



Ancient Philosophy

## **Runaway Statues: Platonic Lessons on the Limits of an Analogy**

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**ABSTRACT:** Plato's best-known distinction between knowledge and opinion occurs in the *Meno*. The distinction rests on an analogy that compares the acquisition and retention of knowledge to the acquisition and retention of valuable material goods. But Plato saw the limitations of the analogy and took pains to warn against learning the wrong lessons from it. In this paper, I will revisit this familiar analogy with a view to seeing how Plato both uses and distances himself from it.

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Recall Plato's analogy.

To acquire an untied work of Daedalus is not worth much, like acquiring a runaway slave, for it does not remain, but it is worth much if it is tied down, for his works are very beautiful. What am I thinking of when I say this? True opinions.<sup>(1)</sup>

When one owns a valuable statue fashioned by a great artist, one becomes responsible for its security. So life-like it is that it may "run away and escape," jokes Plato, the point being that because fine statues are attractive to other people, their owners must take precautions against their loss by tying them down.

Opinions, on this analogy, are potentially flighty, like a slave who runs away from an owner. A slave who runs away is, from the slave-holder's point of view, "worthless." Plato writes,

For correct opinion, as long as they remain, are a fine thing and all they do is good, but they are not willing to remain long, and they escape from a man's mind, so that they are not worth very much until one ties them down by (giving) an account of the reason why... After they are

tied down, in the first place they become knowledge, and then they remain in place. That is why knowledge is prized higher than correct opinion, and knowledge differs from opinion in being tied down.(2)

A valuable statue bought and put in a garden must be "tied down." Otherwise the statue is vulnerable, precarious, temporary, at risk. The same statue tied down becomes certain, permanent, valuable, changeless, safe, unthreatened, bound. It becomes a "slave" that will not run away from its owner.

Plato uses the statue analogy to describe why opinions lack the *permanence* of knowledge. Opinions are impermanent because they are not "tied down." If not tied down with a proper "account," one's opinions, that is, one's intellectual property, can be taken away by others or easily forgotten and abandoned. Plato here follows Parmenides: things of value "stay in place." On the Parmenidean account, the transitory, ephemeral and precarious status of an untied statue, a runaway slave, an opinion, or even a "correct opinion," i.e. an opinion that fortuitously turns out to be correct, are inferior *by definition*, since each is subject to change.(3) As Plato writes in the *Republic*, the eternal reality is that "realm unaffected by the vicissitudes of change and decay."(4) Of the visible world, which exhibits change and decay, one can only have opinions. Thus true knowledge is had only of the invisible, eternal and unchanging world of Ideas. Those who turn their eyes to that changeless world "are fixed on the true being of each thing." It is they who ought "to be called philosophers (lovers of wisdom) and not lovers of opinion (Sophists)."(5)

Now, it is instructive to note that Plato's analogy refers to an untied statue of Daedalus, a recognized master sculptor. Plato seems to be suggesting, therefore, that the statue has value *before* it is secured; and that, by his analogy, would mean a correct opinion is of value even before it has become knowledge by being tied down with a proper account of it. We have encountered a problem. For as we observed in the case of *Meno 98a*, Plato wants the statue to become valuable only if and when steps are taken to secure it against being removed. Likewise, only when knowledge is "tied down" with an adequate account does it become more valuable than an opinion that just so happens to be correct.

This is what causes Plato to quickly distance himself from the statue analogy. For in order for Plato to be able to make his point that opinions increase in value due to the security measures taken by those who hold them, he has to reject part of the analogy to acquisition/retention. For on the traditional model of proprietorship known to Plato, statues do not become more valuable in proportion to, and *as a result of*, the security measures taken on their behalf.(6) Even as Plato uses the statue analogy, his addition of the requirement for responsible stewardship makes it clear that in the case of knowledge, value assessment is independent of, and subsequent to, acquisition.(7)

If we accept the statue analogy whole cloth, we conclude something Plato does not advocate; correct opinions have great value. To keep us from drawing this conclusion, Plato calls on the responsibility of the "owner" to be a good steward of her property, whether intellectual or material. What is at issue for Plato is that the value of an opinion does not reside passively within it. The value of the opinion rests on the owner's ability to retain it. The distinguishing mark of the acquisition of knowledge as compared to the acquisition of correct opinion lies in the *skill* one shows in tying it down.

In other words, knowledge depends on *responsible* ownership. Having an opinion that just so happens to be true is a less responsible form of (intellectual) ownership. We realize that what is at issue for Plato in this analogy is not whether or not correct opinion can have any

value before it attains the status of knowledge. After all, Plato does not speak here of false statues and incorrect opinions. Plato wrote of a statue of widely recognized value. He wants to know whether its value is affected by whether or not it is tied down.

