Meno

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PLATO

Plato's father Ariston descended from Codrus, the last King of Athens, and his mother Perictione had ties to Solon, one of the creators of the Athenian Constitution. Plato planned a political career until 404 BC, when Athens shifted to an oligarchy controlled by wealthy men. After democracy was restored in 403 BC, Plato again considered politics until Socrates, Plato's mentor, was accused of impiety and corruption and subsequently put to death in 399 BC. Responding to this gross display of injustice, Plato abandoned politics for philosophy. He ultimately produced a volume of work that has heavily influenced Western thought and provided the world with a record not only of his own philosophical thoughts, but also historical documentation of Socrates's influential years in Athens. Concerned with justice, beauty, and equality, he influenced many important thinkers by founding the Academy, a philosophy school where Aristotle was a student for twenty years before establishing his own institution when Plato died in 348 or 347 BC.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Given that Anytus—one of Socrates's accusers—appears in *Meno*, it's helpful to know that Socrates was brought to trial in Athens in 399 BC. Accused of impiety and of corrupting the youth, he was given a chance to defend himself with an *apologia* but was ultimately found guilty by the jury members, sentenced to death, and forced to drink hemlock. On another note, it's worth understanding the political climate of Athens during Socrates's last years. After Sparta defeated Athens in the Peloponnesian War in 404 BC, Spartans overtook the city and installed an oppressive oligarchy made up of thirty men. This group became known as "the Thirty" or "the Thirty Tyrants," quickly gaining notoriety for their violent ways, as they killed 1,500 Athenians during their short rule. Thankfully, the Tyrants were overthrown within the year by Athenian rebels who restored the city's democratic system. Considering that Athens was going through so much turmoil and violence during this period, it's rather unsurprising that people like Socrates were interested in thinking about virtue and goodness, which he clearly wanted to help his city achieve.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

When considering *Meno*, it's worth thinking about how the text interacts with the other dialogues Plato wrote that concern Socrates—namely, *Apology*, *Euthyphro*, *Crito*, *Meno*, and *Phaedo*, all of which showcase Socrates's practice of employing the technique of cross-examination to instigate productive intellectual conversations. In particular, *Apology* relates to *Meno*, since Anytus—one of the men who accuses Socrates and is therefore responsible for his guilty verdict in *Apology*—is the man Meno stays with when he visits Athens. What's more, Socrates's ideas about knowledge and "recollection" resurface in *Phaedo*, though they ultimately become more complicated in the latter text and lead to the formation of Plato's theory of forms. As such, *Meno* lays the philosophical groundwork for *Phaedo*'s more complex considerations.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Meno
- **When Written:** Sometime around 385 BC
- **Literary Period:** Ancient Greek Philosophy
- **Genre:** Philosophy, Philosophical Dialogue, Fiction
- **Setting:** Athens, Greece in roughly 402 BC
- **Climax:** Having concluded that virtue is neither a form of knowledge nor an "inborn" quality, Socrates suggests that it is a "gift" from the gods that is "not accompanied by understanding."
- **Antagonist:** Anytus is the only antagonistic character in *Meno*, though it can also be argued that the text's chief antagonistic force is the idea of lazy or complacent thinking.
- **Point of View:** Dialogue

EXTRA CREDIT

Virtue Ethics. The study of virtue and its relationship to ethics originated with Socrates's ideas and were later built upon by Plato and Aristotle. Although *Meno* isn't necessarily hailed as the first text exploring the nature of virtue, its thematic attention to the matter renders it an important piece of work in the formation of this field of philosophy.

PLOT SUMMARY

At the beginning of his conversation with Socrates, Meno—a rising political figure visiting Athens from Thessaly—asks whether or not Socrates thinks virtue can be taught. In response, Socrates references the fact that Meno has become accustomed to finding answers to seemingly any question, since he has studied with a Sophist named Gorgias, who trains his pupils to be clever debaters regardless of the topic they're addressing. However, Socrates tells Meno, he himself doesn't even know what virtue *is*, let alone whether or not it can be taught. In fact, Socrates suggests that he's never met anyone

who fully understands the true nature of virtue, an assertion that astounds Meno, who upholds that he—along with many others—certainly know how to define virtue.

Responding to Meno's confidence, Socrates asks him to articulate what, exactly, virtue is, and Meno tells him that it means one thing for a man, something else for a woman, and something else for a child. This, Socrates says, is not an adequate way to define virtue, since a definition must be all-encompassing, something that applies to every manifestation of a given concept. To illustrate this idea, he points out that bees often differ in small ways from one another, but this doesn't change the fact that they're all bees. Meno agrees with this, so Socrates asks him to provide a definition of virtue that is more universally applicable, but Meno insists that virtue is more complex than Socrates's example about bees and thus requires a definition that can accommodate subtle variations and nuances. In response, Socrates points out that Meno thinks men are virtuous if they "manage the city," whereas women are virtuous if they "manage the household." However, both of these qualities require "justice and moderation" in order to qualify as virtuous. As such, men and women are virtuous in the same way, despite the different ways in which their goodness seems to manifest itself.

Once Meno agrees that there must be one singular definition of virtue that applies to all kinds of virtue, he suggests that "justice is virtue." However, Socrates points out that justice is *a* virtue, not virtue itself. To make this point clear, he says that "roundness" is a **shape** but not something that defines the entire concept of shape itself. Rather, there are many different kinds of shape, and "roundness" is simply one of them. Having said this, Socrates asks Meno to offer up a definition of shape that can be applied to *all* shapes, but Meno balks, asking Socrates to provide the answer himself. Socrates calls Meno's attention to the fact that there is such a thing as a "limit" or "end" to all objects. Next, Socrates refers to the geometrical idea of a "plane" or "solid." Having established these terms, Socrates defines shape, saying, "A shape is that which limits a solid; in a word, a shape is the limit of a solid."

Having given him an example of the kind of definition he's looking for, Socrates again asks Meno to define virtue, and Meno suggests that virtue is to "desire" and have the "power to acquire" "beautiful things." After a series of questions, he adds that "gold and silver" are examples of "beautiful" (or good) things, and he and Socrates determine that these things are only virtuous if they are "acquired" "justly." Because of this, Meno once again decides that justice is what determines whether or not something is virtuous, but Socrates reminds him that they've already proved that justice is only "a part of virtue." Because of this, Socrates says, "You must not think, while the nature of virtue as a whole is still under inquiry, that by answering in terms of the parts of virtue you can make its nature clear to anyone."

Meno becomes frustrated, saying that Socrates is like a "torpedo fish" that numbs anyone with whom he comes into contact. Although Meno was confident he understood the nature of virtue before this conversation—and has even delivered public talks about the concept—he now finds himself baffled and unable to define the idea. Socrates, for his part, assures Meno that he is in the same position, for he doesn't know what virtue is, either. This is why he wants "to examine and seek" the answer with Meno. "How will you look for [the answer], Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is?" Meno protests. "How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?" In response, Socrates rephrases Meno's concern, an idea now commonly referred to as Meno's Paradox. "Do you realize what a debater's argument you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know?" Socrates asks. "He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for."

Socrates isn't quite as pessimistic about the process of intellectual inquiry as Meno, since he thinks that a person can indeed make thoughtful discoveries. However, he doesn't think that this involves learning brand new information. Rather, he believes that the act of learning is actually an act of "recollection," since the human soul is immortal and has already "acquired" all available knowledge. As a result, one need only tap into the memories of their soul to access a limitless wellspring of information. By way of example, Socrates calls Meno's slave forth and asks if he has ever studied geometry. Having confirmed that he hasn't, Socrates proceeds by drawing **squares** in the sand and posing a number of questions to the slave—questions the young man answers correctly. In this way, Socrates demonstrates to Meno that people are capable of finding knowledge within themselves, especially when guided by someone who can help coax this information out of them. This, he suggests, is a better way to look at the process of intellectual discovery, since Meno's viewpoint frames the entire ordeal as futile and therefore runs the risk of making people intellectually lazy.

Once again, Meno asks Socrates to answer his original question regarding whether or not virtue can be taught, and though Socrates thinks it's foolish to consider this matter without first determining what virtue *is*, he agrees to investigate the subject. To do so, he sets forth a hypothesis that virtue is "a kind of knowledge." If this is the case, he says, virtue can be taught, since all knowledge is teachable. If something can be taught, though, then there must be students and teachers—these, Socrates upholds, are good indicators of whether or not an idea is teachable. Turning to Anytus, who is Meno's host in Athens and who is apparently listening to this discussion, Socrates asks if the politician can think of anyone who teaches virtue, but

Anytus asks *him* to answer the question first. In turn, Socrates says that the only teachers of virtue must be the Sophists, who examine these ideas quite carefully. This response enrages Anytus, who thinks the Sophists are bad men who corrupt the Athenian youth. Anytus posits that the best teachers of virtue are Athenians themselves, who instruct their sons how to be good. Despite this confident reply, though, Socrates lists a number of well-respected and virtuous Athenians whose sons are evil, thereby falsifying Anytus's claim and ultimately proving that there are no teachers of virtue. In turn, Socrates and Meno draw the conclusion that virtue must not be teachable, since there is no one who teaches it. What's more, this means that virtue must not be knowledge, either, since all knowledge is teachable.

During their consideration of virtue as "a kind of knowledge," Socrates and Meno determined that doing something that "benefits" the soul is virtuous. What's more, they decided that in order to do something that "benefits" the soul, one must have an understanding—or knowledge of—what they are doing. However, Socrates now suggests that this second point is perhaps a mistake. He says that he and Meno were right to say that doing something that "benefits" the soul is virtuous, but wrong to say that this kind of behavior requires knowledge. To make this point, he uses the term "correct opinion," which more or less resembles good intuition. If a person doesn't know the way to a certain place but directs another person there based on a "correct opinion"—which is uninformed by knowledge—they have still successfully navigated to the place in question. As such, knowledge and correct opinion are functionally the same. Of course, knowledge enables a person to know *why* their "opinions" are "correct," but this doesn't negate the fact that such opinions can be "beneficial" to a person even when they doesn't understand their own logic. "Indeed," Socrates says, "I too speak as one who does not have knowledge but is guessing. However, I certainly do not think I am guessing that right opinion is a different thing from knowledge."

Having said this, Socrates states that people are "good" "not only through knowledge but also through right opinion," going on to say that neither knowledge nor "right opinion" are "inborn" traits that "come to men by nature." Rather, they are bestowed unto humans as "gift[s] from the gods." What's more, these gifts are "not accompanied by understanding," meaning that humans don't have to comprehend virtue in order to possess it. Concluding this discussion with Meno, Socrates suggests that they would have been more productive if they had defined virtue before considering whether or not it can be taught, but now he must go. Before parting, he asks Meno to convince Anytus of what he's learned about virtue, saying that he will "confer a benefit upon the Athenians" if he successfully changes the powerful politician's mind.

