

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-17228-8 - Plato's Meno
 Edited by R. S. Bluck
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

A. THE ARGUMENT OF THE 'MENO'

The question which Meno raises in our dialogue, whether ἀρετή comes by teaching, by practice, by nature, or in some other way, had been much discussed before Plato began to write. In the latter half of the fifth century B.C. the growth of democracy led to an increase in the numbers of those who aspired to a political career, and consequently to a widespread demand for instruction or some other kind of help which might enable such aspirants to achieve success in politics. The result was the appearance of a new kind of sophist, the travelling teacher who for a fee would give special instruction.¹ Most of these sophists, including Protagoras,² Evenus of Paros,³ Euthydemus and Dionysodorus,⁴ and Prodicus,⁵ claimed to teach political ἀρετή. Their claims no doubt gave special urgency to the question whether such ἀρετή could in fact be acquired, and if so, how.⁶ The document known as the *Δισσοὶ Λόγοι* contains a collection of arguments for and against the possibility of its being taught, and these same arguments appear again in Plato's *Protagoras* and *Meno*; but we cannot be sure whether the *Δισσοὶ Λόγοι* was written before these dialogues or not.⁷ In any case it is probable that Plato was using arguments already well known.⁸

Of Socrates' opinion on the matter we cannot be certain, but we can make a plausible guess. In Xenophon's *Memora-*

¹ See note at 91b7–8 on οὓς οἱ ἄνθρωποι καλοῦσι σοφιστάς.

² Cf. *Protag.* 349a. He is said to have written a book *περὶ ἀρετῶν* (Diog. L. ix, 55).

³ Cf. *Apol.* 20b.

⁴ Cf. *Euthyd.* 273d.

⁵ Cf. *Rep.* 600c.

⁶ At *Meno* 95c Gorgias is said to have ridiculed such wide claims, and himself to have promised no more than skill in rhetoric: but see note on 70b4. Among the general public there will no doubt have been many who, like Anytus in the *Meno*, thought that such ἀρετή could be taught, but not by sophists. On the meaning of ἀρετή, see note on this word at 70a1. For convenience I shall use the traditional rendering 'virtue'.

⁷ See Diels–Kranz, II, p. 414.

⁸ For further evidence of the debate, cf. e.g. Eur. *IA* 561, *Suppl.* 913.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-17228-8 - Plato's Meno
 Edited by R. S. Bluck
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

bilía (iv, 2, 20) Socrates suggests that *μάθησις καὶ ἐπιστήμη τοῦ δικαίου εἶναι ὡσπερ τῶν γραμμάτων*. In Xenophon's *Symposium*, when asked how *καλοκάγαθία* is to be acquired, Socrates quotes a couplet from Theognis:

Ἐσθλῶν μὲν γὰρ ἅπ' ἐσθλὰ διδάξειαι· ἦν δὲ κακοῖσι
 συμμίσγης, ἀπολείς καὶ τὸν ἐόντα νόον.¹

When there is dispute, however, as to whether virtue (*ἀρετή*) can be taught, Socrates reverts to another question without committing himself further. Then at *Memorabilia* iii, 9, 1 *sq.*, we are given the answer that he is alleged to have made when asked whether courage was *διδασκτόν* or *φυσικόν*. He replied, according to Xenophon, that some *ψυχαί* may be naturally stronger than others in meeting *τὰ δεινά*, just as some people are physically stronger than others, but that *πάσαν φύσιν μαθήσει καὶ μελέτη πρὸς ἀνδρείαν αὔξεισθαι*: 'for', he continues, 'clearly Scythians and Thracians would not dare to fight against Spartans with *ἀσπίδες* and spears, nor would Spartans want to engage in combat against Thracians with *πέλται* and javelins, or against Scythians with bows and arrows'. But we should not infer from Xenophon's account, in which *μάθησις* anyway implies *ἄσκησις* rather than *διδασχὴ* proper,² that in Socrates' view real moral *ἀρετή* was at present taught, or that in his view anyone as yet possessed the sort of virtue that he had in mind when he said that virtue is knowledge, and argued (as on the evidence of Plato's early works we may assume that he did³) that anyone who had it could never be persuaded to act otherwise than as his knowledge dictated. In Plato's *Protagoras* we find Socrates arguing that virtue *cannot* be taught, first because in matters which are thought to be teachable the advice is sought of those who profess to be experts, whereas in matters of politics equal attention is given to everyone, and secondly because outstanding fathers have

¹ ii, iv *sq.* Cf. *Meno* 95d–e. On the reading *διδάξειαι*, see my note on 95d8.