And so Plato must depart from the straightforward meaning of the statue analogy. Plato must do so because he does not want to say that the value of the statue, a.k.a. opinion, depends on its acquisition alone. Plato withdraws by maintaining that any slave who cannot be retained in service is "not worth much" in the first place, like an untied work of Daedalus. Yet as we are told, a work by Daedalus, whether tied down or not, is uncontroversially of value. Indeed, if we take the analogy over-literally, we might erroneously conclude that the threat of impermanence is itself the source of the value. Certainly, an ex-owner's grief for a lost object may cause him to value the lost object as highly, or more highly, once it is lost to him. But Plato does not allow us to take the analogy too literally to heart. Unlike the masterpiece left out in the garden, a correct opinion left undefended is, from the owners point of view, "not worth much."

Plato denies the value of that which has passed—or is liable to pass—out of one's possession and so he departs from a literal transposition of the complete meaning of the statue analogy onto the question of knowledge acquisition and retention.

The link between knowledge acquisition and material ownership occurs in other dialogues. Yet with each case, Plato warns us that the analogy is limited. The *Protagoras* begins with Hippocrates returning from trying to recapture his runaway slave, Satyrus. Hippocrates hears from his brother, Phason, that Protagoras is in Athens. His immediate impulse is to tell Socrates of the arrival. Though Socrates reveals that he already knows this, notice Hippocrates' sense of urgency. He considers it more important to inform Socrates of the presence of Protagoras in Athens than to inform Socrates about calamity of the runaway slave who took Hippocrates to Ginoe and back the day before.

Plato's picture of Hippocrates passionately rushing around in the pre-dawn hours of Athens shows us again where the acquisition model fails. He lets us in on the true nature of this young man's interest. Hippocrates rushes back to the business of his education from his attempt to recapture his runaway slave. Hippocrates' urgency is not due to an intellectual passion for philosophy, however, but due to his idea that knowledge, like other acquisitions, is a scarce and desirable resource within a system of material exchange. Hippocrates wants to recapture his lost (material) property and to extend his potential (intellectual) holdings through what he might hear from Protagoras. Hippocrates sees both as acquisitions to be desired. His concerns are entirely proprietary: his slave is property, and his future knowledge is property. He rushes back to Socrates from securing material acquisitions to set up his next acquisition: knowledge. Hippocrates is a collector who acquires things for which he is not a responsible steward: they run away from him. Hippocrates does not safeguard his possession. His thoughts likewise "escape his mind." In Hippocrates' explanation to Socrates concerning why he had not mentioned his recent journey, he confesses to Socrates, "I was going to tell you that I was going after (the slave), but something else put it out of my head."<sup>(8)</sup>

In the *Sophist*, Plato returns to the acquisition theme once again to prevent overly literal as well as overly general readings of the acquisition analogy for knowledge. In the *Sophist*, Socrates listens as Theaetetus and an unnamed Eleatic citizen attempt to establish the differences between the sophist, the statesman, and the philosopher. After much classification and "separation of the worse from better," they determine that what the

sophist and the philosopher have in common is that neither is engaged in *making* anything. Rather, both the sophist and the philosopher are concerned with *acquiring*. The difference between them comes in the way in which the acquisitions occur. The acquisition method of the sophist is agonistic and is achieved by "conquest" and "conflict." The philosopher acquires through voluntary exchanges, gifts and purchases. Nonetheless, since Socrates himself did not philosophize with others for "exchanges, gifts and purchases," Plato leaves us wondering whether the distinction has any merit. Indeed, Plato leave us wondering about which kind of acquisition was depicted in the statue analogy. Perhaps only knowledge retention is the real issue.

Plato's ultimate concern was that the failure to secure one's beliefs can result in other, more serious dangers. In the *Phaedo*, Plato's Socrates warns against the evil of "misology." The misologue, explains Plato, like the misanthrope has experienced great and repeated disappointment of his trust. The warning appears as follows:

(We should be careful) that we should not become misologues, (just) as people become misanthropes. There is no greater evil one can suffer than to hate reasonable discourse. Misology and misanthropy arise in the same way. Misanthropy comes when a man without Knowledge or skill has placed great trust in someone and believes him to be altogether truthful, sound and trustworthy; then, a short time afterwards he finds him to be wicked and unreliable; and then this happens in another case; when one has frequently had that experience... One comes to hate all men and to believe that no one is sound in any way at all... (It) is as when one who lacks skill in arguments puts his trust in an argument as being true, then shortly afterwards believes it to be false... And so with another argument and then another... (And) in the end gladly shift the blame away from himself to the argument and spend the rest of his life hating and reviling reasonable discourse and so be deprived of truth and knowledge of reality.(9)

Plato argues that failure to secure one's beliefs can result in more than a hatred of language: it is destructive to the soul.(10) The link between spirit and language is strongly forged here. According to Plato, if a thing of value is removed from one repeatedly, one loses one's faith in it and then one's love for it. One comes to hate the reminder of the lack of skill in retaining it. Misology is the result. A misologue shifts the blame from himself to what he believes is the cause of his disappointment. The misologue is not unlike the misanthrope; neither learns the right lesson. Instead of deciding to being wary about placing trust in another person without reliable evidence for their character, the misanthrope decides that people cannot be trusted. Likewise, because the misologue does not develop the skill of "reasonable discourse," the misologue does not learn to be adequately cautious about the truth of an idea. Plato concludes that when we trust persons and ideas that do not have a reasonable defense for what they possess, we prove that "it is we who are not yet sound."(11)