CHARACTERS

Socrates – A philosopher living in Athens, Greece in the fourth century BC and the primary speaker in *Meno*. A clever thinker and shrewd conversationalist, Socrates is known for encouraging people to carefully scrutinize their beliefs. By asking a series of simple questions, he often tricks his interlocutors into unwittingly contradicting themselves, thereby revealing the flaws in their thinking. In *Meno*, he attempts to answer Meno's question about whether or not virtue can be taught, though he insists that this question isn't worth exploring without first defining virtue itself. As such, he asks Meno questions about the nature of virtue, eventually helping him realize that he doesn't know as much as he originally thought. In fact, Meno discovers that he has no idea how to define virtue, since Socrates has shown him that pointing to examples of virtue doesn't do anything to actually define the concept as a whole. Socrates, for his part, welcomes Meno's confusion, ultimately urging him to become motivated by his own ignorance. Interestingly enough, Socrates himself doesn't think people can learn new information. Rather, he believes that humans "recollect" old knowledge, which their immortal souls have accumulated throughout their many lives. At the same time, though, Socrates knows that it takes quite a lot of effort to "recollect" knowledge, which is why teachers are valuable—not because they teach students new information, but because they help coax old knowledge out of their souls. Socrates even illustrates this by guiding Meno's slave through a geometry lesson, thereby proving that people can access areas of intellectual expertise that might otherwise lie dormant. Despite the significant impression Socrates makes on Meno and the way he thinks, though, he doesn't manage to provide a definition of virtue, instead leaving Meno with the idea that virtue is given to humans by the gods without any kind of "understanding."

Meno – A good-looking young man who belongs to a prominent family in Thessaly. At the time of his dialogue with Socrates, Meno is soon to begin his career as an important politician. For the time being, he is visiting Athens, where he's staying with Anytus, one of the important Athenians who eventually accuses Socrates of impiety and of corrupting the youth. At the beginning of their conversation, Meno asks Socrates to tell him whether or not virtue can be taught, and is taken aback when Socrates admits that he doesn't even know what virtue *is*. Having studied with Gorgias—a well-known Sophist who teaches his pupils to provide eloquent answers to any question they encounter—Meno is flabbergasted by Socrates's response, which goes against his own tendency to reply to difficult philosophical questions with impressive language and "theatrical" reasoning. Despite his confusion, though, Meno soon sees what Socrates means: it is very difficult to define virtue. Struggling to find a way of conceptualizing the idea, he

offers a number of examples of virtuousness, but Socrates shows him that this is an inadequate way to define virtue as a whole. Before long, then, Meno admits that he no longer feels confident in his own knowledge of virtue. Nevertheless, he insists that Socrates answer his original question about whether or not virtue can be taught, and though Socrates obliges, he first underlines his belief that this is a flawed way to investigate the matter. Throughout the dialogue, Meno is an amenable conversationalist, often going along with Socrates's difficult ideas, admitting when he's wrong, and even allowing Socrates to quiz his slave in order to make a point about the learning process. In the end, he and Socrates do not determine the nature of virtue, but Meno's views have certainly changed, which is why Socrates asks him to convince Anytus of what he's learned.

Meno's Slave – A young man who serves as Meno's slave and who has spent his entire life with Meno's family. While Socrates and Meno discuss the nature of virtue, this young man stands by and watches. At one point, Socrates calls him over and asks if he knows anything about geometry. When the slave says he doesn't, Socrates proceeds by asking him a number of questions about a collection of squares he draws in the sand. Slowly but surely, Meno's slave successfully answers these questions, thereby proving Socrates's point that a person can "recollect" knowledge that his soul has already acquired. When the slave eventually becomes confused about a certain question, Socrates points out that he is in a better position than he was before the conversation began, since at least now the young man is aware of that which he does not know. Going on, Socrates then helps him answer this difficult question, though he never tells the slave anything. In this way, it becomes clear that teachers are important figures as long as they help coax out the intellectual abilities that a person already possesses.

Anytus – An important Athenian politician who—according to the historical record—fought as a general in the Peloponnesian War, though this detail doesn't make its way into *Meno*. Anytus is Meno's guest when he comes to Athens, and is even present for part of Meno's discussion with Socrates about the nature of virtue. At one point, Socrates calls Anytus forth and asks him if he can identify a person who teaches virtue. Socrates, for his part, suggests that the Sophists teach virtue—an idea that enrages Anytus, who detests the Sophists and thinks of them as people who corrupt the youth of Athens. In keeping with this, Anytus is one of the men who eventually accuse Socrates of impiety and of corrupting the youth (accusations that lead to Socrates's execution). At the end of their dialogue, Socrates asks Meno to convince Anytus of what he's learned about virtue, saying that he would be doing Athens a great favor if he succeeded.

Gorgias – A Sophist known throughout Athens for teaching his pupils to employ fanciful rhetoric in order to provide an answer to any question they might encounter. Meno has studied with Gorgias and learned this style of debate, which is why he's so surprised to hear that Socrates does not profess to know the nature of virtue.

TERMS

The Sophists – Teachers of philosophy, rhetoric, and virtue who practiced in the fifth and fourth centuries BC in Ancient Greece. Although it is difficult to discern the prevailing social opinion of the Sophists, it's rather undisputed that many Athenians were wary of these teachers, who they thought corrupted the city's young people by teaching them to cleverly argue in favor of seemingly any viewpoint. In their dialogue, **Socrates** points out that **Meno** is used to finding answers to difficult philosophical questions because he has studied with **Gorgias**, a well-known Sophist. Later, when Socrates suggests that the Sophists are perhaps the only people who teach virtue, **Anytus** becomes enraged and says that Socrates should be careful of what he says. After all, Anytus thinks the Sophists are morally corrupt, though Socrates himself seems rather unbothered by both the Sophists and Anytus's outburst. Fittingly, Anytus accuses Socrates himself of sophistry during his trial (outlined in Plato's *Apology*), an event that eventually leads to Socrates's execution.

THEMES

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TEACHING, LEARNING, AND INTELLECTUAL INQUIRY

In Plato's *Meno*, Socrates and Meno—a Thessalian politician visiting Athens—speak at length about the process of learning, specifically unpacking whether or not virtue can be taught. Although Socrates remains skeptical that they will be able to answer this question without first finding a definition for virtue itself, he nevertheless says he'd like to engage in a dialogue with Meno in order to explore the matter. In doing so, he demonstrates his commitment to the process of thoughtful engagement. However, Meno soon sets forth a skeptical idea that Socrates reframes as a statement upholding that it's impossible for anyone to learn anything (this is now commonly known as Meno's Paradox). Socrates, for his part, dislikes the pessimism that comes along with this approach and ultimately works around the dilemma (outlined in more detail below) by agreeing that people don't "learn," but rather "recollect" knowledge that their souls—which have lived many

lives—have already acquired. And though this seems to align with Meno's skeptical view of the educational process, Socrates suggests that people need to do a fair amount of "searching" in order to come upon these recollections of knowledge, thereby putting his faith in the process of intellectual inquiry. In this manner, Socrates suggests that humans shouldn't shy away from making philosophical investigations, even when such endeavors might seem futile.

Socrates implies that virtue cannot be taught, but he is still interested in exploring whether or not it can be. Meno, for his part, is doubtful that Socrates will be able to conduct a worthwhile inquiry without knowing what virtue is, saying, "How will you look for [virtue], Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?" he asks, baffled by Socrates's willingness to "search for something" he claims he doesn't understand. In response, Socrates emphasizes Meno's defeatist attitude, rephrasing his words so that they sound excessively pessimistic about the efficacy of teaching and learning. What he says is now known as the Meno's Paradox; "Do you realize what a debater's argument you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know?" Socrates asks. "He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for." This boils down to an argument upholding that it's basically impossible to learn anything. Indeed, it's clear in this moment that Meno has suggested that any kind of engaged intellectual thought is futile. And though Socrates himself has not yet proved that this *isn't* the case, he disagrees with Meno's newfound pessimism.

It's worth considering the statement that prompts Meno to express this viewpoint in the first place. Before Meno outlines his paradox, Socrates says, "So now I do not know what virtue is; perhaps you knew before you contacted me, but now you are certainly like one who does not know. Nevertheless, I want to examine and seek together with you what it may be." The most important part of this passage is its final sentence, in which Socrates expresses his desire to "examine and seek" information. What's more, he says he wants to do this "together," stressing the importance of dialogue and joint intellectual discovery. Whereas Meno has suddenly succumbed to the pessimistic view that no one can learn anything, Socrates commits himself to the process of critical inquiry.

After expressing his belief that "search[ing] for" certain ideas remains a worthwhile endeavor, Socrates sets forth a new idea about the learning process. Because the "human soul is immortal," he says, it has lived many lives and undergone countless experiences. In fact, he upholds that there is "nothing" the soul "has not learned." As such, "it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both about virtue and other things," Socrates says. Going on, he adds that "nothing prevents a man, after recalling one thing only [...from] discovering everything else for himself, if he is brave and does not tire of the search [...]." In other words, Socrates believes that people innately possess everything they might wish to know—all they need to do is access it, though this can be a "tire[some]" process.

To illustrate this point, Socrates addresses Meno's slave, who has never been taught geometry. By drawing **squares** on the ground and asking the slave to answer simple but increasingly involved geometry questions, Socrates proves that the young man can indeed find certain informed "opinions" within himself. This, he upholds, is because the slave is "recollecting" information that his soul has already learned. At the same time, though, it's important to understand that the slave would never have been able to come to these conclusions without someone to help him "recollect" the information. "These opinions have now just been stirred up like a dream," Socrates says to Meno, making it clear that, although he didn't teach the slave anything, his guided questions (a form of teaching now known as the Socratic Method) played an important role in the young man's ability to "recollect" what would otherwise have remained dormant within him.

By emphasizing his own importance in the slave's process of discovery, Socrates suggests that—although people can't teach each other new information—they can still help one another come to important realizations. This is why he rejects Meno's Paradox, which he thinks will make people "idle" and mentally lazy. Although his own approach to teaching and learning doesn't solve the fact that it's impossible to impart wisdom to another person, it at least encourages people to engage in critical discourses that might lead to valuable recollections. In this way, Socrates advocates for the process of intellectual inquiry, framing it as an undeniably worthwhile endeavor.

LANGUAGE, RHETORIC, AND REASONING

In *Meno*, Socrates is interested in simply exploring ideas alongside his interlocutor (the person he is in dialogue with). Whereas in *Apology* he tries to persuade the Athenian jury not to condemn him, in this dialogue he focuses on investigating the claims that both Meno and he himself make. Interestingly enough, though, he makes use of the same process of conversational cross-examination that he employs in Plato's other dialogues, ultimately using this method to challenge what Meno takes for granted in his arguments. Because of his desire to conduct a productive dialogue in which both he and Meno make their way toward valuable realizations, Socrates pays close attention to the language they use, making sure to reduce each statement to its simplest, most straightforward formulation. In doing so, he demonstrates how important it is to interrogate one's own beliefs and the ways in

which one presents those beliefs. What's more, when Socrates abandons his normal format of cross-examination in order to apply critical pressure to his *own* hypotheses, readers see that he is willing to scrutinize himself as thoroughly as he scrutinizes anyone else. In this way, he proves that he is interested first and foremost in participating in a worthwhile, logically sound discussion, which is why he has no problem holding himself to the same argumentative standards to which he holds everyone else.

