

TMA 02

Does the *Meno* establish that virtue can be taught? Or that it can't be? Or neither?

I. Introduction and context: 2037 of 2000 words

The author:

the early dialogues¹ are Plato's invention to explore questions of goodness and excellence. Using Socrates and other historical interlocuters, Plato seeks unitary definitions of the essential nature of human goodness' such as courage, piety, wisdom and virtue, in abstract rather than concrete terms.

The *Meno*'s² theme is virtue which allows Socrates to reflect on the nature of both virtue and knowledge. Other early dialogues seeking similar unitary definitions generally end without a firm conclusion.

Plato, once a student of Socrates, also argues the power of the Socratic method, the elenchus, friendly question and answer sessions with an interlocuter. This is in opposition to the oratorical style of the Sophists, like Gorgias, more concerned with rhetoric than truth.

Knowledge and learning:

Meno's question simpliciter states the 'pedagogical triad' reflecting an ongoing 'long-standing pedagogical debate' on the relative contribution of 'nature, teaching and practice' in accounting for goodness' such as virtue, [Scott, D., \(2006,pp.16-17\)](#). Scott interprets practice as repeated doing, a way of learning how, which is indeed how we learn to drive, swim or become a philosopher.

Society and culture:

As a reader I find the dialogue form allows Plato to better engage our attention, iterating the same points to drive the message home, and opining on the character of the speakers that would have been well known to the audience. *Meno*, of noble birth, exhibits the characteristics of male privilege and clan allegiance, in line with the contemporary social

¹ A Dictionary of Philosophy, pps.268-272

² Sophie Grace Chappell translation (The Open University, 2017a)

norms. his definitions of virtue are grounded in these social inequities. Anytus is teased for having a closed mind towards the Sophists and bombarded with references to virtuous parents and their lacklustre offspring.

With these caveats in mind we can interrogate the text.

II. Ontology

Socrates seeks a definition of virtue

Meno asks how virtue might be acquired: through learning, practice, human nature or otherwise [70a](#). Socrates replies that we must first know 'what virtue essentially is' before we can know how it is acquired, [71b](#). When asked for a definition of virtue, Meno gives the first of three definitions each in turn found wanting by Socrates.

1. Meno's first definition of virtue [71c](#) is grounded in civic, social and household roles and duties: for a man to 'run his city's affairs' to 'benefit of his friends and harm his enemies'. Other members of the household and society have their own particular virtuous roles to carry out, for a woman 'to keep the house well'

This is rejected on the basis that these virtues are contingent on gender or social position and represent a 'whole swarm' of virtues [72b](#) not virtue as a unitary abstract concept. According to [Scott,R.,\(2006,pp.24\)](#), Meno's swarm of virtues is an example of Gorgias approach of 'adornment' where he enumerates the virtues of different people separately.

Socrates, through the analogies of health and strength questions tries to lead Meno to more general construct of virtue.

Socrates spells it out, to be good and manage well requires the virtues of temperance and justice, these 'acquired virtues' are not dependent on social role or gender. Virtue is the same quality in whoever is virtuous, in whoever manages their duties with the virtues of temperance and justice. They are good in the same way. Meno agrees, but doesn't quite get it even while he agrees with the conclusion of the argument that 'all humans' can be 'good' in the same way 'when they acquire the same virtues' [73c](#).

Socrates has given definitions of both good and virtue in terms of subsidiary goods, viz. temperance, justice and perhaps others, but not a single definition. This explication that takes us no further in Meno's quest for how virtue, or virtues, are acquired, but it is a clarification of Socrates' quest for a unitary definition of virtue.

2. Meno's second definition 'the capacity to rule over other people', 73d meets the unitary requirement and highlights his egotistic character. However, Meno is a man of his time, Weiss, R., (2001, pp.25-26), a chauvinist, unable to comprehend that virtue might apply to women or slaves, his duty: always to rule in the interests of himself and his clan.

Socrates begins the process of driving Meno into contradiction by asking if this means ruling justly 73e, which Meno concedes since 'justice is virtue', still Meno does not quite get the difference between justice as virtue or a virtue. This calls up other unitary analogies from Socrates, of colour versus a colour and shape versus a shape.

All the while Socrates knows what genre of argumentation convinces Meno, the high-flown poetic answers in the style of Gorgias, of intrinsic effluences that fill everything that exists, 'colour is such an effluence of shapes', 76d. Meno will stay if Socrates answers thus 77a.

3. Meno's third definition attempts an 'unfragmented unity' as required by Socrates, 77b: 'someone who, desiring beautiful things, has the capacity to get hold of them', 77a. This again reflects on Meno's character and general struggle with virtue.

Socrates takes the matter in hand and using the elenchus process concludes that 'virtue is wisdom...or some part of wisdom', 98a. This conclusion is reached by two circuitous routes that equate virtue with benefits and wisdom with beneficial. The LHS of this equation derives from 'knowledge' or 'something else', 87c and the RHS from how good natural properties of the human soul are used for the good.

Having reached this parlous conclusion Socrates maintains that if it is correct 'then it is not by nature that the good are good', 89a 'Then is it by teaching?' 89b. This leaves the possible acquisition of virtue, by practice or otherwise, unaddressed.

In summary Socrates has in part answered Meno's question, virtue is **not** acquired through nature.

III. Epistemology

Paradox: 'But Socrates – how will you search for something, when you do not know at all what that something is?'

