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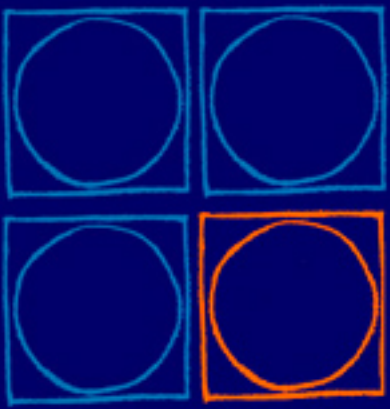
Plato's *Meno*

DOMINIC SCOTT



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PLATO'S *MENO*

Given its brevity, Plato's *Meno* covers an astonishingly wide array of topics: politics, education, virtue, definition, philosophical method, mathematics, the nature and acquisition of knowledge, and immortality. Its treatment of these, though profound, is tantalizingly short, leaving the reader with many unresolved questions. This book confronts the dialogue's many enigmas and attempts to solve them in a way that is both lucid and sympathetic to Plato's philosophy. Reading the dialogue as a whole, it explains how different arguments are related to one another, and how the interplay between characters is connected to the philosophical content of the work. In a new departure, this book's exploration focuses primarily on the content and coherence of the dialogue in its own right, and not merely in the context of other dialogues, making it required reading for all students of Plato, be they from the world of classics or philosophy.

DOMINIC SCOTT is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Clare College. His previous publications include *Recollection and Experience: Plato's Theory of Learning and its Successors* (Cambridge, 1995).

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PLATO'S *MENO*

DOMINIC SCOTT
University of Cambridge

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For Aylin

Contents

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As with all my research, I also owe a lasting debt to Myles Burnyeat, who has been a continuing source of inspiration.

For some years, the *Meno* has been a set text on the undergraduate philosophy syllabus at Cambridge, and I owe a special debt to my students. Their obvious enthusiasm for the dialogue has been a constant delight and their feedback yet another source of inspiration. My only regret is that I may have to remove it from the syllabus to prevent future generations hounding me with lists of my errors, now that they have been committed to print.

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This book has been some years in the making. Doubtless it would benefit by gestating for many more. But the moment of publication can no longer be delayed. My text of the dialogue is now on the verge of disintegration and is threatening to do so at the very page where Socrates remarks on the need to examine the same topic over and over again (85c10–11). No one should ignore such an omen.

Introduction

SYNOPSIS OF THE DIALOGUE

Meno, a young aristocrat from Thessaly, asks how virtue is acquired. In reply, Socrates professes himself unable to answer: since he does not even know what virtue is, how can he know how it is acquired? Meno agrees to tackle the nature of virtue first and offers Socrates a definition, or rather a list of different kinds of virtue. After some argument, he accepts that this is inadequate, and offers another definition – virtue as the power to rule – which is also rejected. In order to help the inquiry along, Socrates gives a short lesson in definition, after which Meno offers his third and final definition of virtue: the desire for fine things and ability to acquire them. When this is refuted, he despairs of ever making any progress in their inquiry: how, he demands, can you look for something of whose nature you are entirely ignorant? Even if you stumble upon the answer, how will you know that this is the thing you did not know before?

In the face of this challenge, Socrates changes tack (81a). Adopting a religious tone, he asserts that the soul is immortal and has had many previous lives; what we call learning is in fact the recollection of knowledge that the soul had before. At Meno's request, he offers to provide some support for these claims, and summons one of Meno's slave boys to join them. Drawing some figures in the sand, he sets the boy a geometrical puzzle: take a square with sides of two feet and an area of four square feet. What would be the length of the sides of the square whose area is double the original? In response to Socrates' questioning, the boy first gives two wrong answers. But eventually, after continued questioning, he gives the correct one. Socrates argues that, as he has only questioned the boy and never taught him, the answers must have been in him all along. In fact, they must have been in him before birth. Finally, Socrates mounts an argument to show that the truth was in him for all time and that his soul is immortal.