Early in their conversation, Socrates urges Meno to articulate how, exactly, he would define virtue. Already, then, it becomes apparent that Socrates thinks their discussion will be most productive if they first linguistically ground themselves. He understands the importance of using the clearest language available, for this will later enable him and Meno to articulate more nuanced ideas. In other words, Socrates believes that using straightforward language makes it easier to grasp complicated ideas.

But Meno struggles to hit upon a solid definition of virtue, eventually suggesting that it is "to desire beautiful things and have the power to acquire them." In response, Socrates asks if Meno means that "the man who desires beautiful things desires good things," and Meno says that this is indeed what he means. Going on, Socrates asks if people ever desire "bad things" even when they know these things are bad. "Certainly I do," Meno says. At this point, Socrates poses an important question, one that showcases his fondness for linguistic precision. "What do you mean by desiring? Is it to secure for oneself?" he asks. When Meno says yes, Socrates proceeds to outline the following: since "bad things" harm people, and no one actively *wants* to be harmed, then it can't be true that anyone would ever "desire"—or want to "secure"—a "bad thing," for by doing so they would knowingly harm themselves. In this way, Socrates reveals a flaw in Meno's argument, one that hinges upon his failure to fully consider the implications of the language he employs. After all, if he had more carefully thought about the word "desire," he likely wouldn't have set forth this faulty definition of virtue in the first place.

Socrates's sensitivity to linguistic accuracy is also evident in the examples he uses to support his points. For instance, when Meno tries to define what virtue is by pointing to various traits that he considers virtuous, Socrates tries to impress upon him that this is an inadequate way to define something. In order to make this point, he considers the concept of "**shape**," saying that although a circle is a shape, it doesn't define the entire concept of shape itself. He then offers a straightforward and geometrically sound definition of shape, one that applies to *all kinds* of shapes, thereby laying the groundwork for more complex investigations into geometry. In the same way that this attention to linguistic detail might provide the basis for a more in-depth discussion of shape, it becomes clear that any valid investigation into the nature of virtue must include a careful definition of virtue itself.

For the first half of his conversation with Meno, Socrates cross-examines him as a way of showing him the faults in his arguments. This follows the traditional model of all Socratic dialogues, in which Socrates peppers people with questions until they realize that their original statements are logically unsound. However, in this dialogue, Socrates transitions to a different kind of philosophical investigation, one in which he poses a number of hypotheses and then methodically walks through them until they are disproven. Of course, he only does this because Meno insists upon considering whether or not virtue can be taught even though they haven't yet established what virtue *is*. Going along with this, Socrates formulates a hypothesis that if virtue is a kind of knowledge, then it can be taught, since all knowledge is teachable (or "recollectable"). He then goes step by step through this hypothesis, and though his specific points are too numerous to outline here, what matters most is that he determines that the hypothesis is wrong, for if virtue were knowledge, there would certainly be people who taught it to others, and since there are none, then virtue must not be knowledge after all.

Meno, though, has trouble accepting that the original hypothesis is wrong, since it seemed so logically sound to him when he and Socrates first formulated it. "We should not only think it right at the time [of its formulation]," Socrates advises, "but also now and in the future if it is to be at all sound." As such, Socrates underlines the importance of fully and mercilessly examining one's own suppositions, ultimately demonstrating that a person can and should interrogate their own ideas even when they appear to be solid. Indeed, this is the same kind of careful scrutiny that Socrates applies to language. Furthermore, Socrates has now made use of a new rhetorical move, one that doesn't depend upon cross-examining his interlocutor, but posing difficult questions to himself, thereby demonstrating that people are capable of holding themselves to high standards when it comes to formulating logically sound ideas.

VIRTUE, IGNORANCE, AND KNOWLEDGE

Virtue is the central concern of Socrates's dialogue with Meno, as each man struggles to find productive ways to talk about this elusive concept. Despite the fact that they often come close to clarifying the nature of virtue, though, their understanding of it always erodes before they're able to determine what it actually is. In an attempt to better understand this difficult idea, Socrates briefly conceives of virtue as "knowledge," which then leads him to a consideration of "right opinion," an idea that can be more or less understood as good intuition, for lack of a better term. In the end, though, Socrates determines that virtue is "neither an inborn quality" nor something that can be "taught," upholding

that the only way a person can acquire virtue is if it is bestowed upon them by the gods. What's more, this "gift" is "not accompanied by understanding," meaning that even those who *do* possess virtue have no way of conceptualizing what it is, how they got it, or how they might impart it to others. In this way, then, Socrates sets forth a paradoxical viewpoint, suggesting that the only way he can understand virtue is by pointing to the human *inability* to understand virtue.

Meno is more interested in answering whether or not virtue can be taught than in defining virtue itself, and though Socrates thinks this is a foolish way to go about their discussion, he placates his friend by examining the teachability of virtue. To begin, he tests the hypothesis that "virtue is a kind of knowledge." Explaining this idea, he lays out a short syllogism upholding that good things only "benefit" the soul when a person possesses an "understanding" of those things; for example, "courage" can be beneficial in some cases and foolhardy in others. As such, that which benefits the soul is indeed a kind of knowledge, since this knowledge is what makes something like "courage" beneficial in the first place. Complicated logic aside, Socrates is simply exploring the idea that "virtue is a kind of knowledge," a notion that therefore suggests that virtuous people are not virtuous "by nature," since knowledge is something that is learned. However, Socrates finally exposes the flaw in this line of thinking by saying that if virtue were indeed "a kind of knowledge," then there would surely be people who taught virtue. Since there are seemingly no teachers who do this, though, he believes that "the subject cannot be taught," meaning that virtue must not be knowledge after all.

Continuing his inquiry into the nature of virtue, Socrates says that he and Meno were wrong to hypothesize that a person needs to have knowledge in order to benefit their soul. Indeed, he now suggests that "men succeed in their affairs" for reasons that don't necessarily have to do with their wisdom. However, Socrates and Meno don't know what, exactly, makes them succeed, which—according to them in this moment—means they don't know what makes men virtuous. This, in turn, leads Socrates to set forth the concept of "right opinion," outlining the idea that if someone happens to have an opinion that is not based in knowledge but is nevertheless true, then this opinion is just as valuable as knowledge. This complex idea is explained in greater detail in the Summary and Analysis section of this guide, but for the purpose of this discussion, it's simply important to understand that Socrates is acknowledging that a person can be virtuous (or act "beneficially") without knowing how or why this is the case. To that end, Socrates says, "Indeed, I too speak as one who does not have knowledge but is guessing. However, I certainly do not think I am guessing that right opinion is a different thing from knowledge. If I claim to know anything else—and I would make that claim about few things—I would put this down as one of the things I know." In this moment, then, Socrates embraces his own ignorance and encourages Meno to do the same, effectively failing to pinpoint virtue's defining qualities but expressing his overall satisfaction with the idea that such things are perhaps unknowable. At least, he points out, he's cognizant of his own ignorance—an idea that echoes his theory in *Apology* that true wisdom means recognizing one's own inability to possess any sort of meaningful knowledge.

There is one final aspect of Socrates's conception of virtue and its origins that is worth considering. He sees it as a chiefly religious problem that he and Meno can't determine what virtue is, and this is why he's relatively unbothered by their philosophical shortcomings. Addressing Meno at the end of the dialogue, he says, "If we were right in the way in which we spoke and investigated in this whole discussion, virtue would be neither an inborn quality nor taught, but comes to those who possess it as a gift from the gods and is not accompanied by understanding." If virtue is neither an "inborn quality" nor something that is "taught," there is seemingly no way to explain its existence in humans—that is, unless one believes, as Socrates does, that it is a "gift from the gods."

At first glance, this argument seems rather rhetorically flimsy compared to Socrates's previous points, which are philosophically complex and nuanced. However, this statement is more intellectually intricate than it first appears, since Socrates upholds that virtue "is not accompanied by understanding." Strangely enough, then, Socrates's way of making sense of virtue hinges upon the very fact that he *can't* make sense of it. His misunderstanding forms the basis of his understanding, and he accepts his inability as a human to conceive of such matters. By accepting this ignorance, Socrates yet again avoids feeling discouraged about the process of intellectual inquiry. Combining his characteristic faith in the pursuit of knowledge with his recognition of his own intellectual shortcomings, then, he intimates that questioning the nature of virtue is an inherently worthwhile endeavor, even if it won't yield definitive answers.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

SHAPE

To convince Meno of the importance of crafting accurate definitions, Socrates uses "shape" to symbolize the difference between a concept and a manifestation of that concept. When he asks Meno to define virtue, Meno references a number of qualities that make a person virtuous, but Socrates insists that this is a faulty way of defining an entire idea. To illustrate this point, he turns to the

notion of "shape," saying, "For example, if you wish, take roundness, about which I would say that it is a shape, but not simply that it is shape. I would not speak so of it because there are other shapes." By saying this, Socrates stresses the fact that "roundness" is simply an *example* of the concept of shape, not a description of the entire notion of shape itself. In this manner, he proceeds by providing his own definition, ultimately referring to geometrical terms in order to boil his description down to the simplest and least ambiguous possible way of talking about shape. In doing so, he accentuates how important it is when having philosophical discussions to use precise language, effectively allowing the concept of shape to represent Meno's inability to separate the overall nature of virtue from the many tangible manifestations of virtuousness.

THE SQUARES

The squares that Socrates draws in the dirt during his discussion of geometry with Meno's slave slowly come to represent his conception of the educational process. To show Meno that it's possible to make intellectual discoveries simply by "recollecting" knowledge that the soul has already "acquired," Socrates calls forth his slave and starts asking him questions about geometry—questions based on a collection of squares he draws on the ground. Although the slave has never studied geometry, he finds himself capable of answering Socrates's questions, partly because of the way Socrates guides him through the impromptu quiz. And though Socrates never gives the slave any kind of information, he does ask well-paced questions that subtly lead the young man to the correct answers. This, Socrates upholds, is evidence of the fact that a person simply needs to "recollect" the knowledge his soul has already gained, since all souls are immortal and have thus already experienced and learned everything a person might ever want to know. By guiding the slave through this demonstration, then, Socrates allows the squares to represent the very process of intellectual inquiry, which can be productive regardless of whether or not a person has any kind of formal education or training. In this way, the squares represent Socrates's belief that humans don't learn brand new information, but simply need help accessing the knowledge their souls have already collected—a viewpoint that showcases the important role teachers play as guides capable of "stir[ring] up" knowledge that might otherwise lie dormant within their students.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Hackett edition of *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo* published in 2002.

