

Outline of the *Meno*

Question of the dialogue: Is virtue something that can be taught? Or does it come by practice, or natural aptitude, or some other way?

S's answer: How should I know? Not only don't I know—I've never met anyone who did.

We can't know a property--whether it's teachable--unless we know what it IS.

M: What? You never met Gorgias? (He's one of our sophists; see pp. 44-6)

Act I: What is virtue? (quest for a definition of excellence, *arête*: what is required to be outstanding among one's peers?)

1. M: a list: a man's virtue is capable management of the city's affairs; a woman's, obedience, careful management of the household [=role and function; v. consists in carrying political and civic functions out well, excellently]

S: I don't want examples! What is the essential nature, that in respect to which all virtues are the same?

Analogy with bees

Analogy with health and size and strength..

[Meno: I somehow feel this is not on the same level as the others...]

Your examples have in common the need for temperance and justice to be done well. So: What did Gorgias say virtue was?

2. M: the capacity to govern men, if we seek one quality to cover all instances.

S: but that wouldn't apply to a slave or a child. And—shouldn't we add 'justly' to the capacity?

M: yes—for justice is a virtue.

S: Hmm. Justice is A virtue. What are others, and what do they have in common?

a. Examples of definitions: shape, color

[Socrates asks Meno if he believes in the theories of Empedocles, as a way of establishing theoretical premises from which we can deduce answers...(76)]

Meno judges the result as sufficiently 'high-sounding', although Socrates prefers his earlier definitions]

So: do the same for virtue! And remember—we're hunting for the whole, not just a part.

3. M: V=desiring fine things and being able to acquire them.

But: don't some men desire evil things?

M: yes—even knowing that they are evil.

S: but we don't consider it to be virtuous if they acquire good things unjustly; justice, or temperance, or piety, or some other part of virtue, must attach to the acquisition if we are to consider it virtuous...

[the goal of *arête*, excellence, is to acquire good things; justice and other virtues are at best means to their acquisition, which reduce risk]

--but we want the whole of virtue, and agreed we can't define it in terms of its parts! So we have to go back to the beginning!

APOREIA: Socrates as sting-ray

Meno's paradox: How can you look for something when you don't know what it is? If you do bump into it, how can you recognize it?

Act II: Digression: transmigration of souls and the myth of recollection

S: The soul, since it is immortal and has been born many times; has seen all things in this world and in the other; so it can recall the K it once had.

[*Problem: isn't this just moving the same question back one step?*]

The slave-boy and the Pythagorean theorem

"If the truth about reality is always in our soul, one must take courage and try to recollect what one does not happen to know (or remember) at the moment."

S: "I shouldn't like to take my oath on the whole story—but we will be braver,

better and more active men if we believe it right to look for what we don't know than to believe we can never discover it...."

Act III: Applying the hypothetical method to our original question: What attribute of the soul must virtue be, if it is to be teachable?

It is virtue that makes us good;

So it is advantageous;

All other things which we consider advantageous (health, strength, good looks, wealth) can sometimes do harm, if they are not used well; and the same with courage, temperance, wit, memory...

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

4. So virtue then, must be some sort of knowledge—in whole or in part, wisdom. --so it can't come by nature.

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

M: Yes---

S: But I have never found any.

Act IV: Anytus joins them, and is asked to help to inquire where are to be found the teachers of virtue.

S: Who are the experts in teaching men capable management of estates and cities? The sophists? Protagoras?

A: Heavens no! I would never have anything to do with such folks! Any Athenian gentleman is a better man than any of them.

S: You can be a good man and not a good teacher of virtue; witness the sons of some of the best men in our city. Surely if their virtue could be taught, they would have passed it on to the children they loved best!

A: Watch your mouth, Socrates! It's certainly easier to do a man harm than good, as you may find out for yourself some day!

S: Well, if neither the sophists nor those who display fine qualities themselves are teachers of virtue, I'm sure no one else can be. And if there are no teachers, there can be no students.

Act V: Knowledge v. True Opinion

M: Gosh, Socrates—maybe there are no good men. If there are, how are they produced?

S: Well—maybe knowledge is not the only possible source of virtuous conduct. True opinion can also lead us aright. (analogy with the road to Larissa)

M: Yes—but it is not so certain a source of correct judgments.

S: Analogy with Daedalus' statues: you have to tie down right opinions by working out the reasons why they are correct. It is the existence of an account of the rightness of an opinion, an understanding of why it is a true belief, that distinguishes knowledge from right opinion.

So: the good man is useful

And is so by either knowledge or right 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 was, virtue would be knowledge;
but if it were teachable, there would 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.

(But we won't understand the truth of the matter until we figure out what virtue really is, in itself.)

Tell that to Anytus! If you can assuage his anger, Athens may have reason to be grateful to you!