² Cf. *Mem.* ii, 6, 39 and iv, 1, 4; and note on 96a3.

³ E.g. *Protag.* 352c.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-17228-8 - Plato's Meno
 Edited by R. S. Bluck
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

THE ARGUMENT OF THE 'MENO'

failed to pass on their ἀρετή to their sons. Now it is at least possible that in giving the first of these reasons Socrates is being ironical, for in the *Apology* (22 d) he deplores the fact that artisans, because they practise their particular crafts well, set themselves up to advise on other matters also; and so far as the second reason is concerned, he may not have considered that the fathers in question were really 'good', for he himself had never found anyone who possessed the appropriate ἐπιστήμη.¹ 'Virtue is knowledge' may have been his pious hope; and such virtue would be teachable. But he could still contend that virtue is not teachable, meaning that *no* virtue could be taught *as yet*.²

Whatever Socrates himself may have said or meant, these conclusions seem to be the outcome of the discussion in the *Meno*. The evidence shows that at present virtue is not teachable in any way, and not knowledge; but there is the possibility that a πολιτικός might appear οἶος καὶ ἄλλον ποιῆσαι πολιτικόν, a πολιτικός to whom we could attribute virtue based on knowledge. Socrates does not argue from the absence of teachers of virtue both now and in the past to the conclusion that virtue cannot *ever* be taught; his 'not teachable' means simply 'not teachable *now*', as is shown by his allowing that one day someone might teach it.³ At the same time it is made quite clear what form such teaching would have to take. Since the knowledge in question would depend upon recollection of knowledge acquired before birth, one could teach it only in the sense that one might aid someone else to recollect it. As it is, such virtue as exists or has existed must be based on ὀρθῇ δόξα, acquired, presumably, θεία μοίρα. Our dialogue ends with the point, made also at the end of the *Protagoras*, that we cannot know for certain how virtue comes until we know what virtue itself is, which means

¹ *Apol.* 21 c sq.

² He is usually taken to have meant simply that true virtue can *never* be transmitted by *sophistic* διδασχή.

³ The grounds for this interpretation of the discussion will appear presently. See especially pp. 20 sq.

INTRODUCTION

(in the present context) unless or until we can recollect its nature. The interpretation of the dialogue may now be discussed in detail.

The *Meno* may be divided into the following sections:¹

1. The question 'Is virtue teachable?' raises the prior question 'What is virtue?' Attempts are made to define virtue. Meno is reduced to *ἀπορία* (80a).

2. The question 'How can you look for something you don't know, or recognize it if you find it?' causes Socrates to propound the theory that the soul is immortal and that learning is recollection of knowledge acquired before birth. Socrates illustrates the theory by questioning one of Meno's slaves (80d–85b).

3. Meno again asks, 'Is virtue teachable?' Socrates undertakes to investigate the question (interpreted to mean, 'Is it *ἀναμνηστόν*?') by means of a hypothesis, a method used by geometers:

Let us suppose that virtue is a kind of knowledge. If it is, it will be teachable; otherwise it will not (87e).

But virtue is knowledge (88d, 89a).

Therefore virtue is teachable (89c).

4. Socrates suggests that there is an objection to this conclusion. If a thing is teachable, there ought to be teachers of it (89d–e). But there are no teachers of virtue (96b). Therefore virtue cannot be teachable after all (96c).

5. Virtue is not knowledge but 'true belief'. It is not teachable and comes *θεία μοίρα ἀνευ νοῦ*—unless some statesman should be found who is capable of making a statesman of another (96e–100b).

Epilogue (100b): we can only be certain of the right answer if, before asking how virtue comes, we try to discover what its essential nature is.

