



## IS PLATO S RECOLLECTION THESIS A DÉJÀ VU?

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### Abstract

*The individual background is often considered as the lens for viewing reality. This background determines how one makes a position about the reality that surrounds us. Arguments have emanated on the divergent epistemic claims especially on the most reliable source of attaining knowledge. On one hand, a camp argues that every person is born with some innate ideas, and on the other hand, another camp opines that sense perception is the ultimate source of knowledge. Try as philosophers may, the divide between these two camps has become somewhat irreconcilable. The crux of this paper therefore is to consider Plato's recollection thesis which pitches its tent with the first camp, that at birth, the soul is born with some innate ideas, with the aim of seeing if a dichotomy could be placed between it and déjà vu. As it were, we cannot but raise the following fundamental questions in order to realize this intention: Does the soul possess innate ideas before being transmigrated into the body? Does this argument really hold any philosophical water? Is the situation of reminiscence a mere coincidence? Where do we place the possibility of déjà vu in Plato's recollection thesis? Or is Plato's recollection thesis simply a misplaced déjà vu?*

**Key words:** Soul, Immortality, Déjà vu, Knowledge, Recollection

### I. Introduction

Plato's search for ultimate truth and reality might have been aroused by the experience he had when his master Socrates was murdered. His friendship with him instilled an unquenchable quest to pursue wisdom by confronting himself with hard questions about life. He never ceased to wonder why the society could despise a man so much filled with philosophical wisdom. This is made lucid in his words when Socrates breathed his last that: such was the end of our friend, who was, I think, of all men of our time, the best, the wisest, and the most just... (Plato, 1941). In order to satisfy his unquenchable thirst for wisdom and to satisfy his

search for ultimate reality, Plato probed to unravel the mystery behind human knowledge so as to arrive at the justifiable means to knowledge.

Plato's recollection thesis intends to lend more support for rationalism especially on the possibility for us to have innate concepts. It must be noted that in the *Meno*, there was no elaborate discussion on the theory of recollection. More efforts were made in the later Dialogues such as *Phaedo*, and the *Republic* in discussing the theory of the forms. It was argued that what we are recollecting are the forms. For Plato in his *Meno*, one only remembers what has been deposited in the soul and this accounts for why he referred to knowledge as *reminiscence* (Plato, 1956).

This paper does not attempt to examine all the intricacies involved in Plato's theory of knowledge but some selected aspects as they relate to the focus of this work. His theory of innatism and his doctrine of the soul which is believed to be the seat of knowledge shall be our major concern. A critical analysis shall be made on his recollection thesis in view of answering the question, is Plato's recollection thesis a déjà vu?

### Plato's Rejection of Relativism and Sense Experience

Plato examined the common maxim of Protagoras that man is the measure of all things in the *Theaetetus* as a way of expressing relativism. Protagoras gave the impression that the same wind may seem chilly to one person and pleasant to a more warm-blooded person. The two persons cannot be said to be wrong because it is perceived from different perspectives. Plato had this relativism flawed in his *Theaetetus* when he depicted it in the dialogue between Theodorus and himself. He concluded that even the relativists do not really believe all opinions are equally true because they always think they are correct and their opponents are wrong. Plato's criticisms of Protagoras' position prefigures arguments advanced against relativism by its critics ever since. One of the objections he raises is that relativism collapses the distinction between truth and falsity. This is because if each individual is



really the measure of what is, then everyone would be infallible and this sounds absurd. Plato argues that the implausibility of the Protagoras thesis is obvious in the scenario of two people making incompatible predictions about the future. Events will prove that one of them, at least, was not a good measure of what is true. He therefore sees relativism as self-refuting (Plato, 1956).