Meno Quotes

In particular, he accustomed you to give a bold and grand answer to any question you may be asked, as experts are likely to do. Indeed, he himself was ready to answer any Greek who wished to question him, and every question was answered. But here in Athens, my dear Meno, the opposite is the case, as if there were a dearth of wisdom, and wisdom seems to have departed hence to go to you. If then you want to ask one of us that sort of question, everyone will laugh and say: "Good stranger, you must think me happy indeed if you think I know whether virtue can be taught or how it comes to be; I am so far from knowing whether virtue can be taught or not that I do not even have any knowledge of what virtue itself is."

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Gorgias, Meno

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

Socrates speaks these words to Meno after Meno asks whether or not virtue can be taught. Referring to Gorgias, a well-known Sophist, Socrates says, "He accustomed you to give a bold and grand answer to any question you may be asked, as experts are likely to do." By saying this, Socrates underlines the fact that Gorgias—Meno's teacher—is a clever man capable of instructing people how to bend language to their will so that they can furnish an answer to any quandary they might encounter. And though this might seem like a beneficial talent to possess, Socrates underhandedly condemns this kind of rhetorical posturing, hinting that debating in this manner doesn't actually help a person access the truth of a given subject. This is why Socrates contrasts Meno and Gorgias's approach to the viewpoint that most Athenians adopt (at least in Socrates's characterization), which is humbler and more reserved. To emphasize this point, Socrates says that most Athenians wouldn't presume to know whether or not virtue can be taught. In fact, he says, they wouldn't even claim to know how virtue "comes to be," or what it is in the first place. By saying this, he effectively encourages Meno to examine his own rhetorical approach more carefully, urging him to stop and consider what he has clearly taken for granted.

SOCRATES: [...] if I were asking you what is the nature of bees, and you said that they are many and of all kinds, what would you answer if I asked you: "Do you mean that they are many and varied and different from one another insofar as they are bees? Or are they no different in that regard, but in some other respect, in their beauty, for example, or their size or in some other such way?" Tell me, what would you answer if thus questioned?

MENO: I would say that they do not differ from one another in being bees.

SOCRATES: If I went on to say: "Tell me, what is this very thing, Meno, in which they are all the same and do not differ from one another?" Would you be able to tell me?

MENO: I would.

SOCRATES: The same is true in the case of the virtues.

Related Characters: Meno, Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

When Socrates asks Meno to define virtue, Meno refers to a number of qualities that he considers virtuous. However, Socrates says that this isn't a logically sound way to form a definition. To illustrate his point, he asks Meno to consider "the nature of bees," pointing out that bees are often "different from one another" because they fluctuate in "size" or "beauty." Nevertheless, this doesn't change the fact that they are all bees—an idea Meno has no trouble comprehending or accepting. Moving on, Socrates asks Meno if it's possible to articulate how, exactly, bees "are all the same," and Meno says that this is indeed possible. This, Socrates explains, is the kind of definition he is searching for when it comes to the concept of virtue, for he wants to know what makes something virtuous. Unfortunately, though, Meno has only provided him with a list of examples of virtue, thus failing to provide any kind of overarching definition. In this way, Socrates urges his friend to use precise and unambiguous language to formulate a simple and incontrovertible understanding of virtue, which would ultimately enable both men to engage with more complex ideas later in their discussion.

SOCRATES: [...] Consider this further point: you say that virtue is to be able to rule. Shall we not add to this *justly and not unjustly*?

MENO: I think so, Socrates, for justice is virtue.

SOCRATES: Is it virtue, Meno, or a virtue? — What do you mean?

SOCRATES: As with anything else. For example, if you wish, take roundness, about which I would say that it is a shape, but not simply that it is shape. I would not so speak of it because there are other shapes.

MENO: You are quite right. So I too say that not only justice is a virtue but there are many other virtues.

Related Characters: Meno, Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

As Meno tries to formulate a definition of virtue, he suggests that the ability to "rule" is certainly part of what it means to be virtuous. Hearing this, Socrates says that it would be wise to add the words "justly and not unjustly" to this definition, since it's possible to "rule" in a way that is oppressive, evil, and—thus—unvirtuous. Meno, for his part, likes this idea, eagerly positing that Socrates's addition is a good one because "justice is virtue." Before going on, though, Socrates stops to consider this notion, asking, "Is it virtue, Meno, or a virtue?" This is an important distinction, and one that factors heavily into the rest of the dialogue, since Socrates is constantly trying to show Meno the difference between a concept itself and an *example* of a concept. To make this point, Socrates speaks about shape, saying that "roundness" is "a shape" but not shape itself. After all, "there are other shapes," so "roundness" can't be the defining feature of the entire concept of shape. Applying this idea to virtue, then, it becomes clear that "justice" isn't virtue, but rather *a* virtue, since Meno concedes that "there are many other virtues," too. Once again, then, Meno fails to deliver a definition of virtue that applies to all manifestations of the concept, instead offering up yet another singular example that does little to help him or Socrates understand the general idea's overarching nature.

What then is this to which the name shape applies? Try to tell me. If then you answered the man who was questioning about shape or color: "I do not understand what you want, my man, nor what you mean," he would probably wonder and say: "You do not understand that I am seeking that which is the same in all these cases?" Would you still have nothing to say, Meno, if one asked you: "What is this which applies to the round and the straight and the other things which you call shapes and which is the same in them all?" Try to say, that you may practice for your answer about virtue.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Meno

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

After Socrates impresses upon Meno the importance of finding definitions that articulate an idea's overarching nature rather than singular examples of that idea, he imagines what Meno might say to a person asking him to define "shape or color." Indeed, he uses this hypothetical person to express his own grievance—namely, that Meno doesn't understand that he's "seeking that which is the same in all […] cases." What Socrates is truly after is a definition that "applies" to all manifestations of a certain idea. Regarding the concept of shape, this would mean Meno must identify something that "applies to the round and the straight" and all other shapes. And though Socrates doesn't know what this might mean for virtue, he knows that whatever answer Meno provides must describe every instance—every manifestation—of virtuousness. By outlining this idea, then, Socrates once more emphasizes the importance of using the most straightforward and unambiguous definitions possible so that Meno can linguistically ground himself in certainty before moving on to investigate more complex philosophical notions.

SOCRATES: It seems then that the acquisition must be accompanied by justice or moderation or piety or some other part of virtue; if it is not, it will not be virtue, even though it provides good things.

MENO: How could there be virtue without these?

SOCRATES: Then failing to secure gold and silver, whenever it would not be just to do so, either for oneself or another, is not this failure to secure them also virtue?

MENO: So it seems.

SOCRATES: Then to provide these goods would not be virtue any more than not to provide them, but apparently whatever is done with justice will be virtue, and what is done without anything of the kind is wickedness.

Related Characters: Meno, Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

During one of his many attempts to define virtue, Meno suggests that virtue is the ability to "acquire" good or "beautiful" things, such as "gold and silver." Going along with this idea, Socrates says that this "acquisition" should "be accompanied by justice or moderation or piety," an idea Meno immediately accepts because he believes that virtue cannot exist "without these" things. However, Socrates complicates this idea by pointing out that it isn't always "just" to secure gold and silver. Indeed, earning money isn't an inherently fair process, since there are times when becoming rich requires a person to do bad things. As such, it's conceivable that it might be *more* virtuous to refrain from making money. In other words, if a person has an opportunity to make money in an unjust way but chooses not to, then they avoid succumbing to "wickedness" and thus act virtuously by *not* "secur[ing] gold and silver." In turn, Socrates disproves Meno's assertion that acquiring good or beautiful things is what it means to be virtuous, since this is not true in all cases. Once again, then, Socrates shows Meno how difficult it is to formulate a working definition of virtue that applies to all situations, ultimately urging his friend to avoid lazy generalizations while also stressing the importance of employing precise rhetorical language.

SOCRATES: […] So now I do not know what virtue is; perhaps you knew before you contacted me, but now you are certainly like one who does not know. Nevertheless, I want to examine and seek together with you what it may be.

MENO: How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?

SOCRATES: I know what you want to say, Meno. Do you realize what a debater's argument you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know? He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for.

Related Characters: Meno, Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

After Socrates destabilizes Meno's confidence by showing him that he doesn't actually know the meaning of virtue, he reassures his friend by telling him that he too doesn't understand the nature of virtue. "Perhaps you knew before you contacted me," he says, "but now you are certainly like one who does not know." Socrates is eager to "examine and seek" the answer alongside Meno, however, ultimately demonstrating his belief in the importance of dialogue and intellectual inquiry.

However, Meno remains skeptical. Now that he's thoroughly confused about how to define virtue, he feels incapable of even "search[ing]" for the answer, complaining that it is impossible to "search for something you do not know at all." Socrates, for his part, understands Meno's exasperation, but he rephrases the complaint so that Meno can see how pessimistic it is, emphasizing the fact that Meno is implying that "a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know." This concept is now known as Meno's Paradox, which upholds that it's basically impossible for anyone to learn anything because the educational process requires a certain kind of previous knowledge that would enable a person to recognize valuable information when they come upon it. Although Socrates doesn't propose a solution to this paradox in this specific passage, it's clear that he disapproves of Meno's pessimism, as made evident by the fact that he refers to this dilemma as a "debater's argument," suggesting that what Meno says is unnecessarily complicated and difficult to address. In this way, readers can intuit that Socrates will soon advocate for a way to circumnavigate this problem and remain committed to the process of intellectual inquiry.

As the soul is immortal, has been born often, and has seen all things here and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both about virtue and other things. As the whole of nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, nothing prevents a man, after recalling one thing only—a process men call learning—discovering everything else for himself, if he is brave and does not tire of the search, for searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection. We must, therefore, not believe that debater's argument, for it would make us idle, and fainthearted men like to hear it, whereas my argument makes them energetic and keen on the search. I trust that this is true, and I want to inquire along with you into the nature of virtue.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker), Meno

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Socrates upholds that people don't learn new information, but rather "recollect" knowledge that their souls have *already* learned. Socrates believes that the soul is immortal, meaning that it has lived many lives and thus "learned everything" there is to learn. By presenting learning as a process of "recollection," then, Socrates manages to sidestep the paradox that Meno has outlined—an idea that frames the pursuit of knowledge as an impossible and futile endeavor. According to Socrates's view, it doesn't matter if it's impossible to learn new information, for this isn't necessary in order to make intellectual discoveries. Rather, people simply need to tap into their souls and access the fountain of knowledge they've acquired throughout the course of history. This, Socrates asserts, is a better way to look at the process of intellectual inquiry, since Meno's pessimistic view runs the risk of making people "idle" and discouraging them from searching for knowledge. Socrates's view, on the other hand, makes people "energetic and keen on the search."

SOCRATES: You realize, Meno, what point he has reached in his recollection. At first he did not know what the basic line of the eight-foot square was; even now he does not yet know, but then he thought he knew, and answered confidently as if he did know, and he did not think himself at a loss, but now he does think himself at a loss, and as he does not know, neither does he think he knows.

MENO: That is true.

SOCRATES: So he is now in a better position with regard to the matter he does not know?

