

## Genius and the Theory of Recollection

The theory of recollection is one of Plato's most popular and outlandish theories. Referred to in the *Phaedrus*, *Phaedo*, *Meno*, and *Republic*, the theory of recollection entertains and provokes discussion of a few of philosophy's favorite topics of discussion: knowledge, truth, and the unexplained. Sounds daunting, but the theory makes sense as long as we enter it with the right frame of mind. That is, we should be open to the new and often strange possibilities this theory may provide. For instance, in the next few pages, I attempt to use the theory of recollection to explain the phenomenon of creative genius, which in turn involves knowledge, truth, and the unexplained.

To begin, the theory of recollection involves the attainment of knowledge both in the everyday world as well as in the afterlife. The knowledge we gain in the everyday world may or may not be the correct thing to learn. The knowledge in the afterlife is fundamentally true and right. Let us start with a person being born. From a very early age, the person will be taught certain things about the world, his environment, etc. This person, once adulthood is reached, will solidify the things he has learned up to that point, as well as continue to add some new pieces of knowledge he picks up along the way to his death. The problem, according to the theory, is that the knowledge one might gain from others in the world is hardly the truth. That is, the majority of people are completely wrong in regards to what they know and never truly embrace true knowledge, instead they are blinded by their own false intelligence (with respect to knowledge).

Indeed, they are blinded, that is until they die. After a person is deceased, the body is disposed of, but the soul persists. The soul is then subjected to the underworld, where it learns everything there is to know. The soul now knows everything it will ever know and upon a certain event will travel back to the everyday world via a new body. And, we begin again, only now we understand the soul in the body knows everything it will ever know. And, if this person is influenced by the wrong people, as described above and as most people are, then they will “learn” countless facts that are wrong.

So, is everybody stupid?

There remains a select few that are the most knowledgeable, but not necessarily most intelligent, people on the face of the planet: Philosophers, lovers of beauty, and the creative artists. As stated above, each soul is taught everything after the body expires and before the entrance into another. The issue of truth versus everyday knowledge arises here. When we speak of truth, we must understand it as a *form* and not a thing or a fact. That is, truth represents what is pure and, for lack of a better word, *true*. In the Phaedrus, Plato describes it in this way, “There abides the very being with which true knowledge is concerned; the colorless, formless, intangible essence, visible only to the mind, the pilot of the soul” (Phaedrus, 13). The true essence of a thing is what we are after when we speak of truth. It has nothing to do with what color the paint is, or how loud the music is. As long as we can experience it, and we witness its essence, we can observe truth. And, in this paper, I will use “Beautiful” to refer to the form and “beautiful” to refer to the aesthetic quality of an object.

As a side note, everyday knowledge, in my opinion, includes things such as the names of people, directions to a building, or the show times at the local Cineplex. These

are not included in the theory of recollection, so when we speak of this next group as the most knowledgeable, a representative from this group only has knowledge of the forms, especially truth, and we should not expect this person to truly know everything there is to know in the world.

With that preface, I present the list. In the Phaedrus, Plato explains that only a select few are able to see, recognize, and understand Truth. The list, order from the most recognizing of Truth to the least, is as follows:

1. Philosopher, artist, or some musical and loving nature (lovers of beauty).

Other translations include: A man who will become a lover of wisdom or of beauty, or who will be cultivated in the arts and prone to erotic love.  
(Nehamas and Woodruff)

A man who will become a lover of wisdom or of beauty, or devoted to the Muses and to love. (Rowe)

2. Righteous king or warrior chief.
3. Politician, economist, or trader.
4. Lover of gymnastic toils or a physician.
5. Prophet or hierophant.
6. Poets or some other imitative artists.
7. Artisan or husbandman.
8. Sophist or demagogue.
9. Tyrant (Phaedrus, 16).