Furthermore, the tenet of empiricism is that all knowledge is derived from sense experience. Plato proffered different reasons why we cannot derive true knowledge from the data of the five senses. All these reasons culminated in the fact that sense perception only gives us the world of constant change and all claims about the sensory world are relative to the perceiver. The knowledge gained from perception is too fleeting and ephemeral (Lawhead, 2015). The real immutable knowledge resides in the world of the form. Little wonder he argues that the soul dwells in the World of the Forms before being united with the body. In Book Four of the Republic, Plato argues that all objects we experience through our senses are particular things. We do not sense anything abstract. For instance, we only see this particular beautiful thing or that particular beautiful thing but we never see beauty. Beauty is a property that more than one thing have. Plato therefore claims that if many different things can be beautiful, then there is something they share in common which is beauty. There must be something which is beauty. This idea of a universal property that more than one thing can have is the first approximation of the idea of the Form (Plato, 1956).

### **Plato's Theory of the Immortality of the Soul**

Discussing the recollection thesis of Plato would be incomplete without delving into the background that necessitated it. The Recollection Thesis was among the three arguments put forward by Socrates in justifying the immortality of the soul or his arguments on death. The theory of opposites serves as the bedrock in justifying the immortality of the soul. Socrates made it succinctly clear in the *Phaedo* that everything which has an opposite is generated only from its opposite. By opposite he meant the honourable and the base, the just and the unjust, and so on in a thousand other instances. He posits that when anything becomes greater, it must first have been less and then become greater. Socrates goes ahead to explain the instances of the two pairs of opposites and its generations. Sleep is the opposite of waking, from sleep is produced the state of waking, and from the state of waking is produced sleep. This instance was likened to the

episode of life and death, that the living is generated from the dead and vice versa. He therefore assumes that our souls exist in other worlds and if there be such a thing as a return to life, it will be a generation from the dead to the living (Plato, 1956).

The doctrine of the opposites was used as a foundation in establishing that our learning is only a process of recollection. It is supposed that we have learned at some former time what we recollect now. Learning at some former time would be impossible unless our soul had existed somewhere before they came into this human form. Socrates in that dialogue therefore concluded that that is another reason for believing the soul immortal. It is claimed that if you question men about anything in the right way, they will answer you correctly by themselves. But they would not have been able to do that unless they had had within themselves some prior ideas (Plato, 1956).

At this juncture, it would not be out of place to assume according to Plato that the seat of this recollection is the soul. The question as raised by Socrates is when did our souls gain this knowledge? Socrates avers that the knowledge would not have been acquired by the soul after the person had been born. He was out to show that knowledge existed before human persons were born and would continue to exist after we were dead. According to him, when the soul and the body are united, nature ordains the one to be a slave and to be ruled, and the other to be master and to rule. He again asked, which do you think is like the divine, and which is like the mortal? Do you not think that the divine naturally rules and has authority and that the mortal naturally is ruled and is a slave? (Plato, 1956). The perturbing questions raised by Socratic Plato were to justify his most trusted dialectic method of arriving at knowledge. The questions were raised to suggest the primacy of the soul over the body and as the seat of knowledge. The knowledge acquired by the soul can be recollected by the individual human beings. This he argues was evident that knowledge was recollected and not taught, and that "the man who does not know, then concerning what he does not know has within himself true beliefs about what he doesn't know (Church, 1875)" This depicts the fact that soul is immortal and has some innate ideas within it since the slave boy Meno as claimed, was never taught geometry in this life.

It was observed that the agreement of Simmias with Socrates on the existence of realities such as the Beautiful and the Good was simply not to make the argument on the existence of soul and knowledge futile. Simmias still harbours some



doubts on the immortality of the soul but reached a compromise on the ground that the forms and the souls must exist in order to make us see recollection has only shown that the soul exists before birth. He doubts whether it succeeds in demonstrating that the soul is immortal (Plato, 1956: 77). Though Plato thinks with his cyclical and argument from opposites, the immortality of the soul has been established. We cannot separate the recollection thesis of Plato from the defense of the immortality of the soul. His immortality of the soul has been confronted with many objections, ranging from the fact that he glossed over the reproductive system of his time. As would argue, the procreative system cannot be justified by Plato's assumption that the living must come from the dead which made no reference to the process of fertilization of the sperm and eggs (Aloba, 2020: 4).

