

1. 'People know heaps of things without being able to define the terms in which they express their knowledge, and in a given case examples may be more useful for elucidating the meaning of a general term than a formal definition.' Is Socrates then wrong to demand that Meno provide a formal definition of virtue?

In this essay I argue that it doesn't follow from the fact that we know 'heaps of things' without being able to define the terms in which we express our knowledge that Socrates is wrong to demand of Meno that he provide a formal definition of virtue before they enquire into whether or not virtue is teachable. In §1 of this essay, I outline the demand Socrates makes of Meno at the start of the dialogue, and argue, as the quote in the title suggests, that if the principle it rests upon is construed as an epistemological requirement on non-definitional knowledge, then the demand is mistaken. In §2, I argue that if the principle it rests upon is construed as a methodological, rather than epistemological principle, then the demand is much more reasonable in its context. Finally, in §3, I introduce the concept of an expert understanding of a topic, and argue that we can understand Socrates' demand as guiding Meno to pursue an expert understanding of virtue with him.

§1 - Socrates' demand for a formal definition of virtue

Plato's *Meno* begins with Meno asking Socrates if he can tell him whether or not virtue is teachable. Socrates' response to this question is to claim that he is himself entirely ignorant of what virtue is, and that until he and Meno can answer this question, they will be unable to learn whether or not virtue is teachable. For how, if they don't know 'what a thing is', Socrates asks, can they know 'what sort of a thing it is'. Socrates' response to Meno's question is thus to demand that Meno provide a definition of virtue, before they come to the question of its teachability. And the kind of definition that Socrates has in mind is a rather demanding one—he will not accept examples of virtue from Meno (a man's virtue being 'managing the affairs of his community', a woman's being to 'keep the indoor property safe and obey her husband'), but demands a definition that gives that essential feature of virtue that is shared by all its instances, and in virtue of which each instance of virtue is an instance of virtue (call this a real definition of virtue). One way of understanding Socrates' demand here is to understand him as subscribing to the following epistemological principle: if you do not know the real definition of some quality Q, then you cannot know anything about the properties of Q (call this the priority of definition, henceforth PD).

As the quote in the title observes, however, PD is an epistemological principle so demanding as to seem highly implausible. We know 'heaps of things without being able to define the terms in which [we] express [our] knowledge'. I am able to know, for example, that earthenware objects shatter when dropped from a height (that the quality of earthenware-ness has the property of making those objects that possess it fragile), even though I could not give anything approaching

a real definition of earthenware-ness. I am able to know this because I am familiar with examples of earthenware objects, familiar enough to know some of the properties they share. So everyday experience seems to tell against PD. We can know the properties of qualities without being able to give real definitions of those qualities. If this is so, however, it may seem that Socrates was mistaken in asking Meno to provide a definition of virtue before they attempted to answer the question of virtue's teachability. If PD is false, then no such definition is required to know whether virtue is teachable. They could have got to the answer Meno was seeking instead, for example, by considering examples of the virtuous, and seeing whether they were able to teach that quality to others (analogous to my considering examples of earthenware, and seeing whether they shatter when dropped).

§2 - Is the priority of definition an epistemological or methodological principle?

In what follows, however, I want to suggest two reasons why Socrates' demand for a real definition of virtue was more sensible than the above paragraph may make it seem. The first of these reasons is that even if PD is too strong as an epistemological principle, and rules out instances of knowledge (e.g., my knowledge about earthenware) that we want to hold on to as genuine cases of knowledge, PD might sometimes be a sensible methodological principle of enquiry. That is, even if knowledge of whether or not some quality is teachable doesn't *require* prior knowledge of the real definition of that quality, it might be that sometimes the most fruitful or most reliable way to obtain knowledge of the properties of a quality is via the real definition of that quality.

In particular, I want to suggest that when we want to know whether a particular quality has a particular property, but are unsure or lacking in examples of things with that quality, then going via the real definition of that quality might be a more reliable way of finding out whether it possesses that property. Why is this so? Because if we are unsure whether purported examples of, say, virtuous people really possess the quality of virtuousness, then using them to answer the question of virtue's teachability might very well lead us to have false beliefs about its teachability (if, for example, our purported examples of virtuous people weren't in fact virtuous, and so for that reason were unable to teach virtue). And there is textual evidence to support the claim that at the start of the *Meno*, Socrates believes himself to be in such a position with regards to examples of the virtuous. As noted above, he professes complete ignorance about virtue to Meno at 71a (he doesn't know 'anything at all' (*to parapan*) about virtue). Even if we take this to be a somewhat hyperbolic utterance, we might still take it as evidence that Socrates feels he is on uncertain territory on the subject of virtue, such that he would feel uncertain in his ability to identify exemplars of virtue reliably enough for this to be a good route to knowledge of whether or not virtue is teachable.

