allows the pessimist philosopher to demonstrate that the paradox stands. The incoherence of inquiry is rooted in the very idea of aiming our desires at the unknown. Asking questions and giving answers rests on referential intentions targeting objects in a region of epistemic darkness, and so our ‘inquiry sceptic’ also finds structurally similar forms of incoherence in the pragmatics of interrogative discourse.

There is something deeply perplexing about inquiry. Or at least so Plato seemed to think, when he shared between Meno and Socrates the presentation of what has become ‘Meno’s Paradox’—the claim that one can apparently inquire neither into what one knows, nor into what one does not know. Commentators after Plato have wrestled with Plato’s texts, trying to wrest from them what Plato’s own resolution to the paradox was meant to be; some have also wrestled with the paradox itself, to indicate how the riddle is to be resolved. But many such commentators have supposed that the paradox of inquiry is somehow special to Plato—that it arises due to peculiarities of the Socratic *elenchus* or of Platonic epistemology. After surveying some of the treatments of Plato’s problem, we will show that there is nothing peculiarly *Platonic* in this puzzle. For the very same puzzle arises, in almost the same words, in several philosophical texts of classical India. In these passages, which have never before been discussed, the paradox of inquiry is not only formulated with great clarity, but analysed in a way that

casts it in an entirely new light. We shall present three treatments of the puzzle in Indian philosophy, as a way of refining and sharpening our understanding of the paradox, before turning to the most radical of the Indian philosophers to tackle the problem. The incoherence in inquiry, our new sources inform us, has its roots in the idea of aiming our desires at the unknown. The game of asking questions and giving answers likewise rests on referential intentions targeting objects in a region of epistemic darkness, and it is no surprise to find structurally similar forms of incoherence in the pragmatics of interrogative discourse.

1. Plato's Paradox of Inquiry

Meno's paradox arises at *Meno* 80d5–e5. It is better named the paradox of inquiry, but the first name is firmly entrenched; we shall use both. The passage is short:

MENO: How will you look for it Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?

SOCRATES: I know what you want to say, Meno. Do you realize what a debater's argument you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know? 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 asks two questions of Socrates, one to do with beginnings, the other about endings: How can we get started in inquiry? How can we know when our search has come to an end?¹ Socrates interprets this as asking how inquiry could happen at all: either we have already finished, or else there is no way to begin.² What can be made of the supposed dilemma?

First, Socrates' version of Meno's paradox clearly rests on an equivocation. Inquiry only becomes otiose when the phrase 'knowing x ' is taken to mean 'knowing everything that there is to know about x '. On the other hand, it is impossible to move forward in inquiry only when I have absolutely no idea at all what sort of thing, at even the most basic level of sortality—object, event, quality— x is. This absolute ignorance on which the second lemma relies is, however, not the contradictory of the complete knowledge which the first lemma requires. The proper contradictory of 'One is in a state of absolute ignorance' is 'One is not in a state of absolute ignorance', a condition consistent with any epistemic achievement better than or equal to having the vaguest intimations. Spelling out the equivocation makes clear the middle road that we immediately feel Socrates

¹See Dominic Scott, who makes a similar observation [Scott 2006: 76–7, 83].

²Whether Socrates offers a reinterpretation, a correct interpretation, or a rather different version of Meno's questions is disputed. See M. M. McCabe [2009] for an insightful way of taking the two formulations to be distinct but complementary. Because the passages we will look at bear strong similarity with Socrates' formulation, this will be our primary focus in what follows.

has left out: the hazy idea, educated guess, suspicion and partial knowledge that seem so clearly to license further inquiry.

Secondly, though, while Socrates ‘overlooks’ this middle ground, it is evident that Plato does not.³ In fact, the middle-ground of belief and true belief occupies much of Plato’s attention throughout the dialogues. That the oversight is not Plato’s is demonstrated by the role [true] belief plays at the end of the *Meno*. ‘We are poor specimens, you and I, Meno’, Socrates is given to say (96d5), for having overlooked the fact that people often have not just beliefs, but even true beliefs—following which they can make progress. Beliefs, if true, can at least get one home at the end of the day, or to Larissa, if that is where one is going.⁴ In fact, we don’t even need true beliefs to make progress in inquiry:⁵ the whole starting point of the *elenchus*, and of Socratic method, was the interlocutor’s beliefs.⁶ And we do all patently have beliefs. The fact that we do have beliefs, at least some of which are true (whether or not we are able to recognize them as such) is all that is needed to resolve Socrates’ riddle. So, at least, goes Gail Fine’s [2003] influential interpretation of the paradox and the dialogue.

The third point to observe is that it is not clear that Meno and Socrates are posing the same question. Meno’s first question is methodological: (1) How do we go about looking for something, how do we make sure our methods fit the object? His second is epistemological: (2) How do we know when we’ve finally got a grip on the world with our thought? How do we recognize which of our thoughts, and at which stage our thoughts, capture (or represent) the world as it actually is? Socrates seems to point to a conceptual problem: What is the conceptual framework required for posing a question and setting about answering it? We might think that one thing the geometrical demonstration with the slave brings out is just how much conceptual apparatus one must have at one’s disposal in order to pose or understand a question. To an extent, any old beliefs will do to get one started in inquiry,⁷ but only with the proviso that ‘equal’, ‘same’, ‘different’, ‘good’ are also clear and present to one. Without a grasp of certain basic concepts, posing a question is conceptually impossible.

³Contrast this interpretation with John McDowell’s view that, as late as the *Theaetetus*, Plato himself believed there to be no other option but complete knowledge or complete ignorance—he ‘regard[s] the knowledge which is required for a thing to figure in one’s judgement as an all-or-nothing matter’ [McDowell 1973: 197]. Panagiotis Dimas [1996: 9–11] sees the *Meno* as an exercise in working out this distinction, but not one presupposed by Plato.

⁴Compare Vlastos’ interpretation of Plato’s solution in Vlastos [1994b].

⁵So Terence Irwin [1977: 139, 140] writes, ‘The slave and Socrates’ other interlocutors discover the resources they need in their present beliefs . . . Plato’s explicit distinction between knowledge and true belief disarms Meno’s paradox and its attack on Socratic inquiry’.

⁶Of course, one might say this only proves that one needs more than beliefs to make progress in inquiry, for after all the *elenchus* is notorious for its inability to progress beyond *aporia*. Vlastos [1994b] and Irwin [1977: 69–70] both take the paradox, and its solution in the *Meno*, to be Plato’s reflections on vindicating (or rejecting) Socratic Method in one way or another. Both, however, take pre-existing (true) beliefs to be sufficient to dissolve the paradox. Alexander Nehamas [1985] agrees that justifying *elenchus* is part of Plato’s motivation—‘He uses the paradox not only in order to discuss serious epistemological issues, but also to resolve a number of dialectical difficulties to which Socrates’ practice had given rise’ [ibid.: 8; cf. 14–16]; he disagrees, however, about the sufficiency of true beliefs in addressing the paradox [ibid.: 16–17].

⁷These will offer terms through which new information can be conceived and conveyed; cf. Michael Beaney’s gloss: ‘Here, if ‘learning’ is to take place, some knowledge must indeed be presupposed, as Socrates himself argued when the general problem was first formulated’ [Beaney 1996: 139].

Meno suggests that searching might be random (or be subject to accidental constraints), and it may be unclear when to stop. Socrates replies that this would make *inquiry*—the intentional *searching* for specific knowledge—impossible. It is this paradox, one which purports to show the impossibility of inquiry, we will be exploring.

Plato offers no explicit resolution of the paradox.⁸ ‘Recollection’, which Socrates trots out in reply, is so obviously incapable of resolving it that even Socrates is made to have misgivings about whether his little myth is true.⁹ If Plato offers any suggestion of a way out, he does so only implicitly, in the *Meno* by magically introducing ‘belief’ later in the dialogue, and then for other purposes.¹⁰ He does not explicitly attempt to motivate the paradox, or demonstrate why it is more serious than just a ‘debaters’ set-piece’.

Any motivation for the paradox, and any recognition that it is serious, has come from commentators trying to resolve it or making suggestions as to how Plato would resolve it. According to Fine, Plato’s resolution of the paradox is that inquiry is possible because we all already have some beliefs (some cognitive states lower than knowledge but greater than complete ignorance) and the ability to reason about them;¹¹ it may be that some of those beliefs need to be true,¹² and perhaps in addition we need to be able to recognize those true beliefs *as* true.¹³ Or we might rather, with Aristotle, distinguish different senses of knowing, if that would help;¹⁴ some would argue that we need also to be able to recognize discrepancies between our beliefs;¹⁵ other commentators wonder whether (given the demonstration with the slave-boy) we should add the need of a distinct questioner, in order to bring our attention to these discrepancies, as a further requirement for the

⁸This is not, of course, to say that Plato does not offer any further resources for reflecting on the paradox. Plato remained deeply concerned with the paradox, throughout his epistemological writings. The point is only that he does not present an answer to the paradox, explicitly formulated as such—apart, perhaps, from ‘recollection’, which raises at least as many difficulties of its own.