MM McCabe (The Open University,2017b) argues that Meno's paradox is a 'pivotal' moment that allows Socrates to transform the original question of how virtue is acquired into an epistemological question on knowledge. This is after all what interests Plato.

Meno's disputatious (eristic) paradox presents knowledge as all or nothing, to know or not to know. But this is refuted by the episode with the slave boy, who has a little knowledge, he knows how to double the length of a line. When coaxed he uses this knowledge to generate squares of area 4 and 16 units by doubling the length of the sides. He does not yet know how to construct an interim square area of 8 units. With gentle questioning the slave boy 'learns' or as Socrates puts it the soul 'recollects' how generate this square of 8. With further consolidation the slave boy will not only know how to solve such problems and will know that he knows how, 81a-86c.

In questioning the slave boy, we recognise this as a pedagogic technique, leading the student to discover new knowledge, building on previous taught knowledge to achieve mastery of more and more complex problems.

Socrates concedes that 'recollection is what people call learning',81e and one should 'boldly try to find' out by recollection, 'anything you don't now happen to know' 86b, demonstrating that enquiry for its own sake is worthwhile, so refuting the paradox. Scott, *ibid*,pps.80-83 agrees the way to 'disarm the eristic dilemma' is to differentiate between full knowledge of the subject and partial grasp of the subject.

Scott considers recollection is used as a method of keeping Meno interested with its reference to 'priests and priestesses' and 'godlike poets' 81b. Certainly, Meno is impressed with arguments grounded in the immortal soul and recollection, 'I can't tell you how much I like what you are saying',86b

In summary, Meno's paradox is the 'pivotal moment' where the focus moves from definitions to epistemological issues of knowledge and teaching.

The method of hypothesis

Socrates and Meno are agreed, the paradox is refuted, together they will enquire into things they 'don't know', specifically 'what virtue is?' 86c.

Meno would still like his original 'how' question answered, so Socrates resolves this by posing a hypothesis partly in terms of acquisition, 'if virtue is in the category of knowledge' then it will be acquired by teaching, if virtue is not knowledge then it will not be so acquired, 87c. This parlous hypothesis leaves aside the acquisition of knowledge by other than teaching, whatever teaching may entail, and excludes discovery or enlightenment.

Socrates argues that virtue is 'some part of wisdom' 89a and wisdom is good, so virtue is good but 'not by nature', for if by nature then infants would be earmarked to serve the city. Hence if they are good 'then it is by teaching' 89b.

Having established virtue must be taught Socrates immediately seeks empirical evidence to support the conclusion, 'wouldn't we be right to imagine that if there are no teachers or learners of something, that thing can't be taught?' 89e

The dialogue with Anytus:

This is an opportunity for Socrates to further progress the problem of identifying teachers of wisdom while at the same time characterising many of the scions of the 'best families' as sorely lacking the wisdom and virtue of their fathers. This may well describe Anytus, a 'mediocre son of a wonderful father, [The Open University \(2017b, footnote 7\)](#).

Socrates asks Anytus, who should Meno seek out to teach wisdom and virtue, 91a. This is an opportunity to portray Anytus as small minded, unwilling or unable to entertain the possibility of Sophists as teachers of wisdom, well respected and worthy their fees.

Anytus' opinion is not based in any personal experience of Sophists, it is clearly second-hand knowledge. For Socrates it is not true opinion, since he has personal experience of Sophists such as Protagoras, whom he considers a wise and successful teacher of wisdom, 92a. But Anytus is of fixed opinion and insists that Meno need only keep company 'with any of the best kind of people in Athens', 92e.

This section of the dialogue certainly allows Plato, once removed, to negatively characterise Anytus and many of his contemporaries, for the audience's delight.

Knowledge and true belief or true opinion

Socrates continues with the epistemological question, what counts as knowledge.

Socrates argues metaphorically that if someone really knows the road to Larisa, '*has a right opinion*', 97a, and if this is passed on to others, then they know as much as their teacher. So right opinion is no less helpful to us than knowledge in guiding human action 'aright'.

But what if certain roads become impassable or infested with banditry, what if 'true opinions' shift, 97c, then they will be as useful as knowledge of the geography and politics of the region. So true opinions need to be bound 'with an account of why they are true' 98a to remain that will always guide us 'aright'.

Socrates claims to know few things but does know that knowledge and true opinion are not the same thing, 98b.

Arguing that neither true belief nor knowledge comes to humans by nature 98d, and there are no teachers of virtue 98e, Socrates concludes that true opinion must be a gift of the gods bestowed on renowned statesmen and politicians. 'wouldn't it be fitting to call people 'divine' when they have no understanding (nous), yet get all sorts of important speeches and actions just right? 99c.

Conclusion

The paradox is refuted by the rightness of searching out knowledge for its own sake. *If* virtue is knowledge it will be acquired actively and not by human nature. The method of hypothesis argues that if virtue is knowledge it will be teachable and confirms that it is not part of human nature.

If the hypothesis is correct it confirms that virtue can be acquired through learning if suitable teachers can be found. If we include practice as a form of learning it can be acquired through practice.

The dialogue with Anytus offers the doubtful alternative of acquisition by birth into one of the best families.

If no teachers can be found, since neither true opinion or knowledge comes by nature then it must be a gift of the gods.

Subject to certain hypotheses, virtue it seems can be acquired through learning, practice, or otherwise, but not by nature.

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