### Plato's Theory of Recollection

There is no gain-saying the fact that a mention of the recollection thesis has been made under our discussion of the immortality of the soul, but there is the need to make a proper analysis of it. Before delving into the paradox that prompted this thesis, it will not be out of place to first outline the theory. The theory is a set of three theses about the human soul and knowledge: firstly, one states that human beings acquire knowledge by remembering innate knowledge hidden in their soul. The second states that the soul is immortal and cannot be annihilated. It transmigrates from a body to another when the first one dies, after staying sometimes in the Hades, though it forgets but does not lose everything it knew in the process. And thirdly, that the soul acquired all knowledge during its previous existence (Colombani, 2013).

In analysing his theory of recollection, Plato gave two horns of dilemma that we both know the universal forms and we don't know them. First, we know them because they are imprinted on the soul. In other words, we have innate knowledge of what is ultimately true, real and of intrinsic value. He believes that we were directly acquainted with the forms before we enter this world but we forgot the forms when we entered the physical world. This knowledge is however waiting to be recovered through the process of recollection. This brings us to the second dilemma why we feel we don't have this knowledge. This recollection of recovering what the soul has forgotten can be triggered through what Plato called dialectical questioning which Socrates initiated (Lawhead, 2015: 50). Plato's recollection thesis is perceived as the means through which the soul remembers what he had learnt in its first

contact with the world of shadows. A distinction between knowledge and true belief was introduced by Socrates where he argues that true belief is as good as knowledge when it comes to any individual action. The difference is that knowledge remains fixed while true belief is apt to wander around. Recollection, at the end, is said to be a mechanism for making true beliefs into knowledge.

Socrates holds that man cannot have pure knowledge while still alive. The more reason he wished Evenus who he believed was a philosopher, death. He argues that the study of philosophy is simply the release and separation of the soul from the body. It is therefore absurd for a man to complain at death when in his life he has been preparing himself to live as nearly in a state of death as he could. A true philosopher studies to die, and to him of all men is death least terrible. Any man whom you see grieving at the approach of death is after all no lover of wisdom, but a lover of his body, a lover either of wealth or of honour, or it may be of both. The point being made here is that it is the hallmark of a good philosopher to embrace death as the prerequisite for knowledge acquisition.

It has been argued by Lorenzo Colombani that the Theory of Recollection could be adopted to probably solve this Meno's paradox.<sup>1</sup> He therefore restructured this theory in a way to suit the purpose of resolving the paradox by stating it thus:

one's soul already possess all possible knowledge, though it forgot it. It is possible to remember it, which is what learning consists in. Thus, one can never learn anything new but only remembers something already known, which is what learning consists in. Hence, learning never consists in learning new knowledge but in remembering what one previously possessed. Thus, it is possible not to know what we are looking for prior to learning it (Colombani, 2013).

With this analysis made above by Lorenzo, is there any gain-saying the fact that recollection thesis of Plato is capable of escaping the philosophical sword of criticism? Is knowledge not a transmission of ideas between two people? Does it

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<sup>1</sup>In Plato's *Meno*, an account of a slave boy was portrayed, who had never had a previous encounter with Geometry. In the dialogue, the slave boy was able to arrive at the right answer in Geometry through the method of dialectical reasoning. The conclusion of Plato was that the slave boy must have had the innate idea of Geometry which only requires the help of a guide through interlocutory means to recollect the previous experience.



imply that one does not learn a new thing but one remembers what he had previously known? Why do we find it hard at times to remember the so-called already learnt things even with the dialectic reasoning? Proffering answers to these questions was done with a demonstration with a slave boy in Socrates's attempt to show Meno that learning is in fact recollection (Cline, 2004). Socrates through his dialectic approach undertakes to pose a geometric problem to Meno's slave-boy who never learned geometry. Despite the fact that he never learned geometry in his current life as claimed by Socrates, he was able to arrive at the correct answer through the guidance of Socrates. Socrates assumed that solving a geometrical problem requires a geometrical knowledge. Then how did the slave-boy able to arrive at the correct answer if he had not learned geometry in his current life? The only explanation he could offer was that of recollection which the slave-boy could have had the knowledge in his previous life. Can we really say this argument of Socrates is capable of holding philosophical water? Can Socrates be completely freed from being a flatfish that he was initially accused of? Are the questions not leading enough to have guided someone who never had any previous knowledge to have arrived at the answers?

