Lecture 3.1: *Meno*: Knowledge, Recollection and the Teachability of Virtue (Or: Making the Punishment fit the Interlocutor’s Crime)

My sources: Irwin, Plato’s Ethics
Nehamas, Virtues of Authenticity
Vlastos

Two words here that are richly problematic: episteme (knowledge); and arête (virtue).

Arête: this term is translated throughout our text as ‘virtue.’ Another frequent translation is ‘excellence.’ Consider it equivalent to “success in action,” achieving, through our actions, the things commonsensically considered valuable: principles of good management; behavior agreed by your peers to be proper; a quality, or set of qualities, that makes something outstanding in its group; (horses have arête in the Iliad; fertile soil has arête in Hesiod); Nehamas terms it justified notability or good reputation.

Episteme, knowledge: this is equally multiform. It ranges from a general understanding of how a word is used, what it is conventionally considered to apply to, to very precise, deductive, mathematical certainty. It is the equivocation on the variously stringent senses of the application of this term that makes this dialogue so frustrating and provocative, really. It is contrasted with ignorance, but also with true belief, correct opinions. Socrates makes a great fuss over definition; you have for-sure-knowledge if you have a definition, in his stringent sense, of the nature, essence, quality-common-to-all-the-things-correctly-called-by-the-name; but at the same time he does not, in this dialogue, want to exclude all the less certain epistemological states, either. The Vlastos article on the website talks about a strong sense and a weaker sense of knowing—infallible and fallible knowledge. I know I locked the door when I left the house this morning; because I always do. I believe P on evidence Q; P is true; Q is true; Q is reasonable evidence for Q—but Q could be true, and P false. It’s not a logical entailment.

Teaching, too, gets called into question in this dialogue, in an interesting way, as we will see. We’ve already discussed that, a little bit, when we talked last Tuesday about Socratic elenchus—the Socratic method that consists essentially not in handing the student the answer on a platter, making you come to ME for MY truth, the truth that I call mine—but in eliciting from the interlocutor what HE believes, and testing it for consistency with his other beliefs.

The dialogue: The question with which the dialogue opens, asked by Meno, is whether virtue can be taught. [=Can one be taught what it takes to have a justifiably high reputation among ones peers?]

Well—as first approximation: I dunno. Who are you? Who are your peers? What is the arena in which you wish to excel? What are the values, skills, the capacities and competences, which count in that area?

This is really a question beset by so many indeterminacies of situation that it’s hard to imagine a good answer to it; so Socrates, in Act I of the dialogue, gets elenchic: I don’t know, Meno! And I don’t know anybody that does. What do YOU think it is?

[Structure of the dialogue: Dramatically, this is a 5-act play: see the outline on the website. We have two intermissions, a digression; a play within a play; and a brief intervention from the audience.]
As an interlocutor, Meno is generally considered by the various fans of the dialogues as a B-character. He is variously considered lazy and evasive; maybe even a little dim; unwilling or maybe even unable, to rise to Socrates’ various challenges; the kind of guy who you have to make concessions to, who can be better caught by a good story than a rational argument….but at the same time, greedy for reputation and prestige and power.] Like a good little interlocutor, Meno suggests three definitions.

1. The first one, as we might expect, is a list: a man’s virtue/excellence is capable management of the city’s affairs; a woman’s, capable management of the household, and like that. (72)

Socrates responds with a demand for a definition: (72c) “the character in which they do not differ at all, but are all equally x…” and he gives a number of examples of what he means.

2. At 73d Meno tries again, saying that virtue must be the capacity to govern men. Socrates adds “justly”, and asks if there are other virtues. When Meno gives a list of other virtues, S claims he’s gone back to lists again, and gives definitions of shape and color as examples of what he wants.

3. At 77b Meno gives his third definition: P: v = desiring fine things and being able to acquire them.

But: Q: don’t some men desire evil things? [yes]
And: R: we don’t consider it virtuous if men acquire fine things unjustly, do we? Some of the virtues have to attach to the acquisition.