Related Characters: Meno, Socrates (speaker), Meno's Slave

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place while Socrates quizzes Meno's slave about geometry. Wanting to give Meno an example of how it's possible for people to access knowledge their immortal souls have already acquired, Socrates asks Meno's slave—who has never studied geometry—to answer a number of questions about squares he draws on the ground. To Meno's surprise, the slave provides the correct answer to all of Socrates's initial questions, at which point Socrates asks the young man if he thinks he will be able to figure out the next question. Based on his success, the slave says that he thinks he will be able to answer this question, but he soon sees that the problem is harder than he thought, and he finds himself stumped. At this point, Socrates turns to Meno and comments on the fact that the slave "thought he knew" the answer but now understands that he doesn't.

Socrates shows Meno that the slave first had to "recollect" his soul's knowledge about geometry before he could identify the gaps in his knowledge. In other words, it takes certain amount of wisdom to comprehend the depths of one's own ignorance. And though it might seem like a bad thing that the slave is stumped, Socrates insists that the young man is in a "better position" than he was before, because now he at least "knows" what he "does not know." In turn, Socrates suggests that an important part of the process of education and discovery involves accepting one's own intellectual shortcomings.

SOCRATES: What do you think, Meno? Has he, in his answers, expressed any opinion that was not his own?

MENO: No, they were all his own.

SOCRATES: And yet, as we said a short time ago, he did not know? — That is true.

SOCRATES: So these opinions were in him, were they not? — Yes.

SOCRATES: So the man who does not know has within himself true opinions about the things that he does not know? — So it appears.

SOCRATES: These opinions have now just been stirred up like a dream, but if he were repeatedly asked about these same things in various ways, you know that in the end his knowledge about these things would be as accurate as anyone's.

Related Characters: Meno, Socrates (speaker), Meno's Slave

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout *Meno*, Socrates frequently summarizes the conclusions he and Meno have just made, effectively going through their investigations step by step and restating their findings in simpler language. This is yet another example of his commitment to finding unambiguous, straightforward answers. In this passage, though, Socrates does more than simply repeat what he and Meno have determined. As he rehashes the fact that Meno's slave was able to answer geometrical questions even though he's never studied geometry, he slowly introduces a new idea regarding "true opinions." Whereas Socrates's original point had to do with the difference between learning new information and "recollect[ing]" old knowledge that the soul has already acquired, now he makes a subtle transition, ultimately hinting at the observations he is about to make in the following pages about "true opinion," an idea that is integral to the way he approaches both the process of learning and the nature of virtue. This is an important moment, since it's critical to understand that Socrates believes "true opinion"—which is similar to good intuition—is one of the primary things that enables a person to successfully "recollect" knowledge, thus rendering it a vital part of the learning process.

SOCRATES: [...] We were right to agree that good men must be beneficent, and that this could not be otherwise. [...] And that they will be beneficent if they give us correct direction in our affairs. [...] But that one cannot give correct direction if one does not have knowledge; to this our agreement is likely to be incorrect. — How do you mean?

SOCRATES: I will tell you. A man who knew the way to Larissa[...], and went there and directed others would surely lead them well and correctly? — Certainly.

SOCRATES: What if someone had had a correct opinion as to which was the way but had not gone there nor indeed had knowledge of it, would he not also lead correctly? — Certainly.

SOCRATES: And as long as he has the right opinion about that of which the other has knowledge, he will not be a worse guide than the one who knows, as he has a true opinion, though not knowledge.

Related Characters: Meno, Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

This passage appears shortly after Socrates and Meno determine that their hypothesis that virtue is "a kind of knowledge" is logically unsound. Retracing their argument, Socrates suggests that they were "right to agree that good men must be beneficent" and that "beneficent" men can give "correct direction." But, he says, they were wrong to think that a person "cannot give correct direction" if he "does not have knowledge." In other words, he suggests in this moment that it's possible for a person to be right about something without knowing *why* he's right. By way of example, he references the fact that a person who doesn't know the way to Larissa but nonetheless accurately directs people there is just as useful as a person who *does* know the way to Larissa. This is an important point, as it points toward Socrates's later conclusion that virtuousness is often accompanied by a lack of human "understanding."

SOCRATES: [...] if it is not through knowledge, the only alternative is that it is through right opinion that statemen follow the right course for their cities. As regards knowledge, they are no different from soothsayers and prophets. They too say many true things when inspired, but they have no knowledge of what they are saying. [...] And so, Meno, is it right to call divine these men who without any understanding, are right in much that is of importance in what they say and do? —Certainly.

Related Characters: Meno, Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

Near the end of their discussion, Socrates and Meno contemplate what it is that makes virtuous people virtuous. Having determined that virtue is not "a kind of knowledge"—which was one of their hypotheses—Socrates concludes that "statesmen" who are virtuous must be so because of "right opinion," which helps them "follow the right course for their cities." Interestingly enough, this means that such men have no idea why, exactly, they are able to act virtuously, since "right opinion" doesn't necessarily include understanding. Nevertheless, though, Socrates says that it is "right to call divine these men" who are so virtuous, even if they're completely "without any understanding" about the nature of their own virtue. In turn, he urges Meno to embrace ignorance while also hinting at the fact that even uninformed manifestations of virtue are "divine"—a notion that prepares Socrates to deliver his final point about the fact that virtue is god-given.

[...] if we were right in the way in which we spoke and investigated in this whole discussion, virtue would be neither an inborn quality nor taught, but comes to those who possess it as a gift from the gods which is not accompanied by understanding, unless there is someone among our statesmen who can make another into a statesman.

Related Characters: Socrates (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Socrates reaches his final conclusion about virtue, which is—in truth—not very conclusive. Indeed, after spending the entire dialogue interrogating the nature of virtue and conducting philosophical investigations that utilize logic and reason, Socrates surrenders himself to the idea that virtue is "a gift from the gods which is not accompanied by understanding." Having proved that virtue is "neither an inborn quality nor taught," Socrates finds himself at a philosophical impasse, unable to determine how, exactly, humans acquire virtue. To solve this problem, he suggests not only that virtue is god-given, but that this

process cannot be understood by humans, an idea that aligns with the fact that he and Meno have been relatively unsuccessful in their attempt to articulate the teachability and nature of virtue.

Some scholars read this portion of *Meno* as ironic or insincere, upholding that Socrates doesn't truly believe that virtue is "a gift from the gods which is not accompanied by understanding." However, other readers take his words at face value, since these remarks aren't necessarily out of step with his willingness to embrace his own ignorance.

Regardless of whether or not Socrates truly believes what he says in this moment, though, it's worth noting that he doesn't seem discouraged by the notion that virtue is "not accompanied by understanding." Rather, he remains open-minded and eager to have engaged in philosophical conversations with people like Meno, thereby proving once again his commitment to the value of intellectual inquiry regardless of whether or not he thinks he'll successfully stumble upon definitive answers.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

MENO

"Can you tell me, Socrates," asks Meno without preamble, "can virtue be taught?" He then asks if virtue is "the result of practice"—and therefore "not teachable"—or if it is perhaps an innate quality. In response, Socrates acknowledges that Meno is used to the idea that he can find an answer for any question, no matter how complex. This, Socrates says, is because Meno has studied with Gorgias, who has taught him to "give a bold and grand answer to any question." Socrates, on the other hand, doesn't think this way. In fact, he suggests that the best way to respond to Meno's question is to say: "I am so far from knowing whether virtue can be taught or not that I do not even have any knowledge of what virtue itself is."

When Meno—a political figure visiting Athens from Thessaly—asks Socrates to tell him whether or not virtue can be taught, Socrates characteristically scrutinizes the very process of answering such a question. Rather than jumping directly into a consideration of virtue, he takes a moment to evaluate the process of inquiry that Meno is most likely looking for. Socrates knows that Meno is used to rhetorically clever answers because he has studied with Gorgias, a Sophist known for teaching his students how to speak persuasively on any matter at all. However, Socrates knows that true wisdom means recognizing one's own ignorance, and so he begins by destabilizing the very idea that he—or, for that matter, anyone—knows what virtue is in the first place. In this way, he begins the dialogue by urging Meno to let go of his unexamined confidence in his own knowledge.

Clarifying why, exactly, he doesn't know whether or not virtue can be taught, Socrates says, "If I do not know what something is, how could I know what qualities it possesses?" Meno understands his point, but finds it hard to believe that Socrates truly doesn't know what virtue is. To his surprise, Socrates reiterates his own ignorance and even goes one step further by suggesting that he has never met *anyone* who knows the true nature of virtue. "Did you not meet Gorgias when he was here?" Meno asks, but Socrates assures him that he did and that, while Gorgias may indeed know what virtue is, Socrates can't remember if this is the case, and so they should leave the man out of their discussion.

Before answering whether or not virtue can be taught, Socrates wants to investigate what virtue actually is. This, he points out, will be an important part of any discussion regarding virtue's teachability, since it's impossible to "know what qualities" something possesses without fully understanding what it is. To further illustrate his point, he tries to destabilize Meno's belief that everyone knows the meaning of virtue. Indeed, whereas Meno takes it for granted that he and Gorgias understand the meaning of virtue, Socrates wants to scrutinize the matter. He knows that it's important to straightforwardly define a concept before venturing into philosophical discussions about its related ideas.

Moving on, Socrates asks Meno to define virtue. "It is not hard to tell you, Socrates," Meno replies. "First, if you want the virtue of a man, it is easy to say that a man's virtue consists of being able to manage public affairs and in so doing to benefit his friends and harm his enemies and to be careful that no harm comes to himself." He then goes on to say that the "virtue of a woman" is different, as is the "virtue of a child." Indeed, he believes that "there is virtue for every action and every age, for every task of ours and every one of us."

In keeping with his belief that one must solidly define an idea before investigating its philosophical implications, Socrates urges Meno to articulate what, exactly, he thinks virtue is. In turn, Meno sets forth an interpretation of virtue that is highly variable. Indeed, Meno believes that virtue changes depending on context. Although this satisfies Meno himself, it seems obvious that Socrates will take issue with this definition because it leaves so much room for interpretation and thus lacks true clarity.

Interested in Meno's notion that there are many different kinds of virtue, Socrates says, "If I were asking you what is the nature of bees, and you said that they are many and of all kinds, what would you answer if I asked you: 'Do you mean that they are many and varied and different from one another insofar as they are bees? Or are they no different in that regard, but in some other respect, in their beauty, for example, or their size or in some other such way?'" Considering this, Meno decides that he would assert—if questioned in this manner—that the bees "do not differ from one another in being bees." In response, Socrates asks him if he would be able to articulate what makes the bees "all the same," and Meno says that he would indeed be able to make this point clear.

In this moment, Socrates is trying to get Meno to see that a definition must be all-encompassing, something that applies to all parts of a given category regardless of minor nuances or fluctuations. For example, bees differ from one another, but not "insofar as they are bees." In other words, two bees might be different sizes, but they are still both bees. As such, any definition of what it means to be a bee must apply to all *bees. This, of course, is not the kind of definition Meno has offered of virtue, since he has defined virtuousness in multiple different ways.*

"The same is true in the case of the virtues," Socrates says, pointing out that even though there are many different kinds of virtue, "all of them have one and the same form." Because of this, one must identify what this all-encompassing "form" is when trying to define virtue as a whole. Turning back to Meno's assertion that there are different kinds of virtue for men, women, and children, Socrates says, "Do you think that there is one health for man and another for woman? Or, if it is health, does it have the same form everywhere, whether in man or in anything else whatever?" Meno, for his part, answers by saying that "the health of a man" is "the same as that of a woman," and then Socrates encourages him to affirm that this is also the case with "size and strength."