⁹I do not insist on the truth of everything that I’ve said; only that we will be better and braver men if we search for what we know, than if we believe inquiry is impossible’ [*Meno* 86b6–c1]. It is, of course, debated what exactly of 81a–86b Socrates intends to distance himself from; and there are those (Menn [2002: 221–2]) is a recent case) who think that Plato at least meant recollection to be the literal solution to the paradox. If so, it is inadequate, for it explains neither *de novo* acquisition, nor the requisites for recovery now. For such reasons, Scott [2006: 80–14] takes recollection to be a solution, but only to the problem of discovery, recognition of something as the object sought, not to the problem of starting inquiry. Others take recollection to be a metaphor or analogy for some key aspect of inquiry—perhaps that it is rational to engage in inquiry [Dimas 1996: 27–30], perhaps that we have rational capacities and tendencies towards truth [Fine 2003: 62; 1988: 138–41], or perhaps that there is something besides exchanging words (namely, comprehension) that happens in the person and cannot be pointed to [Moravcsik 1971: 64–5].

¹⁰Other passages in which Plato discusses knowledge, judgement and method might be seen as implicit attempts to address the paradox; each of these brings with it interpretive difficulties.

¹¹... one can inquire even if one lacks all knowledge of the subject, for the slave has just done so. The slave can inquire, although he entirely lacks knowledge, because he has both true beliefs and the capacity for rational reflection and revision of his beliefs, and these are adequate for inquiry’ [Fine 2003: 56].

¹²As Vlastos [1994b: 25] suggests.

¹³As argued by Dimas [1996: 9].

¹⁴All instruction given or received by way of argument proceeds from pre-existent knowledge ... [sometimes from] knowledge of the particulars actually falling under the universal and therein already virtually known ... [So that] before he was led on to recognition or before he actually drew a conclusion, we should perhaps say that in a manner he knew, in a manner not’ (*Posterior Analytics* I.1, 71a1–2, 18–19, 24–5; and at 71b5–9: ‘I imagine there is nothing to prevent a man in one sense knowing what he is learning, in another not knowing it. The strange thing would be, not if in some sense he knew what he was learning, but if he were to know it in that precise sense and manner in which he was learning it.’) Or consider also Moravcsik’s claim [1971: 63, cf. 59] that ‘The recollection thesis’ solves the paradox because it ‘enables us to give a consistent and intelligible account of how the inquirer at the outset both knows and does not know what he is seeking’.

¹⁵Vlastos’ focus on the importance of insight into logical relations suggests this [Vlastos 1994: 27; 1965: 156–7].

possibility of inquiry; some, recognizing the need for inquiry to be a directed activity, have proposed that makeshift specifications of the end suffice to get us going.¹⁶ Or it may be that there can only ever be a pragmatic solution to the paradox.¹⁷ All of these suggestions have come from later thinkers, in their reflections on the paradox. Plato himself left us only the puzzle, and a few puzzling hints.

2. The Desire for Knowledge: Inquiry as Adjudication

The idea of philosophical inquiry is introduced in the very first line of the *Mīmāṃsā-sūtra*, a central text in the Sanskrit philosophical canon.¹⁸ ‘Now, consequently, [begins] an inquiry into moral duty’ (*Mīmāṃsā-sūtra* 1.1.1). The text thus declares itself to be a sustained inquiry into the foundations of morality (*dharma*). But the commentators we will look at use this opening statement in order to raise, and attempt to exorcise, the spectre of the paradox of inquiry.

Our first commentator Śabara (c. 400 CE) formulates the paradox of inquiry thus:

It must either be perfectly well known (*prasiddha*)¹⁹ what moral duty is, or else not so known (*aprasiddha*). If it is well known, there will be no inquiry (lit. ‘desire to know’: *jijñāsā*). If, however, it is not so known, then all the more no [inquiry]. So this work on the inquiry into moral duty is quite pointless.²⁰

There is, here, the same formulation of the paradox as a destructive dilemma we witnessed in Plato. There is, we should stress at the outset, no hint or suggestion that any Indian author has read or is aware of the earlier Greek discussion.²¹ It is remarkable enough that the self-same paradox should be

¹⁶See, for instance, Scott [2006: 77,83–7] and White [1974; 1976: 42–7]. For Gail Fine [2003: 60], agreed examples perform the work of initial specifications: ‘He does believe there is great dispute about the correct definition of virtue terms, and of course there is *some* dispute about particular moral cases. But there is also considerable agreement, enough agreement to secure the reference of the terms and so to ground inquiry’.

¹⁷The role of questioning in bringing this matching about is crucial: Plato’s resolution of Meno’s paradox is dialectical rather than logical’ writes Nehamas [1985: 24]. Presumably this means that he also takes the puzzle itself to be more a pragmatic difficulty than a logical one.

¹⁸As with most Indian sources, the text is difficult to date, and one must in any case distinguish between the dates of composition, compilation and redaction. Much of the *sūtra* literature is now thought to have achieved a relatively stable form by the first or second century CE, some strata of the texts invariably being of considerably greater antiquity.

¹⁹The term *prasiddha* is used several times in the texts we are discussing. A past participle from the verb *sidh-* ‘to achieve, accomplish’ with the verbal prefix *pra-*, its common meaning is ‘renowned, famous, celebrated’ (German: ‘bekannt’). The sense is of something generally accepted or commonly agreed to be the case. The Sanskrit verb *jñā* ‘to know, learn, find out, recognize’ is cognate with ‘know’; but the derived noun *jñāna* is used in philosophical Sanskrit with a meaning more akin to ‘belief’, the term employed for ‘knowledge’ being instead *pramā*.

²⁰*dharmāḥ prasiddho vā syād aprasiddho vā | sa cet prasiddho, na jijñāsyāḥ | athāprasiddho, natarām | tad etad anarthakaṃ dharmajijñāsāprakaraṇam |* [Śabara, *Mīmāṃsāsūtrabhāṣya*, *inf.* 1.1.1, 14,2–15,2].

²¹We have serious reservations in general about the ‘diffusion’ thesis, as defended most recently and elaborately by Thomas McEvilley [2002]. There are at least two alternatives to supposing an actual transmission of ideas: one is that the co-occurrence of similar ideas in Greece and India is due to their having a common origin in an Indo-European ‘protophilosophy’; the other is that the deepest philosophical problems are essentially ‘perennial’ or culture inspecific. For the first hypothesis, see the work of Nicholas J. Allen, for instance his review article [Allen 2005]; for the second see the work of B. K. Matilal, surveyed in the introduction to Matilal [2002]. See also Carmen Dragonetti and Fernando Tola [2004].

recognized in two ancient intellectual cultures, especially when we consider how many of the modern commentators on Plato have, in one way or another, understood the paradox as a peculiarly Platonic problem.²²

The etymology of the Sanskrit *jijñāsā* (translated ‘inquiry’) relates ‘inquiry’ not to asking questions but to wanting knowledge (the noun deriving from a desiderative of the verb ‘to know’). The paradox is thus a paradox about desire: desiring implies an acknowledged lack, and the point is that one cannot have a desire either for what one already has or for what one does not know one lacks. Śabara’s resolution of the paradox sees inquiry as consisting in the search for a resolution of conflict between different pre-existing understandings of morality, rather than as constructing such an understanding *ab initio*:

REPLY: On the contrary, [inquiry] does have a point. For different people have different understandings (*vipratipannā*) regarding the nature of moral duty. Some say the moral duty is one thing, others something else. One who strives to perform an act without having considered (*vicārya*)²³ this [controversy with respect to *dharma*] may adopt any old thing and may be thwarted and come to harm. Therefore one should inquire into the nature of moral duty. For we insist that this is what connects a person with the highest good.²⁴

Śabara’s suggestion is that inquiry can commence only when people already have beliefs, indeed conflicting beliefs, about the nature of the object of the inquiry: an inquiry aims at the resolution of conflict under conditions of disagreement. But we might worry that such a solution overlooks the possibility that people are just using terms differently. For what is there to guarantee that the various beliefs people have under the same label ‘moral duty’ do indeed have a common reference?²⁵ What ensures, in other words, that the different parties are not simply talking at cross-purposes?

²²M. M. McCabe [2009] is a notable and rewarding exception. Dominic Scott argues that the paradox arises because of Plato’s commitment to the principle of the ‘Priority of Definition’ and ‘Foreknowledge Principle’ [2006: 84–7]. Gail Fine [2003] and Gregory Vlastos [1994a: 78–9] both likewise take the paradox to rest on the peculiarly Platonic requirement that one know what something *is* in order to know what it is *like* (Fine calls this ‘Priority of Knowledge What’—or PKW—in Fine [2003: 44–50]); Dimas [1996: 8–9] ties this feature even more closely to Plato by making formulation of the PKW principle in more tendentious terms the seed of the paradox. Irwin describes the paradox as one that arises in the context of Socratic inquiry, and must be disarmed if Socrates’ idiosyncratic method of inquiry (including PKW and a distinctive Dialectical Requirement) is to be defended [Irwin 1977: 70, 138–9]. Moravcsik [1971] may be an exception to this, if he sees the unobservable ‘gap between the question and the response’ [ibid.: 65] as an actual feature of the experience of inquiry, which anyone must explain in some way or other.