We now have in front of us a list of the types of people there are in the world and their corresponding amount of knowledge. It is important to note that the theory does not suggest that a tyrant is born a tyrant or even that a philosopher is born a philosopher, but that the influence these people experienced in life has given them their label. That is, all men are created equal, sure, but their environments, and as extension, their influences are different. Also, one might point out that it is relatively difficult to translate the original Greek easily. Therefore the inclusion of artists in the first group, which I shall do

throughout this paper, might be wrongful. However, within the three separate translations provided, we witness striking references to artists. Jowett explicitly says, “philosopher, artist, or some musical or loving nature,” Nehamas and Woodruff say, “A man...who will be cultivated in the arts and prone to erotic love,” and Rowe who says, “A man who will become a lover of wisdom or of beauty, or devoted to the Muses and to love.” All of these descriptions are easily, and I mean easily as opposed to imaginatively, interpreted as speaking about artists. However, I digress. The point is that philosophers, artists, one cultivated in the arts, or devoted to the Muses, are the top ranking people. These people are able to recognize the most truth and, excluding the philosophers, are able to create beauty.

Yeah? So what does this have to do with genius?

All that has been discussed thus far serves as a foundation for what comes next, so drink some coffee and keep reading. The artists, musically natured persons, and lovers of beauty *are* creative geniuses. In order to be completely clear about this subject, we should establish what is meant exactly when speaking of a creative genius. The genius is not only creative, for there are many creative people in the everyday world, but he is able to achieve beauty in a way that few others can. More will be said about how the creative genius can achieve beauty later.

Because the artist is included in the first rank, among the philosopher and lover of beauty, we must take him seriously as a someone who is just as close to Truth (again, the *form* of truth) as the others. The artist, as most artists tend to do, creates things, artworks, and at times, inventions. This artist, this creative genius, is not only talented enough to create certain artworks, but also has the knowledge to create Beautiful things. This is

achieved through being able to see Truth and Beauty as separate from an object. That is, the creative genius is able to achieve aesthetic disinterestedness.

What does that mean?

Aesthetic disinterestedness, most commonly attributed to Edward Bullough, who said, “Distance...is obtained by separating the object and its appeal from one’s own self by putting it out of gear with practical needs and ends. Thereby the contemplation of the object alone becomes possible. It marks one of the most important steps in the process of artistic creation and serves as a distinguishing feature of what is commonly so loosely described as the artistic temperament” (Bullough, cited in Kivy, “Child Mozart as a Symbol” 252). So we see that aesthetic disinterestedness involves the separation of the object itself and its practical use in the everyday world. If we think of this idea in reference to forms, I think we can understand it better. When we say that a creative genius is able to create something Beautiful, we mean that he has separated the form of Beauty from whatever object we are looking at. Kant offers, “One must not be in the least prepossessed in favor of the real existence of the things, but must preserve complete indifference in this respect, in order to play the part of judge in matters of taste” (Kant, quoted in Kivy, 254).

The most helpful way I can think of to bring this argument out is with respect to love. In fact, remember Plato lists those who are of a loving nature, prone to love or devoted to love as those closest to the Truth. Whether Plato meant romantic love is up for argument, but I shall interpret it as such because it works for this example. Let us create these distinctions; love versus True love. When we think of love, we think of someone who we appreciate, care about, think about, etc. When asked why we love

someone, we should be able to spout off any number of reasons and point them out.

Consider someone who is experiencing true love. When asked why they love someone, they will not have an answer that includes specifics. That is, this person will not be able to point to instances or aesthetic reasons for the love they feel. Consider an idea from Edmund Burke:

I likewise distinguish love, by which I mean that satisfaction which arises to the mind upon contemplating anything beautiful, of whatsoever nature it may be, from desire or lust; which is an energy of the mind, that hurries us on to the possession of certain objects that do not affect us as they are beautiful, but by means altogether different (Burke, quoted in Kivy, 253).

Now consider a relevant idea from me:

Two men are walking down the street. One is a philosopher and the other is an ordinary man. They notice a woman approaching and both agree that she is a beautiful woman. The philosopher says, “She certainly is Beautiful, I feel a sort of passion for her. It’s like I have butterflies in my stomach.” And, the ordinary man says, “She certainly is Beautiful, I think I would like to have sex with her...for hours...and hours.”

Now, if we combine the two ideas, we can fully understand the notion of aesthetic disinterestedness. That is, a philosopher, lover of beauty, or artist/creative genius is able to separate the Beauty from an object from the object itself. And, with that separation, comes the ability to be genuinely disinterested in using the object practically. However, the ordinary man, might also be attracted to the Beautiful object, but only thinks of it as beautiful, and instantly thinks of ways to use the object.

