

Meno Notes

Context:

Meno is visiting Athens from Thessaly and staying with one of Socrates' accusers. No other context as to setting is given. Plato's *Meno* primarily concerns the question of whether or not virtue can be taught or whether it comes by practice, birth and nature, or some other way.

Socrates employs Meno's slave in the dialog to show how he is able to learn geometry with no training but rather through his capacity to reason. This opens a question about the soul and memory. Do we know the answers to all of our questions but need to have our memories jarred to help us remember?

Socrates ends in a different way from other dialogues by becoming a lecturer and taking two opposing positions to the issue. 1) Virtue is knowledge and therefore teachable. 2) Virtue is god-granted right opinion and therefore not teachable.

The idea that theoretical knowledge is recollection will appear again in *Phaedo*, where it becomes more fully connected to Platonic Forms.

Again, Platonic Forms are sought through philosophical method of question and answer and reasoning through the situation logically. Be attentive to the ways Socrates explains how this is supposed to work as discourse among friends and not enemies.

Covering the Dialogue

The dialogue opens with Meno asking Socrates outright, can virtue be taught?

Socrates is delighted. He points to the influence of Gorgias on Meno's lover, the king (Aleuadae family) Aristippus.

Now, we know this is not without Socratic irony. We have to be careful when Socrates is praising someone.

What is developing in terms of critical theory and thinking is a rule that praising or blaming someone results in rhetoric as opposed to philosophy.

Ironically, then, Socrates says that Gorgias taught Meno and the people of Thessaly to give bold answers based on their wisdom. But here in Athens, there is a "dearth of wisdom." So, why don't you teach us, Meno?

Socrates says he doesn't know what virtue is, so how can he know if it can be taught until he knows what it is.

Meno says, but didn't you speak to Gorgia when he was in Athens and learn it from him. Socrates answers, I met him but do not altogether remember what he thought then...maybe you can jar my memory, let us leave Gorgias out of it and teach me yourself what you know virtues is.

Compare Meno's initial answer to *Euthyphro*.

Virtue is particular to the situation and the person and there are many different kinds of virtue, differing by gender and age and social status: "There is virtue for every action and every age."

"a man's virtue consists in being able to manage public affairs and in doing so to benefit his friends and harm his enemies and to be careful that no harm comes to himself"

We then get the analogy with bees.

Is there one health for men and one for women? Strength?

We can see here that Socrates is pushing toward the formal conception of things, a transcendent quality. Philosophical method.

Socrates shifts Meno's earlier definition by management and rule to the theme of justice and fairness. Notice that Socrates is being more directive already than in *Euthyphro*.

"So, all human beings are good in the same way, for they become good by acquiring the same qualities." So, what links goodness and virtue across all categories?

Meno: "What else but to be able to rule over people, if you are seeking one description to fit all."

Notice that Socrates encourages this kind of answer, even if he is going to refute it.

Refutation is not about simply "taking down" someone else's argument. We are always revising our arguments to make them stronger, but we can only do that if we *posit* something to begin with. In philosophical method and argumentation, this is what we mean by "positioning something" or our use of "positive" not as "thumbs up or "I like it," but rather that this argument has "substance."

Oppositely, negation or refutation is not about disliking something.

Negation in argumentation is the friction that creates the movement of the dialogue. It is therefore fundamental to *dialectical thinking*.

You've probably already noticed that Socrates is highly concerned with definitions.

We can also see in formal logical syllogisms the same process of negation at work.

Premise 1: All men are mortal.

Term 'A', 'men' = term 'B', "mortal, or the quality of being mortal or having a finite life"

Notice that the predicate adjective sometimes leaves out an implied noun here, but generally, sentences work in terms of "subject-verb-object," or if we are speaking of cases, "nominative-verb-accusative."

Premise 2: Socrates is (was) a man.

Term 'C', Socrates is introduced and equated with the singular form of term 'A',

Conclusion / Synthesis: Therefore, Socrates is (was) mortal.

In the synthesis, term 'C' fuses with term 'B' while canceling out or "annihilating" term 'A'. We can now proceed by using this statement as a new premise or thesis, followed by another antithesis and hope to find a new synthesis.

This is dialectal thinking, illustrating how formal logic works. "Dialectical" comes from Greek and means "through words."

End of Day 1

Meno Day 2

Socrates latches on to a consistent element in Meno's depiction of virtue between men and women. Management united them in their "rule" over respective spheres but having power over others will not work for the child or the slave.

This is subtly a critique of aristocratic notions that some people are better than others simply by their birth. I am not saying Socrates, or Plato, doesn't have aristocratic allegiances. Remember Plato and Socrates had a relative who was one of the thirty tyrants in Athens after the war. Still, we want to think about class and slaves in particular, since slavery will come up over and over.

Meno digresses to many virtues again, so Socrates tries again, this time with a discussion of shapes and color.

Notice that Socrates is again taking the lead and being more assertive in proposing possible answers here, as he does with color.

Shape, says Socrates, "is that which alone of existing things follows color."

This frustrates Meno, who wants to take color out of the answer. Socrates then notes a kind of friend-enemy distinction. The answer to an enemy is “that is my assertion, it is your job to refute it.” But if they are friends, their tone should be gentler and “proper to discussion. By this I mean that the answers must not only be true, but in terms admittedly known to the questioner.

Meno agrees but then proceeds to turn the color question back onto Socrates. In other words, he does the opposite of what they were just talking about in terms of generosity of spirit in dialectical collaboration.

There may be some sexual tension here. Socrates comments on Meno’s good looks. Calling him a tyrant who wants to control discussion.

But this also allows Socrates to take the lead in teaching.

He quotes Pindar: “Color is an effluvium from shapes which fits the sight and is perceived.”

Meno likes this answer but Socrates says he likes it because of its theatricality.

We then get mention of the mysteries.

Kykeon

Eleusis, Soma *Rig Veda*

Meno is enticed.

He offers a new definition of virtue: “to find joy in the beautiful things and have power.”

Then we get the discussion about good and bad things and desire.

After back and forth regarding desiring good and bad, Socrates again latches on to the common element: Desire.

“The desiring part of this statement is common to everybody, and one man is no better than another in this?”

Virtue for Meno is then “the power of securing good things.” Particularly money

They add by justice or moderation.

This creates two different virtues because “failing to

Deduction

Logical fallacies
Epistemology

Souls and Recollection – learning as recalling.

“Does he speak Greek?”

“You see, Meno, that I am not teaching the boy anything, but all I do is question him. And now he thinks he knows the length of the line on which an eight-foot figure is based.”

Socrates questions the slave up to his limit. Socrates asks if this is a benefit or harm. Meno says a benefit.

Socrates notes that the benefit comes from reaching the point of perplexity and knowing we do not know something.

He goes on questioning and the slave shows understanding. He seems to already have known and

Virtue = capacity for reason or logos