(i) *Definitions of Virtue*

Socrates observes that the question 'Is virtue teachable?' cannot be answered until one knows what one means by virtue. In attempting to answer the question 'What is virtue?' Meno at first asserts (71e) that there is a different *ἀρετή* appropriate to every separate group of people—men, women, young, old, and so on; but Socrates makes it clear

¹ A detailed summary, broken up into small sections, can be found in the commentary.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-17228-8 - Plato's Meno
 Edited by R. S. Bluck
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

THE ARGUMENT OF THE 'MENO'

that what he wants is the *ἐν εἶδος*.¹ Socrates remarks that for all mankind justice and temperance are necessary to *ἀρετή* (73c), thus indicating that for him at least all true *ἀρετή* must be based on and comprehend the 'quiet' moral virtues²—a hint as to the nature of *ἀρετή* which Meno should have followed up.

But Meno's next attempt to define virtue, like his description of *ἀνδρὸς ἀρετή* at 71e, is simply a version of the current conception³ of what a *man* should aim at, and still too narrow. 'The power of governing mankind' (73c), as Socrates observes, will still not cover all instances of virtue: it could not apply to the virtue of a slave or a child, for example; and it omits the necessary element of 'justice'. Socrates gives model definitions of *σχῆμα* (75b, 76a) and of *χρόα* (76d), the first of which commits the error of attempting to define *ignotum per ignotius*, and thereby contains a lesson; and then Meno, using the words of a poet, defines virtue as *χαίρειν τε καλοῖσι καὶ δύνασθαι* (77b), which he interprets as meaning to desire *καλά* and to be able to procure them. Here Socrates rules out the first half of the definition as superfluous, on the ground that no one desires *κακά*, and adds that 'ability to procure goods', if 'goods' is to be interpreted as wealth and honours, as Meno would have it, again requires the addition 'with justice', or something of that sort; but then the definition amounts to the statement that *that is virtue which is done with a part of virtue*—an absurdity which involves both the fragmentation of virtue, and circularity. At this point Meno is reduced to *ἀπορία*. But the objections to this last definition could have been avoided had not Meno interpreted *καλά* in a mundane sense. If he had taken them to be spiritual goods he might soon have seen that *knowledge* is needed of what is

¹ No metaphysical doctrine is implied here: cf. Wilamowitz, *Platon* (Berlin, 1919), II, p. 251, and Klara Buchmann, *Die Stellung des Menon in der platonischen Philosophie* (Leipzig, 1936), pp. 38–9. This is the Socratic *εἶδος*, the 'look' that members of a class have in common: cf. note on 72c6.

² For a good discussion of the question of the unity of the virtues as it is treated in the *Laches*, *Protagoras* and *Meno*, see Buchmann, *op. cit.* pp. 41 sq.

³ Cf. notes on 71e3 and 73c7.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-17228-8 - Plato's Meno
 Edited by R. S. Bluck
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

'good' (truly profitable). The discussion at least contains some pointers that might have proved helpful if further attempts at definition had been made.

Here we may ask, what kind of an answer does Socrates expect to the question, 'What is virtue?'. Socrates seems to expect the *οὐσία* (72b) to be expressed in words. When we come to the *Phaedo*, we find the Forms regarded as simple, uncompounded, *individual* entities, distinct from one another; and their individuality would seem to make them indefinable (definition, as Aristotle says, being necessarily of what is universal). In the *Theaetetus* (203a–d), Plato recognizes that there can be no *λόγος* of individual 'simples'. We may doubt whether he had recognized this particular point earlier; but there is in any case no certainty that Plato in the *Meno* was thinking, as yet, of Forms of the kind described in the *Phaedo*. There is, however, another difficulty. To speak of virtue *ἀντὸ καθ' αὐτό* need not, of course, mean virtue in isolation from *everything*: it may simply mean virtue as distinct from instances or species of virtue; but in terms of *what* is one's definition to be? It is pointed out in the *Meno* that a circular definition *or a definition including any unknown term* will be unsatisfactory. If, therefore, the only way in which the meaning of *any* term could be known were by definition, we should have a vicious circle. Can it be that Plato is here deliberately implying that the meanings of terms are to be grasped by some other means, and that *no* sort of *λόγος* will adequately convey the *οὐσία* of a thing?¹ Certainly this view receives good support from the fact that the objection to the definition of *ignotum per ignotius* is immediately followed by the presentation of the theory that learning is recollection. But although Plato probably did believe that the *οὐσία* of a thing cannot be transmitted in words, and although Socrates may *seem* in the *Meno* to be asking for the expression of an *οὐσία*, it is clear both from his illustrative definitions and from what he says at 75b–c that