So, an ordinary man can recognize Beauty?

An ordinary man *can* recognize and even appreciate Beauty, but is unable to distinguish a Beautiful object from a beautiful object. In his article, “Platonic Anamnesis Revisited,” Dominic Scott offers a brief and helpful consolidation of the argument:

Now there is nothing to say that he cannot classify an object as beautiful; what he does not do is recognize it as a copy of something else, which would inevitably conjure up the associations of his previous existence and so bring on the ecstatic pain of the real lover. Recollection involves the conscious awareness of the form, and thus it carries with it an emotional dimension that is lacking in the case of the non-lover (Scott, 361).

This seems to be a paramount problem for the theory of recollection because of the ordinary man’s ability to recognize Beauty, but consider what was said earlier about the influence from others. If an ordinary man were taught, as many of us are, that a certain piece of music from Mozart is Beautiful, the man will continue to refer to it as Beautiful throughout his life. However, when this ordinary man comes across another piece of music he just might decide that it is beautiful also, even though it is not Beautiful. This idea is saliently presented in the Phaedo, which Scott introduced as:

- i. We must have known A beforehand (73c2)
- ii. We must not only recognize B but also think of A (74c7-8)
- iii. A must not be the object of the same knowledge as B but of another (73c8)
- iv. When A resembles B, we must consider whether B is lacking at all in relation to A (74a5-7) (Scott, 353).

If we think of this proposition in everyday terms, we get something like this:

- (i) we must have known the Beauty in Mozart’s music beforehand
- (ii) we must not only recognize the appearance of Beauty in an imitative artists’ work, but also think of the beauty in Mozart’s music
- (iii) the Beauty in Mozart’s music must not be the object of the same knowledge as the appearance of Beauty in an imitative artists’ work but of another
- (iv) when the Beauty in Mozart’s music resembles that of the imitative artists’, we must consider whether the latter’s work is lacking at all in relation to Mozart’s music.

Who creates this music that is simply beautiful, opposed to Beautiful?

Referring to the list of the ranks provided above, look closely and we see a distinction made between artists and imitative artists: Artists are ranked number one, while imitative artists are ranked sixth. Recognizing this difference will help establish the surplus of artists in the everyday world (imitative artists) and the relative shortage of creative geniuses (artists). The creative genius is responsible for creating something utterly Beautiful, while the imitative artist, noticing the appeal of what the genius creates, will merely imitate whatever the artist created. In this situation, only the members of the top group on the list would be able to distinguish between the two. The ordinary men, who have been subjected to countless faulty influences, will accept much more music as Beautiful than is actually out there. In the article, "What is Art," Clive Bell mentions:

When an ordinary man speaks of a beautiful woman he certainly does not mean only that she moves him aesthetically; but when an artist calls a withered old hag beautiful he may sometimes mean what he means when he calls a battered torso beautiful. The ordinary man, if he be also a man of taste, will call the battered torso beautiful, but he will not call a withered hag beautiful because, in the matter of women, it is not the aesthetic quality that the hag may possess, but to some other quality that he assigns the epithet (Bell, 3).

And directly from the Phaedrus, we get:

Now he who is not newly initiated or who has become corrupted, does not easily rise out of this world to the sight of true beauty in the other; he looks only at her earthly namesake, and instead of being awed at the sight of her, he is given over to pleasure, and like a brutish beast he rushes on to enjoy and beget; he consorts with wantonness, and is not afraid or ashamed of pursuing pleasure in violation of nature (Phaedrus, 17).

Again, this issue of influence arises: "He who has become corrupted." The philosophers are without influence from the everyday world though, we must agree, they



have experienced the world. But, what makes it possible for a philosopher to have this recollection of true knowledge, even after being thrown into a world gone awry?