They now return to the topic of virtue. Socrates still wants it defined, but Meno persists in asking how it is acquired (86c). Socrates yields to his demand and, to move the inquiry ahead, introduces a new method adapted from geometry, the method of hypothesis. *If* virtue is a form of knowledge, he argues, it can be taught. The task now is to show that virtue *is* a form of knowledge, which Socrates immediately proceeds to do: virtue is the knowledge that enables us to make correct use of our available resources, be they money, power, or qualities of character, such as endurance or self-discipline. So, at this point (89c), Meno's original question seems to have been answered: since virtue is knowledge it must be teachable. But then Socrates raises a doubt: if virtue were teachable, surely they would be able to point to actual teachers and learners of it. Introducing a new character, Anytus (later to be a key figure in Socrates' trial and execution), he tries to find instances of people who have successfully taught virtue to someone else. The sophists are brusquely dismissed as charlatans, and instead they turn to consider four of the most eminent politicians in recent Athenian history. None of them, it turns out, succeeded in transmitting their virtue even to those dearest to them, their own sons, which they would surely have done if they had been able to teach it. Since even these men were unable to teach their virtue, Socrates now suspects that it may not after all be teachable (94e).

Anytus, clearly annoyed, accuses Socrates of maligning the great men of Athens and withdraws from the dialogue, leaving Meno to resume the role of interlocutor. After confirming the conclusion just reached with Anytus, they find themselves in a quandary. At one point earlier on, they thought they had established that virtue must be teachable because it is a form of knowledge. Now they have reached the conclusion that it is not teachable. At 96e, Socrates proposes a way out. They were wrong to think that virtue is only knowledge. It is not just by knowledge that one can act rightly and make correct use of one's resources, but also by having something less – true belief. After explicating the difference between knowledge and true belief, Socrates goes on to draw a parallel with poets and soothsayers who are divinely inspired to say much that is both useful and true, but without any understanding. Similarly, he suggests, the great politicians guided their city not by knowledge, but by true belief. He concludes that virtue comes by divine dispensation, although he adds that they still need to investigate the nature of virtue before establishing with any clarity how it is acquired.

THE QUALITY OF THE ARGUMENTS

The *Meno* is a remarkable work – a philosophical gem, as J. S. Mill called it.[1] Perhaps its greatest claim to fame is the theory of recollection and its purported means of demonstration, the interview with the slave boy. But the dialogue is also remarkable for the sheer breadth of topics covered in so short a space: virtue, definition, philosophical method, mathematical method, education, the origins of knowledge, the immortality of the soul, Athenian politics, and the distinction between knowledge and true belief. In this way, the *Meno* epitomises the synoptic character of so much of Plato's work: here was a philosopher who could rarely broach one topic without stumbling upon a multitude of others.

But this feature of the dialogue also raises acute challenges for the interpreter. For one thing, what is the work about? Over the years, this question has met with quite different responses. Some see it as a dialogue about virtue; others have claimed that the ethical themes of the work are chosen just by way of example: the real topic is inquiry, discovery or knowledge.[2] A different response altogether would be to say that there is no one topic that the *Meno* is 'about'; its interests are irreducibly plural. Even so, we might want to find a complex unity – some rationale for why all these different themes are included within one work. There is such a unity, I shall claim, but that is something which we can only establish after working through all the different arguments one by one.

As we do so, we shall confront what is surely the main interpretative challenge of the work. Because it covers so much in so short a space, its arguments often appear very sketchy. For example, the amount of space that Socrates devotes to proving recollection from the evidence of the slave boy's performance (85b–d) is remarkably brief relative to the enormity of the conclusion; the argument for immortality flashes past just as quickly; and it takes little more than a page (87d–89a) to establish the thesis that virtue is knowledge. (Contrast the much lengthier treatment of the *Protagoras*, 349e–360e.) So with relatively little information at our disposal, it is often very difficult to determine on any one occasion exactly what the argument is. Worse, a sketchy argument can easily be represented as a bad one. Critics of a particular passage will claim that there are gaps not so much in Socrates'

[1] Mill 1979: 422.