²³The Sanskrit *vicārya* ‘having deliberated, considered, examined, discussed, investigated’, is a causative derivation from the verb *vicar-* ‘to wander about, roam over’.

²⁴athavā arthavat dharmam prati hi vipratipannā bahuvidah | kecid anyam dharmam āhuḥ, kecid anyam | so ‘yam avicārya pravartamānaḥ kaṃcid eva upādādāno vīhanyeta anartham ca rchet | tasmād dharmo jijñāsītavyaḥ | sa hi niḥśreyasena puruṣaṃ saṃyunakti iti pratijīmanīmahe | [Śabara, *Mīmāṃsāsūtrabhāṣya*, 16,3–16,6].

²⁵Irwin [1977: 138–9] also discusses the problem as one of ‘securing reference’, although he does not seem to think it is such a grave problem: ‘The answer to *Meno*’s paradox [is as follows:] though the slave does not know, he has true beliefs about the questions discussed (85c6–7) ... To inquire into *x* we need only enough true beliefs about *x* to fix the reference of the term ‘*x*’, so that when the inquiry is over, we can see we still refer to the same thing’ [1977: 139]. Dimas argues, unconvincingly, that the matter of ‘securing reference’ should not be on the table at all: ‘We do not need to have any true substantive beliefs about *x* to be able to identify the reference of *x*. What we do need is the capacity to acquire such beliefs. Most importantly, however, it is false that we need to identify in any way at all the reference of something in order to be able to raise the question ‘What is —?’ about it’ [1996: 18].

We must remember, though, that Śābara has earlier said that an inquiry into moral duty can commence only if one has already made a study of the texts that prescribe it (the Vedas). Perhaps that is enough to anchor peoples' various beliefs to a common reference point. The texts have given us a range of exemplary cases of right acts. We may agree, more or less, about which acts are rightly done, but disagree over what their rightness consists in. An inquiry takes as its starting point this concord over extension and discord over intension, and seeks, somehow, to reach an adjudication. Śābara in effect concedes the force of Meno's point that with no knowledge at all of the object, one would know neither how to begin an inquiry nor when it had ended; his answer is to restrict the ambitions of inquiry itself. Thus his resolution of the paradox is similar to Plato's (on certain readings of it): as a matter of fact, we simply do have a lot of beliefs already, wherever they might have come from. Śābara adds explicitly what both Vlastos and Fine have tried to find in the *Meno*, namely that among our beliefs are some true ones, and that our natural preference or tendency is towards the true, rather than the false beliefs.²⁶

Śābara in fact specifies the sorts of (largely true) beliefs that must pre-exist the inquiry: if we want to inquire into the nature of *x*, we must have been able to fix some examples of *x*. This follows the method that Socrates (and we) do typically use, although Socrates is often dismissive of examples as a route to knowledge.

There is, however, at least one good reason for sharing Socrates' suspicion of agreed examples as providing starting points: namely, that although we *agree* about the extension of a term, we might both be wrong. Sometimes, indeed, in the course of inquiry, we can even come to discover our error. If a pre-requisite to inquiry is agreement on the extension of terms, how will we explain our ability to return to our original examples, once we have an outcome, and to revise or reject them?²⁷ What this shows is that the original agreement was at best provisional, however; it leaves unexplained how such a provisional agreement can actually guide the inquiry to completion. So Śābara's solution allows only provisional inquiry and results.

A commentator on Śābara, Kumārila (c. 660 CE), provides the following re-statement of the paradox:

It is possible to know (*jñātum*) that which is perfectly well known (*prasiddha*), but being so known there is no desire [to know it, and inquiry is a desire to know]. On the other hand, that which is not perfectly well known, being

²⁶According to Fine [2003: 59], Plato 'seems to assume that some important true beliefs are better entrenched than are various false beliefs (or will seem more reasonable to us when we first consider them) so that, in cases of conflict, we tend, upon reflection, to reject the false beliefs'; recollection is brought in to explain not the possibility of inquiry but the curious fact that 'in inquiring, we tend to favour true over false beliefs' [2003: 62]. See also Vlastos [1994b: 25–7].

²⁷Scott's 'problem of discovery' seems to turn on similar worries: 'the assumptions included in the specification play a crucial role in determining the direction and outcome of the inquiry . . . Yet, unless you already know that the specification is correct, how can you know that this proposed answer is the right one, even if it happens to be?' [Scott 2006: 83]. Compare a similar worry in the Platonic context, raised by McCabe: 'In order, then, for true beliefs to underpin *inquiry*, the status of those beliefs must itself be under scrutiny' [McCabe 2009:245].

impossible [to desire to know], is all the more not [a possible object of a desire to know]. That is what is said.²⁸

Here, the connection between inquiry and desire is made more explicit. Actually possessing the knowledge deprives the would-be inquirer of a capacity to desire knowledge, but desire uninformed by knowledge of what one desires is impossible. So we have a general principle about desire:

[D] S can desire ϕ only if S knows that she lacks ϕ .

Inquiry is desire for knowledge. So we substitute ‘knowledge of A’ for ‘ ϕ ’:

[DK] S can desire knowledge of A only if S knows that she lacks knowledge of A.

If S does have knowledge of A, then she does not lack it, in which case it will not be true that she knows that she lacks it, and so cannot desire it. But if S lacks knowledge of A, then, the thought seems to be, she will not be in a position to know that she lacks knowledge of A. So the epistemic principle to which the argument is implicitly committed is that ignorance is not transparent: $\neg KA \rightarrow \neg K(\neg KA)$. This principle states (in contraposed form) that one knows one is ignorant of A only if one knows A. So if one knows that one is ignorant of A then one both knows A and does not know A. Therefore, one does not know one’s own ignorance. Setting this out explicitly:

[1] $\neg KA \rightarrow \neg K(\neg KA)$ Opacity of Ignorance.

[2] $K(\neg KA) \rightarrow KA$, by contraposition.

[3] $K(\neg KA) \rightarrow \neg KA$, by the factivity of K.

[4] $K(\neg KA) \rightarrow KA \ \& \ \neg KA$, from 2, 3 and $\&$ -Introduction.

[5] $\neg K(\neg KA)$, by *reductio*.

Kumārila’s answer is to deny that ignorance is opaque. We are not blind to our own ignorance, so long as we have competing truth-claims to arbitrate between. Regarding our moral duty (*dharma*), we have already the competing interpretations of the truth established by the Vedas. To make the case, Kumārila first distinguishes the metaphysical question as to the nature (*rūpa*) of duty from the epistemological question about our ways of knowing (*pramāṇa*) about duty, and points out that Śabara’s previous discussion has established that it is the Vedas which give us knowledge of duty (v.126). There is, however, no agreement even among learned people with respect to the meaning of Vedic assertions. There is doubt and

²⁸prasiddhaḥ śakyate jñātum prasiddhatvāt tu neṣyate | aprasiddhas tv aśakyatvān natarām ityato ’bravīt || 124 || [Kumārila, *Slokavārtika* 57, 1–2].

uncertainty, some saying that the meaning is one thing, others something else. That is why there is room for inquiry and a need for this text (vv. 127–8).²⁹ Thus, to inquire into morality is to search for the correct interpretation of the Vedas. Although it is agreed that the Vedas tell us what duty is, there is no agreement over what they tell us it is. Kumārila’s solution would seem to involve an appeal to contextual definition: the meaning of the term ‘moral duty’ (*‘dharma’*) is fixed by the contexts of its use in a range of authoritative texts, the import of which is not obvious.

That solution, as it stands, will not generalize beyond its specific application, since the Vedas are not authoritative with respect to every disputed concept; but the approach could be generalized. For we might say that whenever we want to inquire into something, we have to find out what the word for that thing means, and in order to find this what we have to do is see how it is used in common language, or in whatever set of uses we take to be authoritative.³⁰ In other words, one might try to argue that there is always information encoded in linguistic practice, and that is why it is not in general correct to say that we are ignorant about our ignorance. The selection and interpretation of authority then becomes the tendentious issue, and absorbs the force of the paradox—how do we know which contexts, examples and cases to acknowledge as authoritative, central and definitive with respect to something unless we already *know* the thing in question?

Kumārila’s comment is important because it brings to the surface the problem with the ‘pre-existing beliefs’ strategy in addressing the paradox. At least on certain versions, this route to resolution simply *relocates* the problem. We cannot so easily avoid the apparent need to have pre-existing knowledge *of the answer to the very question into which one is supposed to be inquiring*.

We can put this another way: One might suspect that there is something rightly called ‘having knowledge of a question’—precisely in the sense of knowing what will count as an answer—and that this is different from knowing the answer. But it is just this presumption that the paradox of inquiry ultimately targets, and forces us to try to articulate more clearly: Can there be ‘knowing what will count as an answer’ that is not already ‘knowing the answer’? As Meno asks, ‘If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?’