Moreover, it is significant that the property Meno wants to investigate with Socrates is teachability. For teachability is not the kind of property that we can readily attribute or withhold attributing to virtuousness by considering exemplars of virtue and their ability to pass on their excellence (even if we could reliably identify exemplars). For while finding an example of a virtuous person who was able to teach their virtue would tell us that virtue is teachable, finding

that no exemplars of virtue were able to teach their virtue to others (as Socrates will go on to suggest is the case later in the text) could at best allow us to make an abductive case for the conclusion that virtue isn't teachable—all it shows by itself is that virtue is not, at present, taught. And given what Socrates will go on to say in the *Meno* about the nature of learning as recollection, this would be a weak abductive case, given the existence of the alternative hypothesis that the exemplars of virtue were unable to teach their excellence because they were attempting to teach in the orthodox manner, rather than the maieutic style that Socrates will suggest is the only real way to teach another. Given Socrates' professed lack of confidence in his knowledge of virtue, therefore, and the difficulty in identifying whether or not virtue is teachable by considering exemplars of virtue, his adoption of PD as a methodological principle at the start of the dialogue seems wholly sensible.

§3 - The value of expert understanding

I want to suggest that there is a second reason that Socrates asks Meno for a definition of virtue at the start of the dialogue. And this second reason is that there is a valuable kind of knowledge that is best pursued (perhaps can only be pursued) via the kind of definition Socrates demands of Meno (i.e., a real definition of the object of enquiry). This valuable kind of knowledge is what we might call expert knowledge of a subject, the kind of deep, synoptic understanding of a topic that comes from understanding not just what is the case, but how and why things are the case. This expert understanding is a much more plausible candidate than everyday knowledge for something the possession of which requires you to be able to give a real definition of a concept. To continue with the example of virtue, we might expect the expert in virtue to be able to pick out the features of the virtuous that make them such, to be able to say, for any attribute, whether or not it may be correctly predicated of virtuousness, to be able to reliably make judgements about borderline cases between the virtuous and non-virtuous etc. These abilities, it seems plausible to suggest, someone could not have unless they had at their disposal a real definition of virtue.

Now as a defence of Socrates' demand for a real definition, this is incomplete unless we have reason to suppose that Socrates is interested in, or thinks it will be worthwhile for himself and Meno to pursue this kind of expert knowledge of the topic of virtue. After all, it is not an expert understanding of virtue that Meno comes to Socrates for, but simply an answer to the question of virtue's teachability. There is evidence in the text, however, to support the claim that Socrates was interested in Meno and himself pursuing this kind of understanding. This evidence comes at 86b of the text, where Socrates has just argued from the geometrical demonstration to the immortality of the soul. Here, he indicates he is not entirely confident in the argument he has just given, but what he is confident in is the proposition that 'as long as we think we should search for what we don't know we'll be better people—less faint-hearted and less lazy—than if we were to think that we had no chance of discovering what we don't know'. What Socrates is affirming here is the value of enquiry for its own sake. It is worth learning about a topic because the very process of learning makes us better, more virtuous people. Now if this is Socrates' view on the value of enquiry, then it should come as no surprise that he is interested in himself and Meno pursuing an expert understanding of the topic of virtue. The pursuit of an expert understanding, even if they could answer Meno's question without such an understanding, will

make them better people. Thus, Socrates' demand for a real definition of virtue from Meno at the beginning of the dialogue we can understand as Socrates taking the opportunity to transform Meno's question into an opportunity for the betterment of them both. And if this is so, then there is a point to the demand, even if definitional knowledge of virtue is not necessary for knowledge of whether virtue is teachable.