Simply put, Socrates wants to show Meno that the only useful kind of definition is one that is universally applicable. Indeed, "health" isn't contingent upon a person's gender—a human is simply healthy or unhealthy. As such, it would be logically unsound to provide a definition of healthiness that changes according to whether a person is a man or a woman (of course, there might be different indicators of healthiness in men and women, but the concept of overall wellness remains the same). Once again, then, Socrates stresses the importance of employing accurate and all-encompassing definitions. In doing so, he encourages Meno to examine his understanding of virtue more carefully, thereby laying the groundwork for a more thoughtful and precise conversation.

Having established that there is "no difference" between the ways in which men and women are healthy or strong, Socrates states that there is also "no difference" between the ways in which men and women are virtuous. However, Meno upholds that virtue isn't "like those other cases." As such, Socrates points out that, although Meno says virtuous men "manage the city" whereas virtuous women "manage the household," both of these traits require "justice and moderation." In turn, he says that "all human beings are good in the same way, for they become good by acquiring the same qualities." Finally, then, Meno agrees with the idea that there is only one kind of virtue.

Socrates makes an important rhetorical move when he points out that, although Meno suggests that there's a difference between the ways in which men and women are virtuous, this difference simply consists of two manifestations of the same qualities: "justice and moderation." As such, men and women actually are *virtuous in the same ways, thereby proving that Meno's fluctuating definition of virtue is inadequate and poorly considered.*

"Since then the virtue of all is the same," Socrates says, "try to tell me and to remember what Gorgias, and you with him, said that that same thing is." In response, Meno says that virtue must be the ability to "rule over people." However, Socrates adds that the truly virtuous way to "rule" would be "justly and not unjustly." Meno agrees with this, stating that "justice is virtue," but Socrates questions this, saying, "Is it virtue, Meno, or a virtue?" When Meno expresses confusion, he directs his friend's attention to the concept of "roundness," saying that "roundness" is "a **shape**," but not something that defines the concept of shape itself. "I would not speak so of it because there are other shapes," Socrates says.

Having finally accepted that "the virtue of all is the same," Meno struggles to pinpoint an all-encompassing definition of virtue. However, he does so by pointing not to a definition of virtue as a concept, but to an example *of the concept. In the same way that "roundness" is a shape but doesn't define the idea of shape itself, "justice" is only one manifestation of virtue, not the meaning of virtue as a whole. By pointing this out, Socrates challenges Meno to speak more precisely.*

"So I too say that not only justice is a virtue but there are many other virtues," Meno replies, responding to Socrates's example of "roundness." Then, when Socrates urges him to name these "other virtues," Meno identifies "courage," "moderation," "wisdom," and "munificence." "We are having the same trouble again, Meno," Socrates replies, "though in another way; we have found many virtues while looking for one, but we cannot find the one which covers all the others." Speaking honestly, Meno admits that he simply cannot "yet find" the answer Socrates is looking for, and Socrates admits that he's unsurprised. Nevertheless, though, he says that he is "eager" to "make progress" by continuing this conversation.

Having emphasized the importance of finding a definition of virtue that "covers all" manifestations of goodness, Socrates brings Meno into a state of confusion. Indeed, Meno expresses his perplexity—an important point to note, considering that Meno was originally so surprised when Socrates suggested he didn't know the meaning of virtue. Though this state of confusion might seem counterproductive to Meno and Socrates's desire to have an insightful conversation about the nature of virtue and its teachability, Socrates clearly believes that this perplexity is a good thing, since he's "eager" to "make progress" by forging onward in the dialogue. In turn, readers see that Socrates isn't discouraged by his own ignorance. He's actually motivated by the gaps in his knowledge, ultimately framing the process of intellectual inquiry as something that is inherently worthwhile even in the face of possibly unanswerable questions.

Socrates points out that, like the fact that "roundness" is a **shape** but doesn't define the entire concept of shape, white is a color but doesn't explain what color is as a general idea. Acting out a hypothetical conversation between Meno and someone seeking the definition of color, Socrates says that this pretend person might say, "You do not understand that I am seeking that which is the same in all […] cases?" Moving on, Socrates urges Meno to articulate a definition that applies to all shapes, but Meno asks him to answer the question himself, and Socrates agrees on the condition that Meno will then tell him about virtue.

Again, Socrates expresses his desire to find a logically sound and linguistically precise definition of virtue, this time urging Meno to speak accurately about shape as a way of illustrating the fact that they must "seek" all-encompassing descriptions rather than ones that are variable and context-dependent.

To define **shape**, Socrates says, "Let us say that shape is that which alone of existing things always follows color." Meno, for his part, finds this answer unsatisfactory and asks Socrates to assume that the person asking him this question also doesn't know what color is. As such, Socrates asks Meno if he understands or agrees with the notion that there can be an "end" to a thing. "I mean such a thing as a limit or boundary," he says, and Meno says that he is familiar with this idea. "Further," Socrates continues, "you call something a plane, and something else a solid, as in geometry?" Again, Meno confirms that he understands, and so Socrates says, "From this you may understand what I mean by shape, for I say [...] that a shape is that which limits a solid; in a word, a shape is the limit of a solid."

When Socrates says that there is "such a thing as a limit or a boundary," he encourages Meno to consider the fact that all objects have edges and boundaries. To be even more specific, he references the geometrical concept of "solid[s]" and "plane[s]," further reducing his description to the simplest, most straightforward elements. By doing this, he removes any ambiguity that might get in the way of complete comprehension and clarity. In the end, he manages to provide a definition of shape that is highly specific but also quite general, one that applies to circles, squares, triangles, and any other conceivable form. This, he intimates, is the kind of definition that he and Meno are seeking for virtue.

Satisfied with Socrates's definition of **shape**, Meno asks him to define color, which he does in an equally simplistic way, reducing color to the idea that things emit "effluvia" that can be perceived by human senses, including "sight." As such, color is "an effluvium from shapes which fits the sight and is perceived." When Meno says that he likes this definition, Socrates says, "It is a theatrical answer so it pleases you, Meno."

Socrates uses the word "effluvia" to refer to the idea that color emits a flow that is visible to the eye. Although this concept is somewhat abstract to contemporary readers, Meno would have been familiar with the idea, which was set forth by the ancient philosopher Empedocles. As such, Socrates's definition of color is—like his definition of shape—effective because it breaks the concept down into precise and simple ideas (according to Meno, that is). At the same time, though, Socrates pokes fun of Meno for liking this answer so much, since he knows that he has pandered to Meno's affinity for "theatrical answers," which he no doubt inherited from the rhetorically clever Sophists.

Moving on, Socrates again asks Meno to define virtue, so Meno suggests that it is the ability to "desire beautiful things and have the power to acquire them." Hearing this, Socrates asks if Meno thinks that "the man who desires beautiful things desires good things," and Meno says that he does indeed think this. Furthermore, Socrates asks if "all men desire good things," and Meno posits that some people "desire bad things." To clarify, then, Socrates asks if people who "desire bad things" *know* these things are bad or simply mistake them to be good. "I think there are both kinds," Meno says. Next, Socrates asks if Meno thinks people ever desire something even when they know it is bad, and Meno says that he does think this sometimes happens.

At this point in the dialogue, Socrates proceeds with an extended cross-examination of Meno's theory that virtue is the ability to "desire" and "acquire" beautiful things. Although he doesn't yet draw any conclusions about this idea, his questions follow his characteristic style of interrogating his conversational partners—a rhetorical technique that is present throughout Plato's dialogues, in which Socrates frequently confuses his interlocutors simply by encouraging them to carefully investigate their own claims.

"What do you mean by desiring?" Socrates asks Meno. "Is it to secure for oneself?" Meno says this is indeed what he means, and Socrates goes on to prove that no one purposefully "secure[s]" *bad* things, since doing so would mean knowingly "harm[ing]" oneself (because bad things "harm" people). Having said this, Socrates reminds Meno that he has said virtue is "to desire good things and have the power to secure them," ultimately urging Meno to give several examples of "good things." In turn, Meno suggests that "gold and silver" are "good things," and Socrates adds that one must "acquire" "gold and silver" "justly and piously" in order to remain virtuous. As such, according to this line of thinking, "failing to secure gold and silver" when it wouldn't be "just to do so" would actually be virtuous.

Socrates's cross-examination is somewhat difficult to follow in this moment, since he asks Meno to answer many questions without revealing yet what, exactly, he's getting at. To boil down his argument, though, Socrates is simply pointing out that acquiring money isn't always virtuous. In fact, he says, sometimes it's more virtuous to refrain *from acquiring "gold and silver." This is because a person must behave "justly and piously," and it's not always just or pious to "secure" money. In this way, Socrates shows Meno that his definition of virtue is faulty, for it doesn't apply to all situations. It's also worth paying attention to the fact that Socrates asks Meno to articulate what it means to "desire" something, once again underlining the importance of providing clear definitions—definitions that will ultimately enable the two men to engage in a more thoughtful and philosophically complex dialogue.*

Since Socrates has demonstrated that acquiring gold or silver isn't virtuous in and of itself, Meno concludes that virtue must depend on whether or not a person acts "with justice." However, Socrates reminds Meno that they've already stated that "justice" is a "part of virtue." In turn, he shows Meno that this new definition is also flawed, since they've established that something cannot be defined by its smaller parts. "I begged you just now not to break up or fragment virtue," he says, "and I gave examples of how you should answer. You paid no attention, but you tell me that virtue is to be able to secure good things with justice, and justice, you say, is a part of virtue."

Once again, Socrates shows Meno the flaws in this thinking. This time, he treats Meno's assertion that "justice" is virtue with the same kind of intellectual scrutiny he applied to his investigation of the definition of shape. In the same way that a circle is a shape but doesn't define the concept of shape itself, justice is a virtue but doesn't articulate what virtue is as a broader idea.

Meno's argument, Socrates says, is that "every action is virtue if it is performed with a part of virtue." Unfortunately, though, he hasn't defined what virtue is in the first place, so they are no closer to understanding the concept than they were before. "You must not think, while the nature of virtue as a whole is still under inquiry, that by answering in terms of the parts of virtue you can make its nature clear to anyone," Socrates says. In keeping with this, he once again asks Meno to define virtue, this time making it even more clear that his friend must find an all-encompassing way to articulate the concept as a whole.

Again, Socrates stresses the importance of language. If he and Meno were able to linguistically ground themselves by providing a simple and incontrovertible definition of virtue, they would certainly be able to speak more easily and productively about the entire matter. Unfortunately, though, Meno has failed multiple times to hit upon a working definition of the concept, instead investing himself in examples that don't actually reveal the overall nature of virtue.