3. The Resources of Language in Traversing the Epistemic Gap

Śāṅkara (or Śāṅkarācārya) is prominent in the Indian philosophical canon, giving distinctive shape and new life to Brahmanical philosophy in the 8th century CE. He raises the paradox of inquiry in his commentary on the

²⁹ svarūpādiṣu dharmasya dvividhā vipratipadyate | pūrvaṃ pramāṇarūpābhyāṃ pādenādyasya nirṇayaḥ || 126 || sthite vedapramāṇatve punar vākyaṛthanirṇaye | matir bahuvīdāṃ puṃsāṃ saṃśayān nopajāyate || 127 || kecid āhur asāv arthaḥ, kecin nāsāv ayaṃ tv iti | tannirṇayarthaṃ apy etat paraṃ śāstraṃ praṇīyate || 128 || [*Ślokavārtika* 57, 5–58, 4].

³⁰ Vlastos is tempted by this sort of resolution to Meno’s paradox when he writes that the paradox does not get off the ground ‘[s]o long as your inquiries concern exclusively moral questions . . . For moral terms hail from common speech, where their meaning is established long before you could undertake to encapsulate it in a Socratic definition’ [Vlastos 1994a: 84].

Brahma-sūtra, a text declaring itself to be an inquiry into the foundational principle (*brahman*) underwriting the order of the cosmos. In his discussion, Śaṅkara clearly borrows from both Śabara and Kumārila in his way of phrasing the paradox and understanding that there must be some prior belief; but he develops from them in finding new potential sources of information about the target of inquiry. *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.1 begins in the conventional way: ‘Now, consequently, [begins] an inquiry into *brahman*.’³¹ Śaṅkara immediately goes on to ask, à la Śabara:

It must, however, either be perfectly well known (*prasiddha*) what *brahman* is, or else not so known (*aprasiddha*). If it is perfectly well known, then there shall be no ‘desire to know’; but if not so known, then it is impossible to inquire [into it].³²

Śaṅkara’s formulation explicitly captures an asymmetry which often features in the paradox: inquiry from a position of knowledge is simply *not to be done*, whereas inquiry from a position of ignorance is *impossible*. Śabara had hinted at the contrast—he said that while it is not possible to inquire into what one does know, he says it is *even more impossible* (*natarām*) to inquire into what one does not know. Socrates may also show a similar sensitivity to the difference between the two halves of the paradox—on his formulation, if we know, ‘there is no need (οὐδὲν δεῖ, 80e4) to inquire’, and this explains why there is no inquiry; whereas if we are ignorant, there simply is no inquiry, full stop.³³ This difference in the nature of the impossibility in the two arms of the dilemma may indicate a real difference between the two problems. The contrast is made even more explicitly by an eleventh century Buddhist author, Ratnakīrti, in connection with an inquiry into the existence of other minds. He comments that, if other minds are already known, then an attempt to demonstrate their existence is quite pointless; but if they are not, then no such demonstration is capable even of getting off the ground.³⁴

If there is any real difference in the difficulties for inquiry between starting from a position of ignorance and starting from a position of knowledge, the latter might be thought to be slightly weaker—for at least, starting from knowledge, one has *something* to go on, even if it is rather too much. The

³¹It is Śaṅkara’s view that an inquiry into *brahman* has four prerequisites, which consist in the possession of intellectual virtues of discrimination, equanimity, detachment from ordinary pleasures, and desire for liberation. Rāmānuja, on the other hand, thinks that a study of Vedic ritual and Mīmāṃsā is the prerequisite. See also Chari [2004: 152–7].

³²tatpunar brahma prasiddham aprasiddham vā syāt | yadi prasiddham, na jijñāsitavyam | athāprasiddham, naiva śakyam jijñāsitum iti | [Śaṅkara, *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 78,1–79,2 (*inf.* 1.1.1)].

³³Dimas [1996: 22] makes much of this formulation, and the fact that it does not explicitly state the *impossibility* of inquiry. He cites this as support for his view that Meno’s paradox is a worry about the rationality of inquiry, rather than the possibility of it: ‘Meno objects that it is impossible, not to conduct an inquiry, but to do so rationally, i.e. hoping reasonably to discover the answer. Let us call this the Rational Impossibility account of Meno’s challenge and oppose it to the Conceptual Impossibility one’ [1996: 19]. For reasons stated below, we do not believe his distinction between the Rational Impossibility and the Conceptual Impossibility accounts will go through.

³⁴See Ratnakīrti, *Santānāntaradīṣaṇa* 147–9.

thought might be that, having full knowledge, I still *might* inquire if I desired to do so; but I do not inquire as it would in fact not be desired.³⁵

Consider, though, what such an activity would look like. Suppose I had complete knowledge of *x*, and I nevertheless decided to go through the activity of ‘searching for knowledge’ of *x*. Would this actually be *inquiry*? Suppose I go through all the motions of inquiring—and might even have good reason to do so—but I know already everything that the inquiry will turn up. In that case, it seems, I am not investigating or inquiring at all; for, as is frequently pointed out, having an aim, namely knowledge (or at least cognitive improvement), is essential to being an inquiry. If my epistemic situation is already optimal, then it is incoherent to set as my aim an improvement in it; for in general, if some purported ‘aim’ is already achieved, then it is not an *aim* at all.³⁶ Acting as if seeking an end one has already achieved could perhaps have the appearance of inquiry, but such an activity would actually be only mere ‘as if’ inquiry. The attempt genuinely to engage in inquiry from a position of full knowledge would be what J. L. Austin [1979] has called a ‘performative misfire’.

The asymmetry of expression between the two horns of the dilemma may then be something more than mere rhetorical flourish. For it captures the fact that the knower might give the appearance of inquiring, whereas the ignorant person could not even do that. Reflecting on *why* inquiry from the position of knowledge is ‘not to be done’—now not because it is unconventional or psychologically impossible, but because it is conceptually incoherent—reveals something of the structure that is at work giving rise to the dilemma. If inquiry is not to be merely the false appearance of inquiry, there must be a gap between my cognitive state before I begin inquiry and my cognitive state after I have finished. *Real* inquiry consists in setting out to fill a *real* epistemic gap. Śāṅkara is aware of this demand: anyone who wants to preserve the possibility of inquiry must also preserve the possibility of a certain distance between two cognitive states, as well as the possibility of bridging that distance, or moving methodically from the one to the other.

In a detailed response to the paradox, Śāṅkara’s first move is similar to moves made by Śābara: inquiry gets off the ground by appeal to information already available to me. Rather than appeal to the Vedas, however, Śāṅkara takes the more promising route of grounding these initial conceptions in linguistic, and in particular etymological, analysis.³⁷ If names are given to

³⁵The claim might be (1) that as a matter of convention, one does not normally conduct inquiries into what one knows, just as, as a matter of convention, one does not normally bathe when one is clean; or (2) that as a matter of psychological fact, when one thinks one knows, one *does not* inquire.

³⁶What holds for desire (for knowledge) holds also for intention (to seek it). Compare Donald Davidson [2005: 97]: ‘Donnellan explains that intentions are connected with expectations and that you cannot intend to accomplish something by a certain means unless you believe or expect that the means will, or at least could, lead to the desired outcome.’

³⁷Those who are impressed by it might point out that Socrates’ first question *about* the slave, before he begins questioning him, is ‘Does he know Greek?’ There are obvious pragmatic reasons for this question. But Plato’s choice to make it part of the conversation at all might suggest it has rather more importance. Perhaps acquaintance with a natural language gives one prior conceptual resources—a grasp of ‘same’, ‘different’, ‘larger’, ‘smaller’, in the case of the geometrical inquiry—which one needs in order to get inquiry off the ground. Inquiry implicitly draws on these conceptual frameworks built into our very acquisition of language. Compare the account of Vlastos [1965], which emphasizes how the slave must draw out inferences from concepts already grasped: ‘Reduced to its simplest terms . . . ‘recollection’ in the *Meno* is *any enlargement of our knowledge which results from the perception of logical relationships*. . . . [I]f the relations are

things for reasons, I can examine the etymological roots and semantic origins of the name of the object I seek, and thereby learn core features of that object, those that are implicit in the very semantic content of the word. In the present case, the object of inquiry is *brahman*:

We reply that *brahman* is [partly known]—his very nature (essence; *svabhāva*) is said to consist in what is eternal, pure and consciousness; bound up with the omniscient and the omnipotent. For the meanings such as ‘being eternal’ and ‘being pure’ are derived from semantic analysis of the word ‘*brahman*’, these meanings following from the verbal root ‘*brh*’.³⁸

The idea here has a sound pedigree in Indian philosophical semantics. To many Indian grammarians, it has seemed that an analysis of the grammatical derivation of a word, especially a noun, can be informative. In particular, such analysis (known as *vyutpatti* or *nirvacana*) can result in an explanation of the reasons why this name is used for this object.³⁹ The claim, for example, that *dharma* is ‘that which upholds’ is based on a conjecture about the verbal root from which the term ‘*dharma*’ is derived. Likewise here: Śāṅkara conjectures that the term ‘*brahman*’ is derived from the verbal root *brh-* ‘to grow’, and this enables him to conclude that *brahman* is so-called because it is in some way (maximally) great. The method assumes that there is some reason why objects bear the names they do, that it is not a matter merely of arbitrary stipulation (recall Quine’s famous example: “‘Giorgione’ is so-called because of his size’). The use of etymological analysis to derive semantic content, we might observe, therefore itself contains an appeal to the expertise of authority—the baptismal expertise of whosoever it was that selected this name as an appropriate one for this object, and the etymological expertise of whosoever it is now who makes conjectures about the derivation of the term. The division of linguistic labour thus enables even an ordinary language user to come to know something about the referent.