§4 - Conclusion

In conclusion, I have argued that there is a point to Socrates' demand that Meno give him a real definition of virtue before they enquire into virtue's teachability, even if we grant that PD is mistaken as an epistemological principle. I have given two reasons why this is so. In §2, I showed that while implausible as an epistemological principle, PD may be a sensible methodological principle of enquiry in certain circumstances, and suggested that (i) Socrates' professed ignorance about virtue and (ii) the nature of teachability make it a sensible methodological principle in the context of the *Meno*. Finally, in §3, I suggested that definitional knowledge is an important component of an expert understanding of a topic, and gave textual evidence for the claim that Socrates would have been interested in himself and Meno pursuing such an expert understanding, even if it wasn't necessary for answering Meno's original question.

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3. Is there a better solution to Meno's paradox than the theory of recollection?

At 80d of Plato's *Meno*, Meno, frustrated at Socrates' refutations of the candidate definitions of virtue he has just offered, presents a challenge to the possibility of enquiry—how can you search for what you don't know if you don't know what it is at all that you are searching for? In seeming response to this challenge, Socrates introduces the doctrine of recollection (henceforth DR), the claim that all learning is in fact recollection of what the immortal soul has previously learned. It is this, he claims, that makes enquiry possible, since 'the search, the process of learning' is revealed to be in fact 'nothing but recollection'. In this essay, I argue (§1) that there is a better solution to Meno's paradox than DR if we understand Meno's paradox to be the reformulation of Meno's challenge at 80d given by Socrates at 80e. This better solution only requires the making of a distinction between two senses in which we might know what we are searching for. I then argue (§2) that it is a mistake to understand DR as a response to the problem Socrates formulates at 80e, and that it is in fact a response to a challenge to enquiry raised by Meno at 80d but ignored by Socrates in the reformulation at 80e, giving textual and philosophical evidence in support of this claim. Finally, in §3, I suggest that there is no obvious solution to the challenge that DR is intended to meet, such that when introducing DR, Socrates wasn't merely overlooking a better, less metaphysically extravagant solution.

§1 - Meno's paradox and the better solution

I want to begin this essay by distinguishing between two challenges to enquiry that are raised shortly before Socrates introduces DR at 81b. There is the puzzle posed by Socrates at 80e (henceforth P_1) as a reformulation of Meno's challenge at 80d, and a distinct problem raised by Meno as part of that challenge at 80d, and yet left out of Socrates' reformulation (henceforth P_2):

P_1 : 'It's impossible for a man to search either for what he knows or for what he doesn't... he wouldn't be searching for what he knows... and he can't search for what he doesn't know either, since he doesn't even know what it is he's going to be searching for.'

P_2 : 'How will you search for something, Socrates, when you don't know what it is at all... even if you come right up against it, how will you know that it's the unknown thing you're looking for'.

Of the two, only P_1 can, without significant distortion, be understood as the reference of 'Meno's paradox'. It, and not P_2 , can be naturally restated as a paradox (which I understand here as an argument from apparently acceptable premises, by apparently acceptable reasoning, to an unacceptable conclusion), as follows:

- (1) For any object of enquiry O , either I know or do not know O ;
- (2) If I know O , I cannot search for O ;
- (3) To search for something, I must know what I am searching for;
- (4) So, if I don't know O , I cannot search for O ;
- (5) So, for all O , I cannot search for O .

Putting aside for now the question of how DR is supposed to engage with P_1 as formulated here, it is clear that the above paradox can be resolved without appeal to DR. For the argument goes wrong when (4) is inferred from (3), which is ambiguous between a weaker and a stronger claim, depending on which of two senses of knowing 'what I am searching for' we understand to be in play. The weaker, true claim is that to search for something, the target of your search must be specified in some way. The stronger, false claim is that to search for something, you must know what (if anything) satisfies the specification of your target. On the weaker, true reading of (3), (4) doesn't follow: I can possess beliefs about O that enable me to specify the target of my enquiry without knowing O . If, for example, I want to know who the tallest head of state is, all I need to begin my search are beliefs like 'the tallest head of state is the individual Wikipedia names as the tallest head of state, 'the tallest head of state is the individual my knowledgeable friend John will name as the tallest head of state' etc. What I don't need to know to begin my search is which individual satisfies these descriptions. We can resolve P_1 without appeal to the DR, therefore. And given that the solution I have just outlined is far less extravagant than the DR, requiring us neither to radically rethink our understanding of how learning proceeds, nor posit the existence of immortal souls, P_1 can not only be resolved without DR, but is better resolved without it.