In the dialogue Socrates had with the slave boy, he presented him with a square of four feet which he drew. The slave boy could identify it even when it was said he never had any prior experience of it. Socrates added another square which the boy still recollected. The additions of the squares increased to four and the slave boy was able to identify them. Socrates then asked the slave boy how many times larger is the space than the first one, which he replied four times. He continued by drawing a blue line cutting the four squares across diagonally, reaching from corner to corner, bisecting each of these squares. The boy answered affirmatively on the bisection. Socrates made several other attempts to divide the square which the slave boy answered correctly. At the end, Socrates concluded that all these answers given out by the boy came out of his head (Maxwell, 2014).

### The Meaning of Déjà Vu

The outcomes of studies have shown that déjà vu is a subjective experience that is often too difficult to explain. Many people describe déjà vu as being able to predict the future while others see it as being the result of a memory error. It is argued that if it is seen as a memory error, then it means that testable hypotheses can be made about what causes it, and it should be possible experimentally to

induce the sensation. The aim of scientific study into déjà vu is to understand it to the extent that it can be recreated in laboratory conditions (Moulin, 2018). We can therefore imply that a well-grounded explanation has not sufficiently been given to the experience of déjà vu, though it must be noted that concerted efforts are in the pipeline to unravel this mystery. This could account for the reason why it has been described in art, literature and scientific works in a consistent and steady fashion for about 200 years. This viewpoint is evident in the work of Arnaud that dated as far back as 1896.

Déjà vu has its etymology in the French language which translates literally as 'already seen'.

Tracing the first person to use the word has been somewhat contentious. One thing that was certain is the fact that as early as 1896, Arnaud was debating what the scientific definition of the term should be and how it differed from false memory and other strange memory sensations.

William James (1902) refers to déjà vu as a variety of religious experience, which he defines as a kind of insight into which I cannot help ascribing some metaphysical significance. James thought that by studying mystical and nebulous experiences such as déjà vu, we might better understand people. His idea is evidenced in his definition of the concept that made him attach metaphysical significance to it. Roediger asserts that déjà vu is an illusion of metacognition (Roediger, 1996:95). Brown describes déjà vu as a pure metamemory experience unconnected with the empirical world (Brown; 2004:5). And Neppe, whose definition has been well celebrated sees déjà vu as any subjectively inappropriate impression of familiarity of a present experience with an undefined past (Neppe, 1983: 1-10). By calling the experience subjectively inappropriate, Neppe emphasized that the sense of familiarity is a personal construct that cannot be judged by the outsider. This definition catches the most important qualities of the phenomenon but it does not say much about the subjective feelings accompanying this experience. The following quote from Charles Dickens lucidly captures some of the most distinguishing subjective qualities of the experience:

we have all some experience of a feeling, that comes over us occasionally, of what we are saying and doing having been said and done before, in a remote time of our having been surrounded, dim ages ago, by the same faces, objects, and circumstances of our knowing perfectly what will be said next, as if we suddenly remember it (Dickens, 1952).





Déjà vu is sometimes called paramnesia (distortion of memory) or promnesia (remembering something from the future), is the distinct feeling of experiencing a new situation that has already happened in the past. The term was coined by French philosopher and psychical researcher, Emile Boirac (1851 -1917). The experience of déjà vu is usually accompanied by a compelling sense of familiarity, and also a sense of strangeness, or weirdness. The previous experience during a déjà vu episode is most frequently attributed to real life, with many people reporting a firm sense that the experience genuinely happened in the past. As Marie Jones and Larry Flaxman would say:

Deja vu then, is but a fleeting memory, like a breeze blowing through the unconscious mind, of something that holds an incredibly profound sense of recognition to us in the present moment. Yet, how is it possible for someone to have a memory of something happening in the present moment, the NOW? Déjà vu, which is one of the most widely reported mysteries of the mind, also appears to be universal-cutting across all social, religious, and cultural borders. From children to adults alike, it seems no one is impervious. Surprisingly, the phenomenon is reportedly more common than ghost sightings, UFO sightings, even ESP and psychic abilities (Jones & Flaxman, 2010).