[2] Thompson (1901: 63) takes the subject matter to be ethical. Crombie (1963: II, 534–5) thinks that philosophical method is the main theme of the dialogue. For Bedu-Addo (1984: 14), it is knowledge and its acquisition. Both agree in saying that the ethical content is chosen by way of example. Weiss (2001: 3) opts for moral inquiry, so straddling the divide.

presentation, but in the argument itself: he just does not have the premises he needs to draw his conclusion. In places, Socrates seems to admit as much. At the end of the recollection passage, he sounds extremely tentative about the conclusions he has drawn (86b6–7), and later on has to correct a mistake in his own argument that virtue is knowledge (96d5–e5). At the end, he stresses the need to resume the inquiry into the nature of virtue before they have any confidence in the conclusions they have drawn about its acquisition.

Furthermore, it is sometimes difficult to pin down exactly what Socrates is trying to conclude in a particular argument, never mind what the argument actually is. There has been disagreement about what Socrates means by saying that everyone desires good things (77b–78b), or that virtue is knowledge (87d–89a). Similar problems apply also to his methodological pronouncements: for instance, determining the exact nature of the hypothetical method has been a thorn in the flesh of many commentators over the years.

The main task of this book is to resolve the indeterminacies surrounding both the arguments and the conclusions that they are meant to support. Where the quality of the arguments is at issue, I shall discuss possible objections and then consider different ways of addressing them. Usually, this involves searching for premises that might be implicit and that would improve the quality of the argument; or, failing that, at least bringing out its interest and importance, whatever the flaws that remain.

There is another strategy. Faced with the prospect of having to redeem what looks like a bad argument, some commentators pronounce it as bad, but add that Socrates was perfectly aware of the fact. Interpreters who take this route claim that he ingeniously tricks Meno into accepting a bad argument, or deliberately confuses him with muddled exposition. In this spirit, individual commentators have targeted the slave boy demonstration, the references to geometry and mathematical method, as well as the entire final section of the dialogue from the appearance of Anytus to the end. If one were to adopt the views of all these interpreters at once, one would end up writing off much of the dialogue as self-consciously bad argument.[3]

Although such an approach might be appropriate for the occasional passage, it risks making the dialogue more of a fake than a gem, at least in philosophical terms. Furthermore, we should note from the outset that Socrates expects participants in a dialogue to speak the truth (75c–d). It is

[3] Weiss (2001: 94–107) takes this kind of approach to the slave boy demonstration, Lloyd (1992) to much of the mathematical material and Wilkes (1979) to the whole of 89–100b.

difficult to see how this is compatible with the use of deliberately misleading arguments on his part. At any rate, I have done my best to avoid this type of interpretation.[4] Almost all the cases I have encountered where commentators adopt it can be better dealt with by a more patient approach to the argument or passage in question. I hope the result is that the dialogue justifies its description as a philosophical gem – even if a little rough cut for some tastes.

CHARACTER AND DIALOGUE

The *Meno* is very much a dialogue – a drama that unfolds between its various interlocutors. Though the same could be said of most of Plato's works, here characterisation and individual psychology are particularly striking. Throughout, Meno's own personality and his reaction to philosophical cross-examination are vividly portrayed. At a number of points Socrates makes explicit reference to his character, even calling him bullying, spoilt and arrogant. How seriously these comments are meant can be discussed in due course, but they ensure that the assessment of Meno as a person, and not just the quality of his answers, is kept well to the fore. The same can be said of Anytus, perhaps even more so.