§2 - Is the DR a response to Meno's paradox?

If we understand 'Meno's paradox' in the title to be referring to P_1 , however, as I just suggested is most natural, then there is strong evidence to think that DR is not, as the title implies, a response to Meno's paradox (such that the existence of the simple solution to the paradox outlined above does not undermine Socrates' reason for introducing DR). Rather, it is best understood as a response to P_2 , the part of Meno's challenge at 80d left out of Socrates' reformulation at 80e. Textual evidence for this claim can be found, firstly, at 86c, where Socrates, concluding his discussion of DR, suggests that the challenge to enquiry DR has shown to be unfounded might otherwise have led us to believe that 'we had no chance of discovering what we don't know and that there's no point in even searching for it'. If DR is a response to P_1 , as Dominic Scott points out, then this remark is puzzling. For P_1 doesn't conclude that searching is pointless, but rather that searching is impossible, that it cannot even get started. It would be very strange to describe something that could never get going as pointless; the charge of pointlessness is much more naturally taken to be the charge that enquiry begins, and can seem to progress, but can never come to a fruitful conclusion. Nor can this remark be dismissed as a careless mistake of Socrates'. For he says something similar at 81d, where he suggests that DR makes successful enquiry possible, so long as one has 'the fortitude not to give up the search'. This remark, like that at 86c, suggests that Socrates understands DR as a response to a problem concerning the potentially interminable nature of enquiry, not its very possibility, and therefore not as a response to P_1 .

P_2 , on the other hand, is explicitly a challenge to the possibility of enquiry ever coming to fruition, and reading DR as a response to P_2 enables us to account for the otherwise odd remarks Socrates makes at 81d and 86c. Not only does seeing DR as a response to P_2 fit better with the text, it is the more philosophically charitable interpretation. For it is unclear how our possessing latent knowledge of the targets of our enquiry (as we do if DR is true) is supposed to resolve P_1 . As latent knowledge, for the purposes of starting enquiry, it seems no better than no knowledge at all. To put the same point another way, we might simply modify premise (3) to read 'to search for something, I must know explicitly what I am searching for' and modify (4) accordingly, without making either less apparently acceptable. It is much clearer how DR might be intended as a solution to P_2 : if we come across the target of our search, and have latent knowledge of it, then there may be an experience of something like recognition that alerts us to our search having been successful (akin to the experience we have when we come across a place or object we were familiar with as a child and have since forgotten, and recognise the object or place as the one from our childhood). There are good textual and philosophical reasons, therefore, to view DR as a response to P_2 , not P_1 , such that there being a much simpler response to P_1 than DR does not undermine Socrates' reason for introducing it.

§3 - Is there a better solution to the challenge at 80d?

In this final section of the essay, I want to briefly consider whether there is a better solution than DR to P_2 , such that DR is a superfluous response even to the challenge it was really intended to meet. To begin, we can restate the challenge of P_2 as follows: if we know nothing at all about the

target of our enquiry, then how, if we were to come across it during our search, would we be able to correctly identify it as our target?

One obvious response to this challenge is that we will be able to correctly identify the target of our search if the beliefs that we used to specify the target of our search were true beliefs. If they were, then when we come across something that meets the specification of that target, our search will come to a fruitful conclusion. This response is too quick however, at least in the context of the search for a definition of virtue that Socrates and Meno are engaged in. Suppose we have correct beliefs about virtue that enable us to begin a search for a definition, and that this search culminates in finding something that matches the beliefs that determined the direction of enquiry. What warrants us in then claiming that we've discovered what virtue is, as opposed to just discovering *something* that matches our beliefs about virtue?

The natural reply here is that we will be warranted in making the former claim if the beliefs that provided the specification of our target were not just merely true beliefs, but instances of knowledge (and were thus warranted). But note that the challenge raised by P_2 is the challenge of explaining how enquiry can come to fruition when we know *nothing at all* about the target of our enquiry. Thus, a response to P_2 needs to show how we can obtain knowledge of the definition of virtue when all we have to go on are beliefs about virtue that are not instances of knowledge. It needs to show, in other words, that we can escape the circle of belief described in the previous paragraph without prior knowledge of instances or attributes of virtue. Now I don't want to claim here that there is no better solution to this problem than DR, but if there is a better solution, it is at least far from obvious what this solution is. Thus, we should be sympathetic to Socrates' introduction of DR at 81b. It is not the case that he simply overlooked an erroneous piece of reasoning in the challenge raised at 80e. Rather, he was attempting to respond to a much deeper challenge raised at 80d, to which there is no similarly straightforward response.