An interesting answer, or potential explanation, for this question can be found in the notion of the childlike and its relevance to genius. According to Schopenhauer, there are unforgiving similarities between children and geniuses, and therefore philosophers and the others in the first group on the list. The most prevalent characteristic they share is the ability to think irrationally. This irrational thought is not what most of us would think of, rather, it is more of a freer type of thought. That is, after years of experience in the world, many men will think in the ways they have been taught to think, whereas a child thinks like a child; dreamy, irrational, and fresh. An interesting Schopenhauer claim is that,

Every child is to a certain extent a genius, and every genius to a certain extent a child. The relationship between the two shows itself primarily in the naivety and sublime ingenuousness that are fundamental characteristic of true genius. Moreover it comes to light in several features, so that a certain childlike nature does indeed form a part of the character of genius (Schopenhauer, quoted in Kivy, 256).

Think about it this way: children tend not to think in motives. That is when a child stumbles upon a Beautiful woman he will react like a child and simply think she is pretty (or Beautiful). Much like the philosopher in the short story provided above, the child will simply feel an emotional tug, thereby recognizing the Beauty in the woman, but does not feel any sexual attraction to her. Also, a child is without experience. The absence of experience also means the absence of influence from the corruptors in the world. Keep in mind, however, that a corruptor is not a bad person it is simply an ordinary man who think he is teaching the child something worthwhile.

In addition to the irrational thought of a child and its relation to genius, Schopenhauer discussed the notion of aesthetic disinterestedness for it is equally important. For Schopenhauer, this is the ability to view an object, whatever it may be, independently from the principle of sufficient reason. The principle of sufficient reason refers to a four tier theory; cause and effect, premise and conclusion, space and time, motivation and action. All of these involve some sort of use. Think about it this way: A man buys a 1955 Corvette, yet decides to never drive it. Instead, this car collector places it on a pedestal and remains in a perpetual state of awe. The car collector could be a philosopher enjoying something Beautiful that was produced by a creative genius. Take note that the philosopher enjoys the car, not by driving it, but by simply admiring it.

Again, a passage from Schopenhauer will bring this point to clarity:

The madman correctly knows the individual present as well as many particulars of the past, but...he fails to recognize the connection, the relations, and therefore goes astray and talks nonsense. Just this is his point of contact with the genius; for he too leaves out of sight knowledge of the connection of things, as he neglects knowledge of relations, which is knowledge according to the principle of sufficient reason, in order to see in things only their Ideas, and try to grasp their real inner nature which expresses itself in perception (Schopenhauer, quoted in Kivy, 255.)

In this example, the car collector fails to see the connection between a car and using it as transportation or leisure. Surely, many would call this man, who would spend a great heap of money on a car, yet not drive it, a madman.

So, what happens if a creative genius were to learn musical theory or take painting classes?

Nothing. Experience in the world will not hinder or stifle the creative genius for he is already above anything he is taught in this world. On this topic, Goethe, remarked, “the musical talent...may well show itself earliest of any; for music is something innate and internal, which needs little nourishment from without, and no experience drawn from life.” The passage is self-explanatory, but we should think about it a little longer. Goethe seems to suggest that true musical geniuses should not have an ounce of experience (learned skills) with music. He seems to suggest that a true genius will no longer be a genius after acquiring knowledge of his art.

However, a suggestion is not an assertion. According to Peter Kivy, “Their point was a negative one: that music can do without experience, witness the early musical maturity of a Mozart. The composer can function ‘when the head is still empty and the emotions have barely had a flutter’; his talent does not require ‘nourishment from without’ or ‘experience drawn from life.’ It is not to say that he cannot function when he has become intellectually and emotionally mature” (Kivy, 256).

So, you say that nothing happens?

Well, perhaps nothing happening *is* a little difficult to believe. In the event that a creative genius is to take classes and gain experience, yet continue to make music the way he sees fit, he would simply be regarded as a madman. I should mention here that Plato refers to the philosopher as being struck with divine madness. There are two specific reasons. The first has to do with the example above of a trained creative genius continuing to create what he sees fit and the second example comes from the fact that a philosopher will only call those things Beautiful that are Beautiful. Think about the way the philosopher reacted to the Beautiful woman. Instead of gawking and wishing he

could use her, he simply admired from afar. This was not a natural way of thinking of an attractive woman. Any witness of this behavior would most likely call him crazy. And, even more, when another woman who is merely beautiful comes along, the philosopher would not miss a beat. He would most likely continue to walk, while the other man, the ordinary man, would gawk and be amused.