Here then is a potential source for the first necessary component for inquiry: an initial conception, a partial specification of the object sought.⁴⁰ *What brahman* would be, if there were such a thing, is established; *that* there is any such entity remains uncertain, as do its more specific properties. This is the gap to be bridged by inquiry. This is what we inquire into.

Śāṅkara’s second step is to point to something in the world we *do* know to exist. We know it by direct acquaintance:

intra-propositional . . . , then to ‘recollect’ is to gain insight into the logical structure of a concept, so that when faced with its correct definition one will see that the concepts mentioned are analytically connected’ [1965: 156–7]. Vlastos, however, does not connect this to language acquisition; but see note 30, above.

³⁸ucyate—asti tāvad brahma nityasuddhabuddham uktasvabhāvaṃ sarvajñam sarvaśaktisamanvitam | brahmaśabdasya hi vyutpādyamānasya nityasuddhatvādayo ’rthāḥ pratīyante | brhater dhātor arthānugamāt | [*Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 79,2–81,1].

³⁹For discussion of the Indian tradition of semantic analysis (the *nirvacana* tradition), see Eivind Kahrs [1998]. For a treatment of Plato’s discussion of the same practice, see David Sedley [2003].

⁴⁰Cf. White’s preferred solution to Meno’s paradox, in White [1976: 43–7], and in greater detail in White [1974]. According to White, an initial specification of the object sought suffices to dissolve the paradox. We will see reasons, especially in the discussion of Śrīharṣa, to doubt the viability of this proposal.

For every one knows of the existence of his own self, and does not think 'I am not'. If the existence of one's own self were not perfectly well known, any one of us could think 'I am not'.⁴¹

The Cartesian resonance in this passage is striking, but is not relevant to the present discussion. That one has a self is something we cannot doubt. This can operate as an additional non-empty starting-point for inquiry. It is not clear whether the weight of the argument should rest on the *indubitability* of the self, or simply on the fact of our *acquaintance* with it. It is also not clear whether sheer direct acquaintance suffices for indubitability, and so it is hard to tell whether Śāṅkara takes himself to be offering a solution to the problem of inquiry that can generalize, or whether he thinks there is something very special about his current topic of inquiry.⁴²

In this case at least, and perhaps in many possible cases, there is something I can know by description: whatever truths follow from my use of the name 'X'. There is also something I know by acquaintance, something which does not, as I am acquainted with it, fit the description. So what we need—thirdly—is a way of linking these two objects of knowledge. In the present case, 'And this self is *brahman*'.⁴³

Crucially, I do not already know this identity. After all, as Śāṅkara now has the opponent say, 'If the identity between self and *brahman* were perfectly well known among people, then being already known the consequence would be that there is no room for inquiry.'⁴⁴ My ignorance that what I am already familiar with under a certain description is the same thing as something I know only by acquaintance is the gap which makes room for inquiry.⁴⁵ Inquiry can therefore be a real movement from less to greater knowledge, in its ability to deliver *a posteriori* identities. Surveying the various possibilities on offer, Śāṅkara says:

[T]here is disagreement with regard to its [self's] special nature. Common folk and materialists think that the self is the mere body in possession of consciousness. Some think that it is the conscious sense faculties; others, that it is the internal faculty (*manas*). Some [Buddhists] think that it is the momentary [flow of] mere cognition; other [Buddhists], that it is empty (*śūnya*). Some people [the Nyāya] think that there is an agentive and experiencing transmigratory entity distinct from the body; others [the Sāṅkhya] that it is an experiencing thing but not agentive; others again [the Yoga] that, distinct from that, there is an omniscient and all-powerful God-soul. Still others

⁴¹[sarvasyātmatvāc ca brahmāstitvaprāsiddhaḥ] | sarvo hy ātmāstitvaṃ pratyeti, na nāham asmīti | yadi hi nātmāstitvaprāsiddhaḥ syāt, sarvo loko nāham asmīti pratīyāt | [*Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 81,1–2].

⁴²In fact, Śāṅkara's monism permits him the thesis that there is only one object of inquiry, namely *brahman*. Vedāntadeśika, however, wonders if there can be inquiry into a single, undifferentiated, reality [Chari 2004: 94–5].

⁴³ātmā ca brahma | [*Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 81,2].

⁴⁴yadi tarhi loke brahmātmātvena prasiddham asti, tato jñātam evety ajijñāsyatvaṃ punar āpannam | [*Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 81,3].

⁴⁵As John Perry [1979] has pointed out, the pronoun 'I' is, in his phrase, 'essentially indexical', that is to say irreducible to any non-indexical expression.

[Vedāntins like Śaṅkara himself] think that this [God-soul] just is the self of the experienter.⁴⁶

The business of inquiry is to test these different ways of describing the self until we find the true one.⁴⁷ So again, inquiry is arbitrating between competing views (as in Śabara and Kumārila), with some recognition of an end to be matched up with experience. Thus I do not start with a mental blank slate when I embark on inquiry; but neither do I already know the thing I am seeking. Riddle solved.

The solution, of course, does rely on our supposition of substantial claims about the role of language in providing us with initial access to, perhaps even the essence or core definition of, the object of inquiry. And we might find this claim optimistic. But let us accept the method of etymological analysis for the moment as offering an adequate starting point—for Śaṅkara's solution suffers a deeper difficulty.

Śaṅkara seems committed to the notion that etymological analysis gives us a description of the object of inquiry, while acquaintance gives us the fact of its existence. Inquiry is a process of learning that 'this' before me is 'that' which I knew fully by description. But how did I come to link 'this' with 'that'? Did I just chance upon the identity, or was there something about 'this' that indicated it is 'that'? The former is mere blundering about, not inquiry at all; the latter, however, reduces 'inquiry' to the one-step process of attending properly to what 'this' is. But handing over *in the first move* the identification between 'this' and 'that' is fatal to the possibility of moving from one cognitive position to another, since in Śaṅkara's view this was all there is left to learn. Solution dissolved.

Nevertheless, the view is so close to having all the necessary pieces in place that one might be tempted to try another solution in the same vein. Suppose that our initial specification, however obtained, is incomplete. It tells us something, but not everything, about our object. It might then be informative about *how* to find an actual instance, where to look, without giving everything away at once. And even if we were then simply handed the fact that 'this is that', or stumbled upon the object in the world that meets the description, we could look to the *object*, rather than mere language (which perhaps has been exhausted), to learn further things about the object of inquiry.⁴⁸ Knowing merely that *brahman* ('eternal pure consciousness') is self would still leave room for an inquiry into the nature of self, and so of *brahman*.

Such a solution preserves the basic structure of Śaṅkara's solution, but gains greater flexibility by introducing the notion of an incomplete description, or incomplete specification of the object of inquiry. An

⁴⁶tadvīṣeṣam prati vipratipatteḥ | dehamātram caitanyaviśiṣṭam ātmeti prākṛtā janā lokāyatikāś ca pratipannāḥ | indriyāny eva cetanāny ātmety apare | mana ity anye | vijñānamātram kṣaṇikam ity eke | śūnyam ity apare | asti dehādivyatiriktaḥ saṃsāri kartā bhoktety apare | bhoktaiva kevalam na kartety eke | asti tadvyatirikta īśvaraḥ sarvajñāḥ sarvaśaktir iti kecit | ātmā sa bhoktur ity apare | [*Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 81,3–82,3].

⁴⁷The suggestion of a progression from worldly to refined theories of selfhood may remind one of Prajāpati's graded instruction to Indra in *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.7–12.

⁴⁸It seems to be considerations of this sort that move Moravcsik to claim that 'it is intuitively easy to see that one would not be bothered by the paradox except in cases of *a priori* inquiry' [1971: 56]. Only in the case of *a priori* inquiry, he thinks, will getting hold of the object itself be problematic.

incomplete description can indicate features of the object useful for discovering an instance and still leave something to be discovered, once one has become acquainted with the object of interest. This looks promising. Unfortunately, as Śrīharṣa will show, relying on anything so nebulous as an ‘incomplete specification’ is itself going to make a nonsense of inquiry.