¹ Cf. G. P. Henderson in *Παιδεία καὶ Ζωή* (1956), p. 74; W. Jaeger, *Paideia: the Ideals of Greek Culture* (Oxford, 1944), II, p. 163.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-17228-8 - Plato's Meno
 Edited by R. S. Bluck
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

THE ARGUMENT OF THE 'MENO'

he is not, even unintentionally, demanding the impossible. After defining *σχῆμα* as that which alone always follows upon colour, he says that he would be satisfied if Meno would define *ἀρετή* for him 'even like this' (*κἄν οὕτως*). Meno objects that someone (*τις*) might say that he did not know what colour was, and this passage is no doubt meant to point out that it is no good trying to define *ignotum per ignotius*; but Socrates may be excused for not expecting such a retort—Meno is being rather 'difficult'—and we may take it that this sort of definition, explaining one thing by reference to others, would satisfy Socrates. He then offers another definition of *σχῆμα*, which certainly seems to be seriously intended. This defines *σχῆμα* by its relation to *στρεβόν*, which, though not here defined, is acknowledged as *known*. When, later on, after the presentation of the theory of recollection, Socrates seems to recommend a continuation of the attempt to define virtue (86c), the idea may be that this could help them to recollect its nature.¹ We may suppose, then, that the Socrates of the *Meno* would have been satisfied with a *λόγος* similar to his own at 75 b: one which, without itself stating the *οὐσία* of virtue, might help both Socrates and Meno to recognize (or recollect) what that *οὐσία* was. The terms of the definition, we may suppose, need not all be defined, so long as they are *understood*. The vision resulting from recollection would transcend definition, but attempting to define a thing by reference to other things would aid recollection of it, and make possible agreement about its nature. But this conclusion can of course be reached only after reflection upon the theory of recollection. In the early part of the dialogue, before that theory is introduced, we have a picture similar to that of earlier dialogues, in which Socrates is asking for the *εἶδος* of a thing without reference to any metaphysical theory. Whether the historical Socrates believed that definitions (and if so, what sort of definitions) could adequately express *οὐσίαι*, we cannot say.²

¹ See pp. 16–17.

² See, further, note on 71 b3–4.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-17228-8 - Plato's Meno
 Edited by R. S. Bluck
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

(ii) *The Theory of Recollection*

When Socrates proposes to continue the search for virtue, although he declares that he has no idea what it is, Meno, perhaps anxious to avoid further humiliation and, if possible, to catch out Socrates, asks (at 80d), 'How will you look for something when you don't know at all what it is? What sort of thing, pray, among those that you don't know will you set before yourself as the object of your search? Or even if you were in fact to hit upon it, how would you know that it was the thing that you didn't know?'

So far as Meno is concerned, this question may be regarded as a convenient dodge, an eristic trick; but for Plato it had important philosophical implications. The historical Socrates might have replied, 'If I don't know as yet what virtue is, I do at least know that it is that which justice, temperance, wisdom and courage have in common, and this is my criterion. When I have found this unitary virtue, I shall be able to return to its various instances and see whether they all in fact possess this character, and thus verify my discovery.' This would at least be a possible answer to the paradox which, to judge from the similar difficulties which are raised in the *Euthydemus*, was part of the stock-in-trade of some of the sophists. But Plato, in his endeavours to justify Socrates' beliefs and to show that there were moral standards which could be known, found it necessary to suppose that such standards were not to be found in, or derived from, objects or acts within this phenomenal world. He was thus prevented from giving to this eristic question the sort of reply that Socrates might have given, and it became, for him, a question of considerable philosophic importance.¹ He had to show,

¹ So Silvan Nacht, 'Un passo del Menone di Platone (80d-81)', in *Maia*, 1 (1948), pp. 198-9. Professor Bernard Phillips (*Classical Weekly*, XLII (1948), p. 89) challenges M. Koyré's remark (*Discovering Plato*, New York, 1945, trans. L. C. Rosenfield, p. 10) that Meno's paradox 'actually implies that nothing can be learned'. He sees Meno's objection as 'an expression of an underlying nominalistic empiricism' (p. 90). 'If the question under discussion', he says,

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-17228-8 - Plato's Meno
 Edited by R. S. Bluck
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