But if characterisation is such a feature of this work, how are we to relate it to the philosophical content? With this question one needs to steer between two extremes. Some readers may be tempted to treat the dramatic element as mere packaging, or literary *joie de vivre* intended to draw us into the dialogue, which they then go on to ransack for philosophical arguments. But it is possible to go to the opposite extreme, and to be so caught up by Plato's powers of characterisation that one ends up reading a passage merely as an episode in an unfolding psychological drama, without asking what philosophical pay-off is involved.[5]

As far as the *Meno* is concerned, one thing that brings content and characterisation together is moral education. The dialogue, I shall argue, does not just have this topic as one of its central themes; it is also an exercise in moral education. Meno's character is carefully exhibited in the first half of the dialogue, not to leave us with a static portrait of a somewhat unsavoury character, but to introduce us to the educational challenge that Socrates has to face. After reviewing the faults that Meno is shown to possess in the first

[4] One exception is Socrates' description of the geometrical method (86e–87b); another is the argument with Anytus. However, in neither of these cases shall I claim that Socrates deliberately misleads his interlocutor.

[5] On the hazards of this approach see Gulley 1969: 162–3 and Burnyeat 2003: 23.

part of dialogue (pp. 60–65), I shall argue that he starts to improve, thus demonstrating the results of Socratic education at work (pp. 209–13).

THE *MENO* AS A TRANSITIONAL DIALOGUE

Over and above the importance of its philosophical content or the brilliance of its characterisation, the *Meno* has another claim to fame: it has long had a fascination for those concerned with Plato's intellectual biography. 'Developmentalists', as they are sometimes called, usually divide his works into three groups. In the early dialogues, he aimed to capture the nature and character of Socrates' thought. While he did not reproduce *verbatim* transcripts of actual Socratic encounters, he at least caught the spirit of his mentor. But eventually Plato grew dissatisfied, especially with the negative character of Socratic philosophy with its emphasis on refutation, and started to develop positive views of his own. Also, he widened his philosophical horizons beyond Socrates' exclusively ethical interests to embrace metaphysics, epistemology and psychology. In the final phase of his thought, Plato adopts a critical approach to some of the views expounded in the middle period, and sometimes even reverts to the apparently negative style of the early Socratic dialogues.

Developmentalists often see the *Meno* as 'the' transitional dialogue.[6] Although it starts in the manner of an early Socratic dialogue, it soon changes and, especially with the theory of recollection, shows Plato in his more positive mode, although without the confidence of some of the middle period works. This episode also shows the broadening of interest associated with Plato's departure from Socratic philosophy. The recollection passage is not the only point of interest to developmentalists. They also point to the distinction between knowledge and true belief (something of which Socrates says he has knowledge), and the interest in mathematics as a helpful parallel for philosophical method.

Developmentalism has been a distinctly mixed blessing for the *Meno*. In the first part of the dialogue, Socrates criticises Meno for breaking virtue into small pieces. The same can be said, alas, of so much recent work on the dialogue itself. Its claim to fame as 'the' transitional dialogue has often made commentators less interested in it in its own right than in how sections of it relate to other works. For instance, Socrates' examination of Meno in the first part is often used by scholars looking back to the earlier dialogues, while the positive epistemological developments that follow are

[6] For references, see pp. 202–8.

often viewed as anticipations of later works. So although references to the work are plentiful, they often come as part of broader discussions of Plato's thought and its development.[7]

Nevertheless, 'developmentalism' should not be treated as a dirty word, despite the damage it has done to scholarship on the *Meno*. So long as we are prepared to do justice to the integrity of the dialogue, it can be very illuminating to see the methodological and epistemological achievements of the *Meno* in the context of Plato's broader development. Indeed developmentalists need not confine their interest to these fields alone. In the course of this book, I shall argue that the dialogue's moral psychology and political theory can also be seen as pointing towards other dialogues.