4. On Questioning: The Pragmatics of Interrogative Dialogue

The sceptic Śrīharṣa (c. 1100 CE) argues extensively for the impossibility of meaningfully asking a question. His claim is that there is an internal incoherence in the logic of inquiry. The very idea of ‘taking aim’ at an object of thought incompletely conceived is, he argues, paradoxical. We will distinguish two strands in his argument: a strand having to do with the pragmatics of asking questions and giving answers, and a second strand to do with prior epistemic commitment.⁴⁹

The first strand presents an entirely new context for thinking about paradoxes of inquiry: the pragmatics of interrogative dialogue. Śrīharṣa lays down a dialogical principle that seems unobjectionable:

I. Whatever may be the topic of the question, that designated thing is the one which must [also] be what is spoken about in reply.⁵⁰

The rules of conversation, as they bear upon question–answer discussions, dictate that a respondent must make his answer ‘speak to’ the question, and in particular, that it must ‘speak of’ the very same things being asked about.⁵¹

This principle might seem a fair and necessary point of dialogical hygiene: questions must be addressed in the terms in which they are put: neither changing the subject nor trading on an equivocation is permitted in a reply that counts as answering the question. What a question is about (that is, the ‘topic’ of the question) is a function of what the speaker has in mind to ask after, and there must be coordination between the ‘speaker meaning’ of the questioner and the ‘speaker meaning’ of the respondent. The respondent must recognize, and show in his response that he has recognized, what it is that the speaker is speaking of.⁵²

⁴⁹The editor divides the text of Chapter 3 into eight paragraphs. In the first two paragraphs, Śrīharṣa distinguishes four possible meanings of the word *kim*, ‘what?’, the last of which is interrogative. What we are discussing now is the argument in paragraphs 3–5, that it is impossible on dialogical grounds to use *kim* to ask a question. Paragraphs 6–8 press a second argument, that the prior knowledge needed to ground inquiry itself makes inquiry impossible. We discuss this second argument in §5.

⁵⁰This is one of a pair of rules Śrīharṣa quotes as *ślokas* from earlier, unidentified, sources; the other is introduced below as *I'*. The principle is first appealed to on page 555, but only stated in this complete form later. The Sanskrit for both principles is: atra ca saṅgrahaślokaḥ “yathāvidhaṃ yaṃ viṣayaṃ nijasya praśnasya nirvakti paro yathoktyā | vācyas tathāivottaravādināpi tathāiva vācā sa tathāvidho 'rthaḥ | praśnasya yaḥ syād viṣayaḥ sa vācya vācānayaivaiva bhaven niruktaḥ | idaṃ tvayāpyāsthitam etayaiva girā svaprechā viṣayasya vaktrā” || [Śrīharṣa, *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā* 557,7–10].

⁵¹We might recall Grice’s ‘conversational maxims’, in particular, the maxim of Relation [Grice 1975].

⁵²Even if a questioner’s use of a particular term must be *corrected*, it can only be so if the respondent first fixes the object of his reply as the same as that of the question. Problems that arise in such cases—as when someone, looking at a dolphin, asks ‘What kind of fish is that?’—will be discussed in the following section.

However, Śrīharṣa treats this principle as if it is merely another way of putting the following, stronger principle:

I'. In whatever way the inquirer speaks of the topic of his own question, it is to be spoken of, in the light of that statement, in exactly the same way by the respondent in his reply.⁵³

Although drawing on a similar feature of question-and-answer discussion, [I'] is not the same as [I]. It is, in fact, an extremely strict interpretation of what is required to satisfy the demands of [I]. For according to [I'], not only must the referent be the same in question and in answer, but the very way in which the object of inquiry is spoken of must be the same, in the question and in the answer.

But if answers can only employ terms used in the original question, and used in the way they are used in the original question, then how can the respondent introduce new information? As Śrīharṣa observes, he cannot: there will be no room at all for sliding away from, or adding anything further to, the information already supplied in the question.

From the agreement that responses must meet the question posed on its own terms, Śrīharṣa tries to argue that it is impossible for an answer rightly to go beyond what is already contained in the question (or, conversely, for a question to be about anything beyond what it already contains). Thus the very nature of inquiry is incoherent, because it presents itself as reaching beyond itself in a way that no thought or statement could.⁵⁴

For example, suppose I want to know something further about *x*—so, in Śrīharṣa's example, I have God in mind, but want to know something about God, namely, a proof for His existence.

If the significance of the word 'what?' is to question, there is an object in mind about which there is a desire for knowledge; and here, because the word 'proof' is being used, the desire concerns a proof. [The rule is that] exactly that thing which the question has as its topic (*viśaya*) should be spoken about (*adhidheya*) by the respondent. In this question [asking whether there is a proof for] the existence of God, is [the existence of] proof in general, or a particular proof, meant to be the topic? If the first, then the answer 'With regard to the existence of God, [there is] proof!' ought indeed be returned. For [the rule is that] exactly that thing which the question has as its topic should be spoken about; the question has proof as a general topic, and that is just what is spoken of by the word 'proof'. But in the second case also, the reply 'With regard to the existence of God, proof!' ought to come back as well. [For] just as the word

⁵³See note 50 for Sanskrit text.

⁵⁴Compare G. E. R. Lloyd's worry, in the context of learning from other cultures, that 'We may be at a loss to explain, in general terms, how such learning can occur, how new insights into underlying ontological questions can be gained. It may seem that it cannot happen, as if either other ideas will be reduced to our own, or they will remain forever unintelligible' [Lloyd 2004: 9]. He replies that 1) we do in fact learn in such circumstances, and 2) there is no difference between such learning circumstances and what we might think of as the usual ones children find themselves in. But neither reply seems very satisfactory: the first simply reiterates the paradox to be explained; the second makes all such learning haphazard—young children, we might think, to a large extent just assimilate whatever is 'around'; their learning is not targeted. But such undirected activity is not inquiry at all. Śrīharṣa's final tongue-in-cheek invitation to his interlocutor to become his devotee seems to be recognizing this very point.

'proof' is used in the question to refer to a particular [proof], so too [can it be used] in the response.⁵⁵

To the question, 'Is there a proof of the existence of God?' the appropriate reply is 'Yes, that object to which you refer with the phrase 'proof of the existence of God' is (as you yourself well know) a proof of the existence of God.' According to the dialogical principle [I], the object of the question and the object of the answer must be the same. Strictly interpreted, as in [I'], this yields the result that only the very information already contained in the question could be included in the answer. Thus, whatever the questioner asks after, she necessarily already has the answer to her question, since the only legitimate way to fix the referent as the same is to use the very same words, in the same way.

Obviously, this is quick and tidy work for the inquiry-sceptic, if it succeeds. Just as obviously, it does not succeed. For nothing warrants substituting [I'] for [I]—surely securing sameness of referent in question and answer does not require anything so strong as [I'].

However, it may well be that something stronger than [I] is required, so that Śrīharṣa is not being *wanton* in introducing [I']. It has been argued by Heck, for example, that testimony imposes a constraint on speakers which is stronger than [I]. Heck writes [1995: 94], 'It is because communication must enable the transfer of knowledge that more than reference must be common to the cognitive values different speakers attach to a given name.' He claims that this leads to a Fregean view about what is required for communication. Heck points out that there is a 'strict' interpretation of what Frege's view demands—an interpretation which makes his view committed to something very like Śrīharṣa's strong principle [I']; but, he observes that while 'On the strictest such view, one must think of the object in the same way as the speaker; . . . note that, even on this strict view, one need not entertain any thoughts about how the speaker herself thinks of the object. Nor will one need to do so on views which explain "an appropriate fashion" in weaker, more plausible terms' [ibid.: 101]. One may grant that what Śrīharṣa might have legitimately been after in [I'] was the insistence that there be an 'appropriate fashion' in which one must think of the object to which the speaker is referring which is such as to allow for the possibility of testimony. This would be something not as strong as sameness of sense (Śrīharṣa's Principle I') but stronger than sameness of reference (Śrīharṣa's Principle I).

But Śrīharṣa himself recognizes the illegitimacy of insisting upon [I']. He introduces an objector, who makes the obvious rejoinder, with all the indignation that any reader of Śrīharṣa's first anti-inquiry argument might feel:

⁵⁵praśnārthāt khalu kiṃśabdāt kasyacit padārthasya jijñāsyamānātā pratīyate, sā ceha pramāṇa padasamabhivyaḥārāt pramāṇaviṣayīṇī pratīyate. yadviṣayaś ca praśnas taduttaravādinābhidheyam tad ayaṃ praśna īśvarasadbhāve pramāṇasāmānyaviṣayas tadviśeṣaviṣayo vābhipretah ? ādyaś ced īśvarasadbhāve pramāṇam ityevottaram āpadyeta, yadviṣayo hi praśnas tadabhidheyam, pramāṇasāmānyaviṣayaś ca praśnaḥ tac ca pramāṇasābdenābhihitam eva | atha dvitīyaḥ tathāpīśvarasadbhāve pramāṇam ityevottaram āpadyeta | yathā praśnavākye pramāṇasābdo viśeṣaparāḥ tathottaravākye || [*Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā* 555, 6–11].