Furthermore, the creative genius requires some sort of impetus to spark his creativity. Mozart began, at the age of three, listening to his sister play the piano. Around four years old, Mozart was playing the piano himself, and better than his sister at that. Because of his obvious talent, his father continued to encourage Mozart's artistic creation. Without his sister playing and without his father's encouragement, there is no telling whether we ever would have known of the musical genius, Mozart. Further, there is doubt that Mozart ever would have known that he was a musical genius. This idea serves two purposes; that creative genius needs some sort of spark to realize his talent and that creative genius can arise at any age.

In the Meno, Plato attempts to explain the theory of recollection. The dialogue involves Socrates, Meno, and a slave boy. Socrates asks the slave boy several questions and eventually gets him to the correct answer without explicitly giving away the answer. The idea is that the slave boy can suddenly understand geometry even without prior knowledge. Given that the boy is a slave, he has most certainly not been taught any sort of reading, writing, or arithmetic. The question is how the slave boy could ever know geometry without having been taught. The answer requires not only the theory of recollection alone but also requires Socrates to serve as a positive influence or stimulus. Much like the way Mozart recollected his knowledge of Beauty in music via his sister's

recital, the slave boy was reminded of geometry by Socrates. According to Dominic Scott, “The theory aims to show that we can attain knowledge and how we can do so, but it shows anamneses starting only after contact with a certain type of stimulus or catalyst, in this case Socrates. Had the slave boy never met Socrates he might never have started to recollect at all” (351, Scott).

Moreover, the notion discussed earlier about the childlike and the genius could be misconstrued easily, leading to the thought that a creative genius must have produced something at an early age. That is to say that if a talented artist creates something Beautiful, we must conduct research to figure out whether he produced an artwork as a child. If he did not, then we must dismiss the idea that he is a creative genius. Two problems are at play here. If this talented artist has the capability to create something Beautiful, then he must be a genius. Ordinary men and ordinary artists are unable to create such Beauty. They just can't. They have not recollected enough, due to corrupting influences; they think too rationally, due to education and the like; they are interested in pleasure, due to the influence from the body, etc. Therefore, we must ask ourselves what the point is with the childlike notion. The point is this; no matter what age a person's genius is discovered, the ability had always been there. That is, imagine a person who has always been regarded as childish or irrational or madmanlike. From the day he was born to his 25<sup>th</sup> year, he has always been different. There was no explanation for his perceived insanity until he sat down and painted a Beautiful picture. People are in awe. He paints another. People are still in awe. This man is a creative genius. Though his creative genius did not manifest itself at a young age, it was always there, simply awaiting some sort of push or impetus.

Realizing the anecdotes and the numerous quotes included in this paper might detract from the true point, I offer a summary:

Souls are floating around in the afterlife, learning everything there is to know. This includes forms and excludes facts. An example of a form is Beauty. This refers to the true essence of something. The other beauty (lower case) represents a superficial aesthetic quality. After the soul acquires this knowledge, it enters a body and is passed into the everyday world on earth. Two things can happen from here: Either the person will be corrupted by the influence of ordinary men, or the person will remain uncorrupted. The corrupted individual will lead an ordinary life and will recognize, in some cases, Beauty, but will always be subject to making a mistake and calling something Beautiful, that is actually merely beautiful. The uncorrupted individual will become a philosopher, lover of beauty, or artist of some kind, and is capable of distinguishing between Beauty and beauty. The person who creates beautiful things, the same person who deceives ordinary men, is an imitative artist. The imitative artist is far from Truth and simply copies- in style, color, or content- the artist. The problem is the imitative artist is unable to achieve aesthetic disinterestedness and therefore never achieves anything Beautiful. Aesthetic disinterestedness involves the separation of the practical usage of an object and the object itself. In this way, anyone who achieves this aesthetic disinterestedness, either in creation or observation, seems like a child or madman. And, finally, the artist is the creative genius who can create Beautiful works of art, the philosophers and other lovers of beauty are the only one who can deem something truly Beautiful, and the ordinary men can only agree with the philosophers.

## Works Cited

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