Exasperated, Meno brings up the fact that people talk about how Socrates is "always in a state of perplexity," suggesting that he forces confusion upon anyone he speaks to, "numb[ing]" them as if he is "the broad torpedo fish." This, Meno says, is what has happened in this conversation, for although he (Meno) used to know what virtue is, he is now at a total loss to define it. "Yet I have made many speeches about virtue before large audiences on a thousand occasions, very good speeches as I thought, but now I cannot even say what it is," he laments.

Socrates is well-known for confusing people by encouraging them to question their unexamined beliefs. Unsurprisingly, this has earned him an unfavorable reputation throughout Athens. In fact, this is the exact reason that he stands accused of impiety and slander in Apology. Simply put, people resent him for throwing them into utter "perplexity." However, Socrates doesn't confuse his interlocutors out of a sense of maliciousness, but because he knows that the only way to embark on valuable intellectual inquiries is to first admit one's own ignorance. This, it seems, is why he has destabilized Meno's superficial understanding of virtue.

Reacting to Meno's accusation that he is like a "torpedo fish," Socrates says that he only "resemble[s]" this creature because he, too, is "numb." "For I myself do not have the answer when I perplex others," he says. "So now I do not know what virtue is; perhaps you knew before you contacted me, but now you are certainly like one who does not know. Nevertheless, I want to examine and seek together with you what it may be."

In Apology, Socrates upholds that the only valuable kind of human wisdom comes from embracing one's own ignorance. In keeping with this, he happily accepts the fact that he himself is just as "numb" as the people he speaks to, since he has no problem admitting his own intellectual shortcomings. However, this doesn't discourage him from engaging in thoughtful debate. In fact, he believes in the process of intellectual discovery so much that he wants to "examine and seek" the nature of virtue with Meno. This is a testament to how much he invests himself in the pursuit of philosophical discovery.

Meno expresses his doubt that he and Socrates will ever learn what virtue truly is. "How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?" In turn, Socrates points out how pessimistic this viewpoint is, rephrasing it to sound even more cynical. "Do you realize what a debater's argument you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know?" he asks. "He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for."

The dilemma Meno outlines in this moment is now commonly known as Meno's Paradox. According to this idea, it is impossible for anyone to learn anything, since—under this interpretation—a person won't be able to find the knowledge they are "search[ing] for" because they don't know what, exactly, they're looking for in the first place. Needless to say, this is a very pessimistic way to view the process of critical inquiry and education, since it ultimately discourages people from trying to make any intellectual discoveries at all.

Having outlined the dilemma Meno has set forth, Socrates says that he disagrees with the idea that it's futile to "search for" the meaning of virtue. Referencing what he's heard from "priests and priestesses," he says that the "human soul is immortal." Indeed, he believes that the soul is reborn each time someone dies, meaning that it is "never destroyed." As such, the soul has "seen all things here and in the underworld," meaning that there is "nothing which it has not learned." Because of this, Socrates thinks the soul can "recollect the things it knew before, both about virtue and other things." What's more, he thinks that since a person can "recall" one piece of knowledge, there is nothing stopping him from "discovering everything else for himself, if he is brave and does not tire of the search."

In contrast to Meno's pessimistic ideas regarding education, Socrates remains optimistic about the process of intellectual inquiry. Rather than accepting the fact that it's futile to search for knowledge, he uses his spiritual and religious beliefs to help him remain motivated to continue making intellectual discoveries. However, it's worth noting that he does agree with Meno that it is impossible to learn, at least in the conventional sense of the word. Indeed, Socrates thinks the soul has already gathered all the knowledge there is to gather, meaning that a person merely needs to "recollect" what they want to know. Though this aligns with Meno's notion that it's impossible to acquire new *information, at least this viewpoint gives people an incentive to engage in intellectual pursuits. Socrates even believes that the only thing limiting a person's ability to "recollect" knowledge is laziness, which is why he thinks people should be "brave" and resist the temptation to "tire of the search" for information.*

Since people can "recollect" the knowledge their soul has already acquired, Socrates rejects Meno's pessimistic viewpoint that frames the pursuit of knowledge as futile. "We must […] not believe that debater's argument," he says, "for it would make us idle, and fainthearted men like to hear it, whereas my argument makes them energetic and keen on the search. I trust that this is true, and I want to inquire along with you into the nature of virtue." However, Meno stops him from venturing any further, asking Socrates to illustrate how, exactly, "learning is recollection."

When Socrates talks about "that debater's argument," he is referring to Meno's Paradox that Meno has set forth. Whereas this viewpoint makes people "idle" and disincentivizes them from engaging in thoughtful inquiry, Socrates's concept of learning as "recollection" makes people "energetic and keen" to pursue knowledge. In keeping with this, Socrates expresses his desire to "inquire" into "the nature of virtue" alongside Meno, ultimately believing that they might be able to help each other "recollect" knowledge that their souls have already acquired.

To prove that "learning is recollection," Socrates turns to Meno's slave, a young man who has never been taught geometry. Drawing **squares** on the ground, Socrates asks the slave a number of guided geometrical questions about the size of the shapes, each one increasing in complexity but logically following from the previous answer. Despite the fact that he has never been educated or trained to understand this information, the slave finds himself capable of answering Socrates's mathematical questions. At one point, Socrates turns to Meno and says, "You see, Meno, that I am not teaching the boy anything, but all I do is question him."

To illustrate the fact that people have the ability to "recollect" information stored in their souls, Socrates demonstrates that an effective teacher doesn't tell a person information, but instead guides them through it in a way that makes sense, ultimately allowing the student to draw their own conclusions. Although Meno's slave has never been taught geometry, he is perfectly capable of using common sense to answer Socrates's questions, especially since Socrates has drawn squares on the ground, making it easier for the slave to conceptualize the geometrical concepts in a tangible way. In turn, Socrates showcases the fact that teaching often means little more than encouraging a student to find knowledge within themselves.

During the geometry lesson, Socrates asks Meno's slave a question the young man thinks he can answer, but as their conversation continues, he realizes he doesn't, in truth, know how to go about solving the problem. "You realize, Meno, what point he has reached in his recollection," Socrates says. "At first he did not know what the basic line of the eight-foot square was; even now he does not yet know, but then he thought he knew, and answered confidently as if he did know, and he did not think himself at a loss, but now he does think himself at a loss, and as he does not know, neither does he think he knows." This, Socrates suggests, is a better intellectual position to be in, since now Meno's slave has pinpointed what he doesn't know and is eager to remedy this gap in his understanding by pushing onward.

It's worth remembering that before this dialogue, Meno was confident that he knew the meaning of virtue. After trying to answer Socrates's questions, though, he realized that he doesn't actually have a solid understanding of the concept. Similarly, Meno's slave confidently answers Socrates's questions at the beginning of the geometry lesson, but he soon reaches a point of confusion. However, he never would have been able to even reach this point of confusion before he engaged in this process of intellectual inquiry. And although this confusion might seem counterproductive, Socrates argues that it is actually a necessary part of the educational process. After all, Socrates knows that one must acknowledge one's own ignorance before engaging in genuine critical inquiry. By showing Meno's slave the gaps in his own knowledge, then, Socrates gives him a chance to identify his intellectual shortcomings, so that he can go forth and address them.

Having established that Meno's slave has "benefited from being numbed," Socrates tells Meno to observe how he brings the young man "out of his perplexity" by doing nothing other than asking questions. After another short exchange in which Socrates quizzes the slave, the young man finally solves the problem he previously had trouble answering. Turning to Meno, Socrates says, "These opinions have now just been stirred up like a dream." Proving that the slave has simply found "knowledge within" himself, Socrates reminds Meno that this is nothing but "recollection." After all, the slave did not "acquire" these "opinions" during his present life, meaning that he must have gotten them from some other—previous—life.

When Socrates says, "These opinions have now just been stirred up like a dream," he does more than simply demonstrate the power of "recollection"—he also shows the importance of guided instruction. Although he believes that it's impossible to acquire completely new information, he believes that teachers play a significant role in the process of "recollection." While they can't simply impart knowledge to students, teachers can help guide them through the process of intellectual inquiry, ultimately helping "stir up" knowledge from the students' past lives.

Socrates tells Meno that he believes this conception of learning as "recollection" is a much better way to approach the educational process than the pessimistic viewpoint Meno outlined when he said that no one can learn anything. "I would contend at all costs in both word and deed as far as I could that we will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know, rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it," Socrates adds, and Meno agrees.

Once again, Socrates outlines the reason he's so uncomfortable with Meno's Paradox, which he believes will keep people from even trying *to "look for" knowledge. Rather than succumbing to the pessimistic viewpoint that it's futile to try to learn, Socrates simply reframes the educational process by casting it as an act of "recollection" instead of brand-new discovery.*

Having settled this matter, Meno asks Socrates once again to answer his original question about whether or not virtue can be taught. Although Socrates obliges Meno's request, he first reminds his friend that he thinks their discussion will be inconclusive because they haven't yet hit upon a definition of virtue itself. Nevertheless, he begins his examination, telling Meno that he will investigate the question by setting forth hypotheses and then testing whether or not they are accurate. In keeping with this, he decides that they should start by hypothesizing that virtue is "a kind of knowledge." If this is the case, he says, it must be teachable, since it is "plain to anyone" that knowledge can be taught.

In Plato's dialogues, Socrates cross-examines his interlocutors by asking them question after question in order to reveal the weak spots in their logic. In this moment, though, Socrates changes his rhetorical technique by deciding to interrogate his own hypotheses. Rather than going back and forth with Meno, he investigates his own statements. This is most likely because Meno has already been convinced that he doesn't understand the nature of virtue. Since Socrates is equally ignorant when it comes to knowing what virtue is, he wants to explore the matter alongside Meno, thus engaging in a joint philosophical inquiry instead of a cross-examination.

"The next point to consider seems to be whether virtue is knowledge or something else," Socrates says. To do this, he asks Meno if virtue is "itself something good." "Of course," Meno answers. If virtue is knowledge, then, all good things are also knowledge. This means, Socrates explains, that there cannot be anything that is good that is not also knowledge. What's more, he says that virtue must be "beneficial," because all good things are "beneficial." As such, Socrates decides to "examine what kinds of things" are "beneficial," agreeing with Meno that there are a number of things that fall into this category. However, Socrates points out that sometimes certain things that are normally "beneficial" can actually be "harmful." For instance, "courage" can be a form of "recklessness" if it isn't accompanied by "understanding" or "wisdom."