The question means ‘What is the particular specific proof [of the existence of God]?’; and the proper answer is to mention some particular proof, and does not consist in the sort of incoherent prattle (*pralāpa*) you engage in.⁵⁶

Even Śrīharṣa could not believe his luck, in stumbling so immediately into a proof of the impossibility of inquiry. He will have to work harder for his desired conclusion; and the only lesson to be carried over from this first attempt is that successful communication between questioner and respondent requires at least as much as is needed to secure sameness of reference—and perhaps something more.

5. The Prior Knowledge Argument

Śrīharṣa takes these points about making identifying reference within dialogue and applies them to the analysis of inquiry in terms of ‘desire for knowledge’. Noting that an inquiry is a desire for knowledge, he reminds us that desire is impossible with respect to the unknown or ‘unapprehended’ (*ajñāta*). ‘From a question or an interrogative what is understood is that something is the subject-matter of an inquiry. Inquiry is a desire to know, but a desire cannot be for what is unknown, on pain of absurd results.’⁵⁷

We should distinguish here between desire proper, which has an object or target, and more general feelings of longing—between, say, a desire for chocolate and a general feeling of hunger. Inquiry rests on the former, not the latter. Inquiry is a desire for knowledge, directed towards some specific region of epistemic lack, not a more general longing for information, a wish to be better informed as it were. Being a specific sort of desire, inquiry has an object - something or another that one desires to know.

Because inquiry is a desire to know something, the inquirer’s present beliefs, Śrīharṣa now insists, whether they be true or false, must form the basis of their inquiry.⁵⁸ This is the only source for fixing the object of desire.⁵⁹ His new strategy in the argument against inquiry will be to show that the prior beliefs necessary to render inquiry possible also make it impossible. If the inquirer has beliefs about *x* which are true and complete, then they already have at their disposal any information *about x* that they might ask for. So the beliefs about *x* on which their inquiry is based must fall short of perfection, if there is to be inquiry at all. They can fall short in one of two ways—both of these, Śrīharṣa argues, fail to make inquiry possible.

First, the inquirer’s beliefs might be false, in which case what they are asking about is not actually *x* at all. Śrīharṣa’s example is an inquirer who

⁵⁶kāsāvasādhāraṇī pramāṇa-vyaktir iti praśnārthaḥ, tatra tādrśyāḥ pramāṇa-vyakter abhidhānam uttaram yuktam naivamvidhāḥ pralāpāḥ | [*Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā* 556, 10–12].

⁵⁷praśnārthāc ca kiṃśabdāj jijnāsāviśayatā rthasya pratīyate | jijnāsā ca jñātum icchā, icchā cājñāte na sambhavati atiprasaṅgāt | [*Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādyā* 557, 35–6].

⁵⁸In paragraphs 7 and 8, Śrīharṣa considers and rejects two possible strategies for defending the possibility of inquiry without prior beliefs about the object of inquiry, one being that the question has a merely causal function, the other that it is asked only for the sake of argument. Neither defence seems promising.

⁵⁹Compare Plato, *Philebus* 35a–c, where either perception or memory must put us in touch with an object, if we are to conceive a desire for it.

has misperceived a shiny shell as a piece of silver, and then tries to ask something about the piece of silver. A question based on false prior beliefs cannot be answered, except with an answer that commits itself to the same error. Thus, Śrīharṣa:

Some belief of one's own (*svajñāna*) is the ground (*kāraṇa*) of that desire [to know], and we have to ask whether perhaps its object is in accordance with the facts, or is not so in accordance (*yathābhūtārtha*)⁶⁰. If it is in accordance with the facts, then that cognition alone will itself provide the proof as its object. This is because, in the matter of that object, it is impossible to speak of its being in accordance with the facts without it reaching (*pravṛtti*) the proof. . . . [On the other hand,] if the object of that belief is not in accordance with the facts, then if what you want from us is also to produce a false belief, why are you in need of someone else to do what you do yourself? You who are skilled in the production of false beliefs can produce more just as you have already generated some! We who never produce false beliefs but only true ones, how ought we be employed here?⁶¹

Second, the inquirer might have true but incomplete beliefs about *x*. The 'failure of accordance' might be a matter of less-than-maximal accordance, rather than one of maximal non-accordance. In that case, one strategy is to argue that their beliefs about *x* fail to pick out some definite object. To the extent that the beliefs about *x* are vague, unspecified or simply incomplete, they will fail to identify *x* adequately, and so fail to be about an actual *x* at all. In both these cases, then, the basis of the inquiry or question fails to aim at any existing thing, and the inquirer is therefore asking about non-existents (or falsehoods).

Now here we are tempted to reply that I can get a grasp on the object of inquiry sufficient to ground a question about it, without knowing everything about the object already, and in fact even believing some false things about it.⁶² Even if I don't know the composition of the sun, even if, indeed, I mistakenly believe that the sun travels around the earth, I can nevertheless successfully refer to the sun (pick it out in thought and dialogue) *and distinguish it* from all other existing things in the world, so that I can inquire into it, or ask a question about it. I need only some characteristic mark of the object,⁶³ in virtue of which we all agree which item in the universe is under discussion.

Śrīharṣa's response is that if I have only an indeterminate notion of the object I am asking about, then it could only be that I am asking about an

⁶⁰Indicative: 'in accordance with the facts, the true state, truth, reality'.

⁶¹tatra svajñānam icchākāraṇibhūtaṃ vaktavyaṃ tadyathābhūtārthaṃ vā syād ayathābhūtārthaṃ vā ? yathābhūtārthaṃ cet tenaiva jñānena svakiyo viśayaḥ pramāṇam upasthāpyate, viśaye pramāṇapravṛttim antareṇa tadīyayathārthatvasya vaktum aśakyatvāt, [tenāpi pramāṇena svagocara īsvarasadbhāvaḥ upasthāpyata ityanāyāseṇaiva siddhosmākam īsvarasiddhimanorathaḥ] athayathārthaṃ tattasminn ayathārthajñānaviśaye yadyasmābhir apy ayathārtham eva jñānam utpādanīyam iti bhavataḥ pṛcchato vañchitam tadā keya svādhiṇe 'arthe parāpekṣā ? bhavānevayathārthajñānotpādanakuśalo yathaikam tatra mithyājñānam ajijānat tathā 'param apy utpādayatu | vāyam punar yathārthajñānasyotpādayitāro mithyājñāne sarvathaiivākṛtinaḥ kim iha niyujyemahi ? [*Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhāḍya* 558,1–558,10].

⁶²Vlastos [1994a: 84], Irwin [1977: 138–9], Fine [2003: 60], and White [1976] all in one way or another take this point to be a key to resolving the paradox—as did Sabara and Śaṅkara, above.

⁶³To be able to specify some sign (σημείον) whereby that thing can be differentiated from everything else' as *Theaetetus* 208c has it. Socrates' objections to this possibility are similar to Śrīharṣa's.

indeterminate object. To try to discover of some object, ‘indeterminately-composed-sun’, of what it is composed involves me in incoherence. Śrīharṣa:

Perhaps what you ask is that we make your belief, the content of which fails [fully or partially] to accord, into one the content of which does [fully] accord? If this is what you want, it is indeed impossible for you to seek to achieve it, for to do so is contradictory. How can a rational person make an attempt with this aim: ‘Let this shell which I think to be a piece of silver become the content of a true belief!’? For there is a contradiction between ‘being the content of a non-accordant belief cognized under a certain mode’ and ‘being the content of an accordant belief cognized under that same mode’.⁶⁴

Śrīharṣa seems to anticipate Moore’s Paradox: I cannot both believe that I am thinking about a shell and think that this belief is false, and then will to form a true belief about it. If an indeterminate conception cannot give determinate shape and direction to the search, and since the object itself cannot draw the search to it as if it were a magnet, there is nothing to regulate the inquiry. The sort of inquiry that seems impossible to get off the ground is an inquiry into the identity conditions of something not yet determinately individuated.⁶⁵ If I search for a place to have dinner in a foreign city with only the scantiest of ideas about what sort of restaurant I am looking for, and eventually come across somewhere, I can hardly then say that this was the place I was looking for all along.⁶⁶

If Śrīharṣa’s principle seems unduly stringent, consider again the non-dialogical situation. Whatever specification of my object I start with, that is the only thing I can end up with. If my initial notions of what I am looking for are imprecise, then I will find all manner of different things answering to it (or all manner of different possible answers) with no means of determining which was the thing I was actually after. But to the extent that my initial description is specific enough to constrict the field, to that same extent I already know my answer. And if that description is false, I am simply on a wild goose chase.