As we have seen, for Plato the difference between correct opinion and knowledge lies in the action that the one who holds the opinion is willing to take to make it remain in place. The analogy establishes a link between the retention of material property and the retention of "intellectual property." Plato knows the analogy will appeal to the proprietary interests of his readers: fellow Athenians who are also proprietors and slave holders. His use of the statue analogy calls on the fear of proprietors that their property is at risk. Plato redirects their mercantile fears towards more epistemological concerns. He asks his readers to recall the care that they take to safeguard valuable possessions and then suggests that the same care is needed to safeguard ideas. Plato conveys that people's dearly held ideas are at risk. He cultivates in his readers a sense of being the proprietors of their own beliefs. He warns people to take care, lest the very value of one's "intellectual property" separate that

proprietor from it. Finally, the statue analogy conveys the ethical lesson that just as a proprietor is sensitive to how her possessions might be approached by others, so too must an epistemic proprietor be.

As regards those whose possessions are inadequately "tied down," the analogy lets us say that if a proprietor does not secure his property, the proprietor's failure to take the proper security measures is an expression of the proprietor's *impropriety*. The impropriety lies in not recognizing the value of what one possesses. Alternatively, the epistemic proprietor who does not take steps to secure his opinions may recognize the value of what he possesses, but may not feel propriety over his (intellectual) property because he has not taken the presence of other people fully into account. The value to the knower of what the knower knows is diminished failure to confirm its value in recognition of its value to others.

After all, the value of material goods is confirmed by the desire of other people for them. Statues and slaves have instrumental value; they are not considered good in and of themselves, but *for* something. But, as we know, for Plato, the highest values are not instrumentally bound to serve towards some other end, but are ends in-and-of-themselves, serving none higher. Here too Plato must depart from an overly literal transposition of his analogy.

Recall that it was the Sophists who were described as "art-merchants" in the *Sophist*, because they practiced the "art of exchange, of trafficking, of merchandising, of soul-merchandising in words and knowledge."<sup>(12)</sup> Plato is careful limit the potential commodification of knowledge that the analogy, taken to an extreme, invites. He opposes the idea that knowledge acquisition is identical to other investments; knowledge acquisition for Plato is not merely a more subtle, less reified form of acquisition in general.

To work the analogy backward for a moment, if statues really were like knowledge, then their value would depend exclusively on the measures taken to protect them. But even here, we must prevent the analogy from taking us to extremes; the best possible way to provide security for a great statue is to hide it away so far from the curious that it will never be subject to any threat of loss. But if the statue is not reserved for the exclusive enjoyment of its owner, it must be tied down in some way that still makes it accessible to being viewed by others, if only a few others to minimize the risk to the statue.

Plato seems to notice and enjoy the parallel to philosophy here. The correct opinion which the statue represents must be "shown" to others, though perhaps not to everyone since the danger to what is shown might prove too great, as in the case of Socrates. At this point, however, the analogy's limits are felt again, because whereas the tying down of a statue is done by the owner who knows that others will take it from her otherwise, in the domain of opinions, the tying down is undertaken with the safety of others in mind as much as the improvement of the opinion under consideration. Those who hold opinions, like those who acquire possessions, contract a responsibility to care for them.

To conclude, Plato gives us a highly descriptive analogy and he warns us against its overzealous application. In his discussion of the need to secure possessions of value against potential loss, in his revealing characterization of Hippocrates as more a proprietor than a philosopher, as well as his analysis of philosophical vs. non-philosophical varieties of acquisition, we see Plato revealing what elements of the statue analogy we must disregard in order to understand Plato's point about the difference between correct opinion and

knowledge. Understanding the reasons why the statue analogy fails tells us as much about Plato's view of knowledge as does the analogy itself. One can't help thinking that in this modern age, with its controversies about intellectual property, and about the worth of intellectual and commercial information disseminated electronically on the Net, that Plato's discussion of acquisition and retention of knowledge that is worth getting and guarding has much to teach us still.

## NOTES

(1) *Meno* 97e - 98a

(2) *Meno* 98a.

(3) A Heraclitean analysis of the same slave/statue/opinion analogy would decide things in quite the opposite direction: opinion would be valued precisely for its ability to "get around."

(4) *Republic* 485b.

(5) *ibid.*, 480 - my parentheses

(6) If this were true of works of art, then Leonardo's cordoned-off-and-glass-encased *Mona Lisa* has more value than Michelangelo's free-standing *Pieta*, or *David*, which both have been victims in recent years of inadequate "tying down."

(7) It seems unlikely that Plato wanted to suggest that the very act of securing something valueless makes it valuable. Only in the post-Industrial age of the "Precession of Simulacra," as Jean Baudrillard describes it, does the acquisition of something of little value, say, a cookie jar or of a stack of soup cans, by a well known personality make the act of acquisition itself give the object value.

(8) *Protagoras* 310c

(9) *Phaedo* 90-91.

(10) "... to express oneself badly is not only faulty as far as the language goes, but does some harm to the soul." *ibid.*, 115e.

(11) *ibid.*, 90e.

(12) *ibid.*, 224d