To grasp what Socrates is saying, it will be helpful to understand the first rhetorical move he makes regarding virtue, goodness, and knowledge. To begin, Socrates says that virtue is "itself something good." Therefore, virtue is goodness. Next, he turns his attention to the original hypothesis, which asserts that virtue is knowledge. As such, if virtue is goodness and *virtue is knowledge, then goodness must also be knowledge, and vice versa. Having established this, Socrates simply restates the previous idea that a definition must apply in all scenarios, meaning that if goodness is knowledge, then everything that is good must be a form of knowledge, and all forms of knowledge must be good. At this point, Socrates points out that certain things that are normally good (or "beneficial") can also be "harmful" if they're done without "understanding" or "wisdom." Knowledge, then, is what determines whether something is good or not in the first place.*

Restating his previous point, Socrates says that certain traits—like courage—are "beneficial" if they are "directed by wisdom," but if they are "directed by ignorance," they are "harmful." Furthermore, he upholds that "all the qualities of the soul are in themselves neither beneficial nor harmful." Indeed, it is "wisdom or folly" that determines whether or not a "quality" is "beneficial" to the soul. Because this is the case, it becomes clear that virtue must be wisdom, since wisdom is what determines whether or not something is "beneficial."

The line of thinking that Socrates sets forth in this portion of the dialogue is often multi-layered, making it hard to remember his original point, which is actually rather simple: virtue is that which benefits the soul, and knowledge benefits the soul, so virtue must be "a kind of knowledge." This, at least, aligns with Socrates's original hypothesis, though it seems likely that he'll soon identify a weakness in this argument.

Going on, Socrates suggests that virtuous people are "not so by nature," since he upholds that if there were people who were "good" by nature, society would identify them when they're young and "guard them in the Acropolis" so they can't be corrupted. Of course, this doesn't happen, which Socrates thinks is proof that people aren't innately good. "Since the good are not good by nature," he says, "does learning make them so?" Meno says this makes sense, since, according to their original hypothesis, virtue can be taught if it is knowledge.

Socrates makes an important point when he says that people aren't good "by nature." If this were the case, it would most likely be difficult to teach virtue, since it's quite a challenge to show people how to acquire an inborn trait. Meno agrees with this interpretation, suddenly throwing his faith into the teachability of virtue, though it seems increasingly likely that Socrates will soon reveal a flaw in the argument that virtue is knowledge.

Despite Meno's newfound optimism, Socrates suggests that they have made a mistake by hypothesizing that virtue is knowledge. After all, if virtue were knowledge, then it could be taught, but there are no teachers Socrates can think of who teach virtue. This, Socrates believes, is an indication that virtue isn't knowledge after all. However, he turns to Anytus (who is Meno's host in Athens and later becomes one of the people who accuses Socrates of slander and impiety) and investigates whether or not there are indeed teachers of virtue. The only people Socrates can think of, he tells Anytus, are the Sophists. "By Heracles, hush, Socrates," Anytus responds. "May no one of my household or friends, whether citizen or stranger, be mad enough to go to these people and be harmed by them, for they clearly cause the ruin and corruption of their followers."

Although Socrates has already poked fun of Meno's sophistic tendency to boisterously answer any question he encounters, in this moment he suggests that the Sophists are perhaps the only teachers of virtue. However, he seemingly does this to simply agitate Anytus, one of the men who ends up sentencing him to death in Apology. By playing devil's advocate and arguing that the Sophists are the only teachers of virtue, Socrates cleverly invites Anytus to refute this point, thereby helping him prove that there are, in fact, no teachers of virtue anywhere in Athens. In turn, he successfully challenges the idea that virtue is a "kind of knowledge," for if this were the case, surely there would be teachers of virtue, since knowledge is teachable.

Addressing Anytus's harsh view of the Sophists, Socrates asks if one of these teachers has "wronged" him. In turn, Anytus admits he's never met a Sophist. "How then, my good sir, can you know whether there is any good in their instruction or not, if you are altogether without experience of it?" Socrates asks. "Easily," he answers, "for I know who they are, whether I have experience of them or not." In response, Socrates jokingly suggests that Anytus must be a "wizard," but moves on to ask him to tell Meno—his guest—who in Athens teaches virtue. "Why give him the name of one individual?" Anytus says. "Any Athenian gentleman he may meet, if he is willing to be persuaded, will make him a better man that the sophists would." Socrates then asks how these men acquired such knowledge, and Anytus says that they were instructed by elder Athenians.

Socrates's primary goal in this part of the dialogue is to prove that there are no teachers of virtue, thereby disproving the hypothesis that virtue is knowledge. However, he also takes this opportunity to demonstrate the importance of experience when it comes to knowledge. Indeed, he believes that people are capable of gaining knowledge from their souls because their souls have already experienced everything a person might ever wish to know. As such, experience becomes an important part of the overall quest for knowledge, which is why Socrates underhandedly ridicules Anytus for condemning the Sophists without ever having met one. This is the opposite of embracing one's own ignorance, since Anytus invests himself wholeheartedly in a completely uninformed opinion and treats that opinion like an incontrovertible fact.

Socrates agrees with Anytus that there are many men in Athens who are good at "public affairs," but he doesn't believe any of them have been "good teachers of virtue." To make this point, he references a number of men who were quite admirable in their lives but ended up raising sons who were, in truth, quite "wicked." In turn, Anytus says, "I think, Socrates, that you easily speak ill of people. I would advise you, if you will listen to me, to be careful. Perhaps also in another city, and certainly here, it is easier to injure people than to benefit them." Taking this in stride, Socrates dismisses Anytus and suggests that the man doesn't know the true meaning of slander.

Since Anytus doesn't think the Sophists teach virtue, he posits that Athenians have learned how to be virtuous from their fathers and elders. However, Socrates easily refutes this point by reminding Anytus of a number of morally lacking young men whose fathers are quite virtuous. As such, it seems that no one in Athens teaches virtue. In turn, it becomes evident that virtue must not be a "kind of knowledge." On another note, it's worth paying attention to Anytus's anger in this moment, considering that he is one of the men who eventually accuse Socrates of corrupting the youth of Athens, acting impiously, and slandering respected figures.

Turning away from Anytus, Socrates resumes his conversation with Meno, who agrees that there is perhaps no one who teaches virtue. This, Socrates, says, means that virtue must not be teachable, which in turn means that it must not be knowledge after all. Meno agrees with this, saying that this conclusion makes him wonder if there are any "good men" at all and, if so, how they have become "good." Socrates, for his part, considers what it would take to make someone capable of teaching another person how to be "beneficent," for he believes that he and Meno were right to assume that "good men must be beneficent." Where they went wrong, he proposes, is when they suggested that a person "cannot give correct direction if [he or she] does not have knowledge."

Having disproved their original hypothesis, Socrates and Meno begin a renewed investigation into the nature of virtue. This time, Socrates decides they shouldn't assume that a person needs to possess "knowledge" to "give correct direction" to a student or peer, ultimately hinting at the notion that acting "beneficently" (and, thus, virtuously) has little to do with whether or not a person understands what they are doing. What's more, it's worth noting that this outlook allows for an interpretation in which Socrates and Meno can be seen as virtuous even if they haven't figured out what virtue is.

When Meno asks Socrates what he means by the fact that a person doesn't need "knowledge" to give "correct direction" to another person, Socrates says, "A man who knew the way to Larissa, or anywhere else you like, and went there and directed others would surely lead them well and correctly." Meno agrees with this, and so Socrates continues, saying, "What if someone had had a correct opinion as to which was the way but had not gone there nor indeed had knowledge of it, would he not also lead correctly?" "Certainly," Meno replies. As such, Socrates posits that a "correct opinion" is as useful as "knowledge." This, he upholds, is what they failed to see in their original hypothesis—namely, that a person can still "guide correct action" even without knowledge, as long as he or she has "correct opinion."

The idea of "correct opinion" is rather strange, since Socrates suggests that it functions like knowledge even though it isn't supported by the same kind of wisdom or understanding. Indeed, "correct opinion" is—as a concept—similar to good intuition. If a person directs someone else to a certain location based on a hunch, and that hunch ends up being right, then there is no functional difference between that "correct opinion" and an informed piece of advice.

If "correct opinion" and "knowledge" are equally useful, Meno wonders why knowledge is "prized far more highly than right opinion." This, Socrates explains, is because "true opinion" is like a statue that is capable of running away—it is valuable when a person possesses it, but it might "escape." As such, adding "knowledge" to "true opinion" is like "tying down" a statue, making it more valuable because it will always remain in place. And this process of augmenting "right opinion" with knowledge is the process of "recollection." "Indeed," Socrates says, "I too speak as one who does not have knowledge but is guessing. However, I certainly do not think I am guessing that right opinion is a different thing from knowledge. If I claim to know anything else—and I would make that claim about few things—I would put this down as one of the things I know."

When Socrates speaks about tying down statues, he references the Greek sculptor Daedalus and his statues, which were apparently so realistic that they were rumored to be capable of running away. By speaking in these terms, Socrates demonstrates the value of "correct opinion" without discounting the value of knowledge. He also embraces his own ignorance once more, this time suggesting that he has "correct opinion" about the very idea of "correct opinion"—a fact that demonstrates his faith in the idea while simultaneously admitting his lack of concrete knowledge.

At this point, Socrates asserts that people are "good" "not only through knowledge but also through right opinion." He then asks Meno if he thinks either knowledge or "right opinion" "come to men by nature," and Meno says he doesn't think this. In turn, Socrates reminds Meno that they've already determined that virtue cannot be taught because it isn't knowledge. "Therefore," he says, "if it is not through knowledge, the only alternative is that it is through right opinion that [men are virtuous]." He uses virtuous "statesmen" as an example, saying that they are like "soothsayers and prophets" who "say many true things when inspired" but have "no knowledge of what they're saying." Nevertheless, he says, they are still admirably virtuous and even quite "divine," for they are "under the gods' influence and possession."

This is an important moment in the dialogue, since Socrates states that virtuous people are still virtuous even if they can't define virtue itself. At this point, he takes a rather large rhetorical step by suggesting that this is because all virtuous people are "under the gods' influence." This divine influence, he argues, is how people manage to embody virtue. In turn, it becomes rather obvious why it's seemingly impossible to teach virtue, since only the gods would be capable of doing so.

Concluding his conversation with Meno, Socrates says, "If we were right in the way in which we spoke and investigated in this whole discussion, virtue would be neither an inborn quality nor taught, but comes to those who possess it as a gift from the gods which is not accompanied by understanding." After Meno agrees with this, Socrates says, "It follows from this reasoning, Meno, that virtue appears to be present in those of us who may possess it as a gift from the gods." Going on, he says that it would be easier to understand this if he and Meno first determined "what virtue in itself is." However, Socrates now takes his leave, telling Meno to convince Anytus of what they've determined, "in order that he may be more amenable." "If you succeed," he adds, "you will also confer a benefit upon the Athenians."

It's often easy to forget that, despite his intense devotion to philosophy and logic, Socrates is quite pious. Of course, some readers interpret his words in this moment as facetious, but there is reason to believe that Socrates truly believes virtue is granted by the gods without "understanding." After all, this acceptance of ignorance perfectly aligns with his belief that true wisdom means recognizing one's own intellectual shortcomings. What's more, he doesn't let this lack of "understanding" deter him from going through the process of intellectual inquiry. In turn, he demonstrates his belief that engaging in the life of the mind is worthwhile even when it's impossible to draw definitive conclusions.

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