⁶⁴atha madyasyāyathārthajñānasya yo viṣayaḥ sa madyayathārthajñānaviṣayo bhavatā kriyatām iti ? tvadyam vañchitam tadā vyāghātādirśyarthē bhavataḥ pravṛttir evānupapannā, sūktikā rajatātmatvena mama yathārthajñānaviṣayo bhavatvityetadarthaṃ prekṣāvān kathaṅkāraṃ prayateta ? yena rūpeṇāyathārthajñānaviṣayatvaṃ tena rupeṇa yathārthajñānaviṣayatve vyāghātāt || [*Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍakhādya*, 558,10–558,14].

⁶⁵Tyler Burge’s famous ‘arthritis’ thought experiment [Burge 1979], one point of which is to show that thought can have an object even if the concepts in play are under-specific and even erroneous, therefore does not bear upon the present discussion. For although a person whose conception of arthritis is woefully inadequate may indeed be thinking of arthritis, they are not in a position to formulate an epistemic project that has as its goal the improvement of a conception acknowledged to be inadequate. One cannot rationally think to oneself: ‘I am minimally competent in my conception of X, and let me seek to improve it with an improved competence.’

⁶⁶A desire, Śrīharṣa says, must have some object. But, by definition, inquiry is for the unknown. Being unknown, it cannot be picked out as an object, and so cannot be an object of desire. ‘It is therefore unlikely that Meno’s paradox is resolved by appealing to them [true beliefs] in order to secure, from the very beginning of the inquiry, reference to the object which the inquiry concerns’, Nehamas argues [1985: 23]. ‘These true beliefs are recovered by the slave at the end of his examination by Socrates; they could not therefore play the identificatory role Irwin asks of them, and which requires them to be there consciously at its very beginning’ [ibid.: 16].

6. Taking Stock: Against Aiming

The arguments of Śrīharṣa, we think, bring us very close to what is felt as paradoxical in the notion of inquiry. The paradox has to do, primarily, with the idea that in standard forms of inquiry the inquirer takes aim at an object.⁶⁷ The problem is that this ‘object’, in so far as it features in the mind, must be both determinate and indeterminate—determinate if it is to regulate the inquiry, but indeterminate if there is to be any scope for further knowledge acquisition. There is a discrepancy between the object as it is conceived, and the object itself that one seeks.⁶⁸ And this discrepancy is not a symptom of any inadequacy in our own cognitive powers, or of some lack of fit between mind and world; the discrepancy is part of the very logic of inquiry. Without such a gap, there is no progress to make and no inquiry possible.⁶⁹ But the difference necessary for inquiry means that the object found *cannot be* the object sought.

This in turn means that appeal to an incomplete initial conception or specification cannot make inquiry possible. What we seek in any inquiry is *the unknown part or parts* of the object initially conceived. Inquiry is into the unknown. But initial specifications cannot help us with *that*, because the whole mystery lies in how these specifications could possibly point beyond themselves in any way more determinate than is already contained within them.

Inquiry wishes to occupy a middle ground—between a pure analysis of concepts on the one hand, and a simple receptiveness to the data on the other—but it seems that there is no such middle ground to be had.⁷⁰ Inquiry might hope to have as its role the clarification of an initially vague or incomplete concept; but a clear answer to an unclear question is possible only at the cost of changing the subject.

What are the alternatives? One is, as Śrīharṣa himself suggests, a kind of epistemic humility: we put ourselves at the disposal of a teacher or simply of the world, and allow whatever knowledge there is ‘out there’ to

⁶⁷Gaṅgeśa, in his seminal post-Śrīharṣa work on epistemology, reaffirms the principle that inquiry requires a target. He says: ‘A cognition (*jñāna*) of an object [to which contrary alternatives are attributed] is a necessary condition for doubt. Otherwise, there could be neither regulation by the object, in a doubt, nor the possibility of an imbalance [in epistemic weight] between the alternatives.’ (dharmijñānaṃ ca saṃśayahetuḥ | anyathā saṃśaye dharmi-niyamaḥ koṭyutkatatvañca na syāt) [Gaṅgeśa, *Tattvacintāmaṇi* 199].

⁶⁸Beaney’s tussle with this problem on behalf of Frege casts it in terms of problems with ‘analysis’, or definition [Beaney 1996: 138–50]. ‘The real problem arises, however, when we do have some grasp of the meaning of ‘A’ [that which we want to inquire into or, here, analyse]. If the analysis is to be informative, must not ‘B’ possess a different meaning? ...’ [1996: 139]. Frege’s own attempt at a solution, Beaney writes, involved attributing the ‘same content’ to starting- and end-point, but “‘split up” differently” [1996: 139], so that we can think of coming to learn something that was not known already. Unfortunately, this solution, like most, seems not to be able to avoid the paradox’s reduplicating itself at another level.

⁶⁹White remarks in passing that ‘inquiries ... begin ... with the possibility of distinguishing between the ability to say what they are seeking on the one hand, and their successful completion on the other.’ He does not make much of the importance of distinguishing between the two, nor does he see the tension between this and his claim that ‘it is the *specification* that defines the inquiry’ [White 1976: 45, 46].

⁷⁰Again, consideration of Beaney’s discussion of Frege’s treatment of the problem is instructive: ‘If the original sense drops out of consideration, then no problem can arise in attempting to analyse it ... But if no such judgement can be made, either where the senses are not obviously the same, or where the established sign has no clear sense at all, then we simply replace the old sign with a new sign, defined in the way we want, and hence bypass the question as to whether the senses are the same.’ This is obviously unsatisfactory, if what we are trying to do is formulate a rational inquiry. As Beaney concedes, ‘It might seem, at best, to evade rather than answer the paradox’ [1996: 147].

come in.⁷¹ Another is to believe that a state of confusion or ignorance, intransitively conceived, has within itself the capacity to come to clarity, without the one who is in that state trying to press the issue. False beliefs, left to themselves, simply dissolve. That is a form of epistemic quietism. But whether we choose humility or quietism, the lesson of the paradox of inquiry is that ‘taking aim at knowledge’, like chasing windmills, is a quixotic pursuit.

7. A Final Rejoinder

One might observe that Śrīharṣa’s arguments rely heavily on the conception of inquiry as targeted at a specific object. But perhaps this is not the right way to conceive of inquiry. Indeed, it is precisely the force of Śrīharṣa’s arguments that may make us step back and consider just what inquiry it is, and how we ought to conceive it.

If sound, Śrīharṣa’s arguments show that we cannot conceive of inquiry as the targeting of one’s thirst for knowledge at some portion of the unknown. This then shifts the burden of proof onto someone who wants to defend the idea that inquiry does, nevertheless, have a direction. The onus is on them to explain how that can be, given that the intuitive model—of targeting—is not one which is available. To say, simply, that inquiry is possible and must have a direction, is as much to miss the point as to respond to Zeno’s paradoxes of motion by saying that motion *is* possible.

One plausible attempt would be to argue that in an inquiry what one wants to find is something falling under a concept of which one has a firm grasp, such as looking for something which falls under the concept ‘a good but cheap restaurant in the near vicinity’.⁷² The criteria are clear, but the particulars satisfying them remain multiple and indeterminate. Here, it might be said, an indefinite description is sufficient to provide the inquiry with a general direction, without any particular’s being targeted. But we must notice that this answer presupposes that the inquirer already has a clear grasp of the concept, and of what would count as something falling under it. The less clear the criteria of specification—if, for instance, I don’t know the city, whether they have restaurants or where, which sorts of things will count as ‘good’ in the restaurant (atmosphere, taste, kind of food)—the more our seeking a good restaurant will look like wandering about the city than a directed search.⁷³ And with that we are back to epistemic humility again.

The paradox of inquiry is most apparent, and most acute, when one is seeking knowledge of what it would be for something to fall under some given concept, which is why the paradox is so regularly formulated in the context of ‘What is it?’-type questions. We see this not only in Plato, but in

⁷¹There are, as Moravcsik [1971: 53–4] points out, different ways to acquire intellectual skills; although one might, with Plato, doubt whether this deserves to be called learning [Nehamas 1985: 10–11].

⁷²Compare Aristotle’s suggested solution, in note 14, above.

⁷³And as Fine [2007: 344] observes, ‘It is difficult, not easy, to say what criteria an adequate specification for fixing any given target must satisfy’.

our Indian sources as well—the paradox arose for Śābara and Kumārila in asking about *dharma* ‘What is it?’, for Śāṅkara when asking about *brahman* ‘What is it?’ Questions not explicitly so formulated might be able to be recast in such a form—for example, Śrīharṣa sets the question ‘Is there a proof for the existence of God?’ which differs only superficially from the question about the proof of the existence of God, ‘What is it?’ If many or most questions guiding inquiry can be so reformulated, this may show that the reach of the paradox is further than we might expect—perhaps, that our conceptual clarity is rather less than we usually suppose.

The full force of the argument of Śrīharṣa is thus that the burden of proof lies with someone who wishes to maintain that inquiry in such cases can have a direction, when the apparently available models for providing such direction either lead to paradox or come into play too late. He thinks, rightly or wrongly, that the burden of proof is unanswerable, and that one must acknowledge instead that knowledge is something which cannot be sought out but only longed for.⁷⁴

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