§4 - Conclusion

In conclusion, I have argued (§1) that there is a better solution to Meno's paradox than DR, when Meno's paradox is understood to be the challenge to enquiry formulated by Socrates at 80e. I then showed (§2) that there is good evidence, both textual and philosophical, to understand DR as a response not to the challenge to enquiry at 80e, but a distinct challenge raised by Meno at 80d. Finally (§3), I suggested that there is no obviously better response to this second challenge, such that we should be sympathetic to Socrates' introduction of DR at 81b; he did not just fail to make the simple distinction between the two senses of knowing 'what I am searching for' that is required to resolve Meno's paradox.

Word count: 1974

12. 'Marriage is the only actual bondage known to our law. There remain no legal slaves, except the mistress of every house.' (MILL) How does Mill defend this claim? To what use does he put it in the argument of *The Subjection of Women*?

In this essay I reconstruct Mill's case in support of the claim that the legal position of the married woman in Victorian society is comparable to that of a slave, and then situate this comparison within Mill's project in *The Subjection of Woman* of casting the patriarchal domination of women as an anomaly in a history of moral progress that has otherwise left behind the notion that legal and social arrangements should be determined by the capacity of different parties to exercise force over the other. In §1, I draw out three similarities between the legal position of married women and that of slaves that Mill puts to use in defending the claim in the title. Then, in §2, I draw upon remarks Mill makes in Chapter I of the text to paint a picture of the audience Mill takes himself to be addressing, and explain why, given this audience and their self-conception, the slavery comparison is a powerful component of the argument of *The Subjection of Women*.

§1 - Mill's defence of the slavery comparison

In Chapter II of *The Subjection of Women*, John Stuart Mill criticises the 'conditions... annexed to the marriage contract' by Victorian society and compares the position of the married woman to that of a slave. In defence of this comparison, Mill picks out several similarities between the legal standing of the married woman in Victorian society and that of the legal slave. The first and perhaps the most significant of these similarities is that in Victorian society, the married woman was not, in the eyes of the law, a person distinct from the person of her husband. This doctrine, known as the doctrine of spousal unity, meant that in practise, the legal personality of the wife was subsumed in that of her husband. As Mill puts it, the two are called one person in law 'for the purpose of inferring that whatever is hers is his, but the parallel inference is never drawn that whatever is his is hers'. The husband alone, under the doctrine of spousal unity, represented the single person of husband and wife in legal matters. He alone had legal rights to any earnings that came into the household (be they his or hers), and he alone had rights to the guardianship of their children should they come to live separately.

A second point of comparison between the married woman in Victorian society and the legal slave that Mill is keen to stress in Chapter II is that like a slave to their master, the labour of the wife, both emotional and physical, had to be at all times at their husband's beck and call. The Victorian wife was never 'off duty', nor had a 'fixed task' to complete after which they could pursue their own interests and projects, but was their husband's attendant 'at all hours and all minutes'. This extended to the wife being unable to refuse to her husband at any time 'the last familiarity'—marital rape was not recognised as an offence in Victorian society. Indeed, under the doctrine of spousal unity, there could be no such thing, husband and wife being, in the eyes of the law, one person (such that there was no possibility of the husband being prosecuted for offenses against his wife; this also meant domestic assault went largely unchecked by law). The autonomy, safety and the dignity of the wife in Victorian society were therefore at all times

threatened by their legal relationship to their spouse, just as those of the slave are by their legal relationship to their master.