It is argued that the phenomenon of déjà vu can be considered within the existing theories of human recognition memory. Recognition is the memory system that is responsible for detecting prior occurrences of stimuli in the environment. It is presumed that déjà vu arises because of a temporary problem or misinterpretation of the recognition memory system, a system that is usually responsible for responding appropriately to familiar and novel environments, ideas and people.

There is the tendency to misconceive or substitute déjà vu for concepts such as flashbacks, cryptomnesia, actualized precognition and vivid memory. Herman and Sno emphatically differentiated these concepts from déjà vu. According to them, in flashbacks, people may conceive themselves as actually being back in time but there is no sense of familiarity involved. In cryptomnesia, there is no comparison with the present but a sense of past ideas that are inappropriately unfamiliar. The subjective impression that the present situation has been foretold in what actualized precognition focuses on. In a vivid memory, the past comes into focus but there is nothing in the present that seems familiar (Herman, 2000).

Again, sense of familiarity has been compared with déjà vu experience. This is succinctly wrapped up in Mandler's phenomenon of the butcher on the bus. According to him, there is the need for us to consider seeing a man on a bus whom you are sure that you have seen before; you know him in that sense. Such recognition is usually followed by a search process asking, in effect, where could I know him from? Who is he? The search process generates likely contexts (do I know him from work; is he a movie star, a TV commentator, the milkman?). Eventually the search may end with the insight, that's the butcher from the supermarket (Mandler, 1980: 252-253). Scholars have argued that this sense of familiarity, although intensely subjective, is not the same as déjà vu. In the butcher on the bus phenomenon, we become conscious of the fact that we are searching for a reason why the feeling is true, a search for why the person feels familiar. If we are to make a comparison with the déjà vu experience, we know immediately or soon after that the strong sense of familiarity is false. Familiarity is seen here as a search engine with signal that takes place in the memory. The signal antenna is turned on with the intention of detecting where the encounter may have first occurred. Epistemic feelings are proposed to give a sense of truth to a belief, or ascribe some meaning to our cognitive processing.

There are basically two types of familiarity theories: the single and the multiple. The single element familiarity theory is one of the most popular interpretations of the déjà vu phenomenon (Brown, 2004). Any single element in the present setting that is objectively familiar but not consciously recognized could provoke the déjà vu experience. The single element familiarity is misinterpreted to cover the entire setting or situation. Rickard cited the example of someone who walks into his friend's living room, where he has never been before, and there is a grandfather clock identical to one of his relative's clocks. He feels a very strong sense of familiarity but unable to locate the source, and so he mistakenly attributes the sense of familiarity to the whole situation. Seeing this will create a sense of familiarity without you being able to clearly identify where you know the thing or person from (Rickard, 2012). It also goes for multiple element familiarity but requiring more than one element as the case with the single element.

Rickard argues that there are two specific groups of people that are prone to déjà vu experiences: those who travel and those with a higher education. Novelty is one of the activating factors of déjà vu. When one experiences a new



place, the situation has a positive effect on the person. People who travel often see many new locations and experience new situations, ideas and routines. The frequency of déjà vu experiences is higher among people who travel due to this novelty in but interestingly enough the amount of travel does not seem to have any positive effect. Again, highly educated people have a higher reported frequency of déjà vu experiences. This could probably be explained by the higher amount of novelty through learning about new things, meeting new people in new settings and often work on new projects (Redgard, 2009: 38).

It would not be out of place to say that déjà vu goes beyond the layman's subjective experience as if I have already seen it before. It can also mean already heard, already met, already visited, and numerous other already experiences (Neppe, 2015). In déjà vu, recognition does not result from real familiarity and the past must be undefined. The moment the past can be defined, then it ceases to be déjà vu. It involves the subjective impression that the present experience has happened before even though it has not. This in line with the most accepted definition of déjà vu as given by Neppe.