THE ARGUMENT OF THE 'MENO'

somehow, that *if* these standards existed in some 'real' world apart from the world of phenomena, they could be *in one way* known, and yet *in another way* not known. This he sets out to accomplish by means of the theory of recollection. At *Meno* 81a *sq.* Socrates says that he has heard from certain 'priests and priestesses' the theory that the soul is immortal and undergoes reincarnation. If it has 'seen all things here and in Hades', we may infer that it has learnt everything, and that 'it is not surprising that it should be able to recollect with regard to virtue and other things that formerly it knew. Since all nature is akin, and the soul has learnt everything, there is no reason why a man should not, on recollecting one single thing—learning, as it is called—discover everything else.' Socrates then answers Meno's objection to searching for something 'unknown' by showing that it is possible that we have *latent* knowledge, which may be aroused into our consciousness by association of ideas.¹

What is here envisaged is not, as has sometimes been suggested, a recollection of things learnt in previous incarnations.² Socrates only mentions τὰ ἐνθάδε because he is drawing inferences from what the priests and priestesses have said. We cannot, indeed, prove this by observing that if the learning were supposed to have taken place in this world, then since *all* learning is recollection (81d5), we have an infinite regress; for Socrates in fact assumes that the soul will have been in a state of knowledge for all time (τὸν ἀεὶ χρόνον, 'had been a purely empirical one, e.g. How many citizens are there in Athens?—then Meno's objection would have been utterly pointless, for this is a question to be answered by counting heads and not by reflection.' This is true, but it seems likely that whoever invented the objection invented it to be used (like the similar problems raised in the *Euthydemus*) purely as a verbal puzzle. Sophists like Euthydemus might have been quite capable of raising the 'pointless' objection that you cannot set about 'finding' the number of citizens if you do not know it.

¹ Some have held that Plato uses the idea of ἀνάμνησις only as a *metaphor*. But see pp. 59–61.

² Cf. Klara Buchmann, *op. cit.* p. 60, n. 142, pp. 65, 70, and Charles Mugler, *Platon et la recherche mathématique de son époque* (Strasbourg, 1948), pp. 302–3, 368–70, 373. Against this view, cf. H. Cherniss, *AJP*, LVIII (1937), p. 498, *Rev. of Metaphysics*, IV (1951), p. 421.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-17228-8 - Plato's Meno
 Edited by R. S. Bluck
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

86a8).¹ Nor is the reference at 86a to the time when the slave οὐκ ἦν ἄνθρωπος conclusive, for this could be taken simply to mean that even then, before birth, the slave possessed his knowledge because he *had already learnt* it (ἐμεμαθήκει).² But it is clear from the *Phaedo*, where the *Meno* arguments for 'recollection' are summarized and the theory is then proved by an appeal to our awareness of norms that are not to be found in this world and can only be fully apprehended by the discarnate soul, that Plato was not concerned with recollection of past experiences on earth.

Socrates illustrates the theory by questioning one of Meno's slaves. He draws a square, and then draws in transversals joining the mid-points of opposite sides. It is agreed that if the sides are two feet each, the square is four square feet, and Socrates asks how long the sides must be of a square double the size. The slave supposes that they must be double the length of the others, and Socrates says that Meno will now witness him ἀναμνησκόμενον ἐφεξῆς, ὡς δεῖ ἀναμνησκεισθαι (82e). Socrates extends two adjacent sides of his figure so as to double their length, and completes a square of four-foot sides, and then suggests that this will contain four squares of the size of the original one, or sixteen square feet.³ The required side must be longer than the original side, but not double its length. The slave suggests that it must be of three feet, but is made to see that this will not do either, when Socrates draws in the 3 × 3 foot square. The slave now has no more suggestions to offer; he cannot even *point* to the required line.⁴ Yet Socrates observes that he is making progress in his recollecting—he no longer thinks that he knows what he does not know; and 'as a result of this

¹ See note *ad loc.*

² See note on 86a8.

³ 83a–b. See figure at note on Οὐκοῦν κτλ., 83a4.

⁴ He had originally been asked the *length* of the required line (πόσων ποδῶν, πηλίκῃ, 82d). Here (84a) Socrates says εἰ μὴ βούλει ἀριθμεῖν, ἀλλὰ δεῖξον ἀπὸ ποίας. The original (impossibly difficult) request may have been primarily concerned with removing the boy's conceit of wisdom. He had thought that he could state the exact length. See note on ἀριθμεῖν, 84a1.