But: EEK! We’re back at lists again. I don’t want parts; I want that characteristic which all virtues have in common, that makes them v.

At the end of Act I, we reach aporeia; Meno confesses he really doesn’t know what to say next, and draws a comparison between Socrates and a torpedo fish, stunning the interlocutors and reducing them to silence.

In the first 8 pages of the dialogue, then, from 70a-80a Socrates is making a fairly stringent demand, by asking for a definition of virtue in order to justify a claim to knowledge of virtue. No definition, no knowledge.

Now dramatically speaking, the two characters in our play are now on the same footing. Socrates claimed to know nothing right at the beginning; and after 8 pages, he’s brought Meno to feeling himself to be in the same state.

This, I imagine, is the perfect place for an intermission in this play.

Act II opens with Meno’s paradox (80 d-e). The second act has three movements. First, It poses a problem (the paradox). Second, it presents a hypothesis in the form of a myth or story: the myth of recollection. “IF the truth about reality is already in our soul, we must take courage, and try to recollect what one does not happen to know (or recollect) at the moment.” Third, it demonstrates what seems very much to be an example of teaching, in the encounter of Meno’s slave boy with the Pythagorean theorem. And that presents a paradox in its own right, in the context of this dialogue—which as a whole, represents a denial of the teachability of virtue.
Let’s hold off on this important third act for the moment, and look at the remaining acts of the dialogue.

In Act III Socrates explicitly introduces a hypothetical method of inquiry. By virtue of the answer Socrates has given to the paradox in the digression, Meno has at least recovered enough energy and hope for resolution to return to the initial question, which was, as you recall, whether virtue is teachable.

Act III has two hypotheses. The first: (87b) “What attribute of the soul must virtue be, if it is to be teachable (or not)?”

It must be some form of knowledge; something that leads to success in action, and thus makes us good; and is advantageous to us.

All other things which we consider advantageous—health, strength, good looks, wealth—can lead to harm if they are not used well; and the same is true of courage, temperance, wit, memory…

“So everything the human spirit undertakes will lead to happiness when guided by wisdom, but the opposite when guided by folly.” (88c)

Virtue then must be in whole or part wisdom; and it can’t come by nature.

The second hypothesis: But IF something is teachable, would there not be teachers of it, and students?

M: yes—
S: But I have never found any.

Is this a good spot for the second intermission? If so, we can insert Act IV, the intervention by the audience, while Meno and Socrates break for a drink and a snack, mulling over their impasse.

IV: Anytus joins them, and is asked for help in locating the teachers of virtue. (89e)

He takes quite personally Socrates’ claim that good men are not able to teach their children; he obviously considers himself one of the better examples of Athenian nobility and will brook no slurs on his honor. Muttering a threat to Socrates, he stomps off.

Act V: Returning to the fray, Meno worries that perhaps there are no good men; for if so, how would they be produced? (96d)

At this point Socrates steps back from his firm demand that without a definition we know nothing, and suggests that true opinion can also lead us aright. It is less certain than knowledge, less stable; but if we tie it down with an account, working out reasons WHY it is correct, it is enough to be going on with. (98c)

So: the good man is useful;

He is so either by knowledge or by true opinion,
Both of which are acquired, not given by nature.

We asked if the good man’s virtue were a matter of teaching.

If it were, excellence/virtue would be a matter of knowledge;
But if it were teachable, there’d be teachers—and there aren’t.

So the fact that there are good men who are wise leaders of their cities is not due to their knowledge/virtue—but a matter of divine inspiration, like poets or oracles.

Last lines: “tell that to Anytus! If you can assuage his anger, Athens may have reason to be grateful to you.”
Some points to consider about the dialogue:

Dramatically, I said, the **dialogue includes a play within the play** (analogous to the actors troupe who come into Hamlet and replicate in miniature the plot of the play). The play within a play in this dialogue is the elenchic digression with Meno’s slave boy. The examination on the geometry problem is a mirror of the examination of Meno in Act I:

The slave boy has a fine mixture of true and false beliefs about geometry; he starts not from pure black ignorance, but with common sense and a grasp of all the relevant vocabulary and how to apply it; he is gradually disabused of some of his mistaken ideas; he gets the right answer, in the end.