### Reconciling Plato's Recollection Thesis with Déjà Vu

The focus of the theory of recollection dwells on the idea that one has some basic knowledge before birth. This knowledge comes to fore through dialectic reasoning as Plato would argue. Would it be in place to say that this knowledge can become the source of déjà vu? The need to raise this question becomes paramount because déjà vu is understood as the recollection of the ideas which represent reality in the form of prior knowledge. Does déjà vu align recollection of ideas which represent reality in the form of prior knowledge? Is it more than just a mind contraction, or trick of the memory collections or a moment of mere familiarity? As this paper proceeds, we shall be attempting to proffer answers to some of these questions raised above.

With the foregoing, we can perhaps say that déjà vu is a reaction to a familiar sensation or memory from an earlier experience, one that was not fully detailed, yet filled with enough elements to trigger the feeling of having been there before. As Rickard Redgård would argue, there are documented mentions of phenomena similar to the déjà vu concept of today reaching as far back as Aristotle, Plato and Pythagoras, but the phenomenon was not introduced to scientific research until early 19th century, led by scholars in France (Regard, 2009: 7).

As a matter of fact, reminiscence which happens to be another name for Plato's recollection thesis was also a name used for déjà vu.<sup>2</sup> If there are evidences of documented mentions of phenomena similar to déjà vu during the time of Plato and even before his life time, there is every possibility that the recollection thesis of Plato could have been influenced by this déjà vu phenomenon. A careful look at both theories would necessarily draw our attentions to the obvious similarities between them.

Following from the studies made so far on the Plato's theory of recollection and the déjà vu phenomenon, we have come to realise that they are subjective, mental and personal that need the influence of the memory. The two experiences need a catalyst to set up the reminiscence. As in the case of the recollection, it can be through dialectic reasoning that is carried out by an interlocutor or through direct contact with the object to be reminisced. In the case of déjà vu, the person who experiences it finds himself being confronted with the person or place or thing or the reality. There is the feeling of either weak or strong familiarity in both, which could be directly or indirectly, When they are subjected to scientific experimentation, the realities of both have been somewhat scientifically difficult to be proven.

Recollection thesis to be noted is a form of extreme rationalism which denies every possibility of empirical knowledge. If one takes it to heart, then it would cast a shadow of skepticism on empirical knowledge. It avers that every person possesses some innate ideas which can be given birth to through dialectical reasoning. The makes his recollection thesis not to advocate for any new knowledge but reminiscence. As it was stated, as long as the sight of one thing makes you think of another, whether it be similar or dissimilar, this must of necessity be recollection (Plato, 1941). This seems not to be completely different from déjà vu where a present situation or word or even a person could flash a light of similarity as if that might not be the first encounter. As déjà vu is empirically situated, Plato's extreme rationalism, despite his intention to gloss over empiricism cannot be completely freed of empirical nuance. It takes one empirical object to confirm the innate idea that eventually turns into knowledge.

## II. CONCLUSION

The variance in the mode in which recollection thesis and déjà vu are experienced can be taken as the consequents of the individual

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Rickard Redgard. P.7



perceptions and perspectives. Plato might not have used the word déjà vu in his *The Republic* or *Phaedo*, where his recollection theory was given so much popularity, but we cannot deny the fact that stance of déjà vu and recollection theses have so many similarities to be noticed. Déjà vu gives an impression that the same conditions and situations were part of a person's previous life which is difficult to remember, while recollection thesis avers that the person has some fundamental knowledge received before he was born and this knowledge can be argued to be the source of déjà vu. If this holds any philosophical water, we might be tempted to argue that recollection thesis and déjà vu could either be the same captured with different names or they are like Siamese twins that cannot be separated. There is the temptation to interpret déjà vu as the ideas or the forms which serve as the innate knowledge.

However, it must be noted that the reality of déjà vu continues to be an issue for discussion among the neuroscientists and psychiatrists on the ground that it is often misinterpreted as a form of disorder or mistake of the brain functions failing to do what they are supposed to do but we cannot deny the possibility of its occurrence. The same way too the recollection thesis of Plato has met with many intellectual twists when subjected to empirical or scientific confirmation. Be that as it may, if the realities of both déjà vu and theory of recollection are assumed to be confirmed, it would become somewhat difficult to separate the two. Based on the aforementioned, it would not be out of place to say that there is a blurry line between Plato's recollection thesis and the déjà vu phenomenon.

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