A final point of comparison that completes Mill's analogy between the slave and the married woman is the inescapability of their position. Just as enslaved people, in the majority of cases, were unable to obtain their freedom from their masters (either because there was no legal route to their freedom, or because they had no real chance of buying their freedom) so too the wife was unable to escape their legal subordination to their husband. She could not obtain a legal separation from him, Mill points out, except in cases of the worst kinds of abuse, or unless her husband deserted her for another woman. And she had no real possibility of living apart from her husband without a legal separation. Not only could he, with the backing of the law, employ force to 'compel her to return' to him, he could also seize any property she obtained for the purposes of living apart from him, such that she would be forced back to him if she did not wish to face total ruin. In these three respects, then, Mill argues that the married woman in Victorian society was a legal slave: she was denied her own legal personhood, expected at all times to put up with the demands and abuse of her husband, and unable to escape from this position of servitude. Free to do with her what he wanted, the married woman in Victorian society was, Mill suggests, in effect if not in the wording of the law, little more than her husband's property.

§2 - Locating the slavery comparison in the argument of *The Subjection of Women*

To understand Mill's use of the comparison between the legal standing of the slave and the married woman, it is important to first understand that in *The Subjection of Women*, Mill understands himself as addressing an audience who have a particular self-conception as modern, as liberal, and as having rejected the arbitrary exercise of power as the primary determinant of social and legal relations between individuals and groups. This is evident in the way he sets up, in Chapter I of the text, the discussion that will follow. Throughout the first chapter, he is at pains to emphasise that the world in which he and his readers live is one in which 'the law of the strongest seems to be entirely abandoned', and in which there is a presumption in favour of fair and equal social and political arrangements. He takes it as given that the burden of proof, thanks to the 'improvement of the moral sentiments of mankind', now lies on the side of 'those who are against liberty', such that any restriction on the freedoms of a particular individual or group must be justified by appeal to the general good.

Because he takes himself to be addressing an audience who have this particular self-conception, Mill adopts the strategy in *The Subjection of Women* of pointing out, as strikingly as he can, how much of an anomaly the social and legal subordination of women in Victorian society is in a pattern of social progress that has otherwise been moving towards the basing of social relations on principles of liberty and equality and away from the basing of social relations on custom, on might, and claims about what is the 'natural' place in society of particular groups. As Mill himself puts it in Chapter I, 'the social subordination of women thus stands out as an isolated fact in modern social institutions; a solitary breach of what has become their fundamental law'.

It is in service of this aim that Mill employs the slavery comparison in Chapter II, to emphasise, by bringing out its 'true character', just how starkly the legal position of the married woman in Victorian society is a betrayal of his readers' professed commitment to liberty and equality. Slavery serves as a paradigm case of a social institution founded on that outdated principle, 'the law of the strongest'. Though it became 'regularised' and recognised in law, slavery began as just an 'affair of force' between slave and master, just as the legal subordination of women in Victorian society, Mill contends, has its roots in the inferior strength of women that enabled men to hold them in a 'state of bondage'. Moreover, it is not just in its origins but also in its nature that slavery is a betrayal of the values Mill takes his audience to see themselves as possessing—holding a person to be the property of another is as clear a violation of a presumption in favour of liberty as there can be. Thus, by comparing the position of the married woman to the slave, Mill forcefully exposes the hypocrisy of the reader who would abhor the practice of keeping slaves, and think himself modern and a man of a more advanced moral age for doing so, but has no complaint about the legal standing of women. Furthermore, given that in the case of the slavery of the male sex, its spurious claims to 'rightness' and 'social necessity' have been exposed as just that, and the institution abolished, by comparing the position of the married woman to that of the slave, Mill is making the point that patriarchal domination stands alone in Victorian society as an institution so unjust in its origins and its nature. Other institutions alike in their morally salient features have been cast aside, Mill points out, placing the burden on the unpersuaded reader to find some distinguishing feature of patriarchal domination that can justify it, without also justifying the abandoned practice of the slavery of the male sex.

§3 - Conclusion

To conclude, in this essay I have reconstructed Mill's argument for the claim that the married woman in Victorian society is the last remaining legal slave (§1), noting three points of comparison between their positions that Mill puts to use in defence of this thesis: (i) the married woman is denied her legal personhood, (ii) the labour, both emotional and physical, of the married woman has to be at all times at the call of her husband, and (iii) the positions of the married woman and the slave are alike in their inescapability. Then (§2), I situated Mill's comparison of the legal positions of the married woman and the slave within his general project in *The Subjection of Woman* of casting the patriarchal domination of women as an aberration in a history of moral progress towards a just and free society, an outmoded relic of a previous age in which the now abandoned 'law of the strongest' was the fundamental principle governing social and political arrangements.

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