1. his initial beliefs were not too far off. Most of his j’s about area and length were correct. Like meno, he begins with a large stock of reasonable beliefs.
2. he was able to make his beliefs more consistent by revising them when he encountered an inconsistency
3. he was able to revise them in a reasonable direction
4. the revisions replaced false beliefs with true beliefs

The conclusions drawn about the slave boy episode are the conclusions drawn at the end of the dialogue about the question of the dialogue. Socrates and Meno agree about the slave boy that he can’t really be said to have knowledge of the mathematical principles he has been working with, yet; but further questioning about the same issues will lead to more fixed and stable knowledge.

What about the mirror-analogy philosophically, though? Meno is being asked about an ethical matter, the nature of virtue. The mini-play is about a geometrical truth. **What is the dialogue saying, implying, about knowledge of matters moral?** We know about geometry—about mathematics in general—what kind of a science, what kind of an episteme, it is: it is subject to absolute, non-empirical certainty. It is a deductive science. It’s made up of what we call these days analytic truths: if you know what a square is, you know the relationship to that square of a square built on its diagonal. Is that the kind of knowledge that Socrates (or at least Plato) is suggesting that we can have of something as apparently different as virtue? Is mathematics Plato’s model of what knowledge should be?

The demand for definitions in this dialogue—the quest for that which is common to all instances, which makes those instances the kind of thing they are—can be read that way.....And if to know something in the most honorific sense requires having a definition of it, no wonder Socrates insists on his ignorance. Knowledge in that sense is a stopping place, not a journey. (And Socrates is in it for the trip, not the destination.)

But what do we really think about matters moral? **Are just actions the kind of thing that you can deduce from a definition of justice?** Or are they more situationally inflected, culturally conditioned, dependent upon intentions and desires, as well as results?

And the dialogue can be read too as suggesting with one hand (while denying with the other) that **there might be a positive answer to Meno’s question.** The only thing standing in the way of claiming that virtue is a form of knowledge, and thus
teachable—is Socrates’ pig-headed insistence that there are no teachers of it. Excuse me—what is Socrates DOING in all these early dialogues, if not in some important sense teaching?

--it’s a kind of complicated and back-handed way of teaching: what is most clear about what he is doing is what it is NOT—he is NOT giving you answers. He is not transmitting information.

--It is not a method of teaching that will make you a lawyer or a physicist or a physician; but that’s all right, because he’s not interested in those things. (It might make you a better lawyer or physicist or physician, if you can figure out what he’s teaching—but that’s a different question.)

The Slave-boy example isn’t about teaching geometry. It’s about teaching someone how to learn. You don’t learn by accepting someone else’s answers, be it a sophist or a philosopher, a poet or a politician, a man or a god. You learn by figuring out what you don’t know about things you thought you knew, and, believing that you can learn, pushing on the limits of your beliefs and increasing their security. Return to the elenchus.

Another very confusing thing about this dialogue: What’s with this myth about recollection and the transmigration of the soul? In the first place, it contradicts what Socrates says in the Apology and the Crito about his beliefs about death. But what bothers me even more: what kind of an answer is that to the question of how we learn things in this life? It just moves the question back one step.

How do we learn it here?
We knew it before.
But—how did we learn it then?
It’s like the story about what the earth rests on: it rests on the back of an elephant. But, you wonder, what does the elephant rest on? Well, the elephant is standing on a turtle. But: what is the turtle standing on? Well—it’s turtles all the way down. (More sophisticated people than me might refer to such an explanation as an “infinite regress.”)

One of my theories about it is that this story is tailored to the ears of the auditor. Socrates will say anything to keep the conversation going. He says explicitly: “well, I wouldn’t swear by its truth; but I do know for certain that we will be better and happier if we believe that we can and should search for answers.

A closer look at the SlaveBoy (if we have time)