One specific claim that I shall make in this context is that, at various points in the dialogue, Plato puts Socrates on what I shall call 'philosophical trial'. The most dramatic example comes when Socrates introduces the theory of recollection in response to Meno's challenge to the possibility of inquiry and discovery (80d). This passage testifies to Plato's concern about whether it is possible to attain knowledge, and hence whether we have any duty to inquire. The historical Socrates certainly believed that we have a duty to inquire, however arduous that may be. Through Meno, however, Plato deliberately challenges this position, and does so by questioning whether discovery is actually possible: if not, why do we have any duty to inquire? Plato shows the importance of the challenge by putting into Socrates' mouth an unsocratic solution of extraordinary philosophical boldness. Other scholars have suggested such an approach to this passage, but I shall also argue that this is just one example of Plato putting Socrates on trial in the *Meno*. There are three others, which concern the historical Socrates' views on definition, the value of the elenchus and philosophical method. To this extent, at least, I am highly sympathetic to those who see the *Meno* as a work in which Plato wrestles his Socratic inheritance.[8]

[7] Such tendencies are epitomised by Vlastos 1991.

[8] Throughout this book, I use 'Socrates' to refer to the character of the dialogue. When making a claim about the historical Socrates, I shall flag the point explicitly.

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

The opening: 70a–71d

Most of Plato's works start with an introductory scene, often of considerable length, giving details about the characters involved in the dialogue, as well as its physical and historical setting. The *Meno*, however, appears to have no introductory scene at all. As one commentator has put it: 'The dialogue opens with an abruptness hardly to be paralleled elsewhere in the genuine work of Plato by the propounding of a theme directly for discussion.'[1] The same commentator immediately goes on to criticise the dialogue for failing to live up to Plato's usual standards of literary composition. It must, he concludes, be a very early work.

Yet, although Meno propounds a theme directly for discussion, Socrates' reply takes a circuitous route, as if trying to slow the conversation down. He talks of how the Thessalians, previously renowned for horsemanship and wealth, have now acquired a reputation for wisdom. By contrast, his own people, the Athenians, are in exactly the opposite state: their wisdom has emigrated to Thessaly, leaving them ignorant about the very nature of virtue, let alone whether it is teachable. This then cues a principle that will be central to the dialogue: one cannot know how virtue may be acquired without knowing what it is (71b3–8). Only now is Socrates ready to start the philosophical discussion. But *en route* to this point, he has peppered his speech with proper names and allusions that send modern readers scurrying to the commentaries. There is no reason to think that this passage is the work of an immature Plato. Rather, it bears all the hallmarks of an author well practised in writing extended and highly allusive introductions, but who has decided on this occasion to use a much more compressed approach.

In fact, it does share something in common with many other opening passages from Plato's works, which very often use the introduction to anticipate some of the themes that will figure in the dialogue to come. The

[1] Taylor 1926: 130.

very abruptness in the way that the *Meno* begins anticipates two important features of the work, both connected with the character of Meno himself.[2]

First, the way he springs his question on Socrates highlights something that will become increasingly important as the dialogue proceeds. At a number of places he reveals himself as someone with a peremptory, almost tyrannical streak in his character (75b1, 76a8–c3 and 86d3–8) – someone with an interest in controlling others; at one point he even defines virtue as power pure and simple (73c9–d1).[3] This defect in his personality will be central to the interplay between the two characters and to Socrates' attempts to improve him.

The second theme anticipated by the opening lines concerns Meno's attitude to teaching and learning, which is one of knowledge on demand. By posing a simple and direct question, he expects to receive an answer that will quickly make him an authority on the topic, able to teach others in turn.

This feature may not strike a reader who approaches Meno's question for the first time. But it is amply shown in retrospect. We can see it already bubbling to the surface in Socrates' reply. Referring to Meno's own people, the Thessalians, he claims that they have recently been imbued with wisdom and acquired the habit of answering confidently whatever question one might care to ask (70a5–71a7). The credit for this goes to the sophist Gorgias. Later on in the dialogue, Meno echoes this same point, saying that in the past he has proudly dispensed what he took to be excellent speeches on virtue on numerous occasions (80b2–3); and the way in which he became an 'authority' on virtue has been gradually revealed in the intervening pages: he simply committed Gorgias' views on the subject to memory (71c10, 73c6–8 and 76a10–b1).

To fill out this picture of teaching and learning, we should turn to a piece of evidence that Aristotle gives us about Gorgias. Like other sophists, he travelled from city to city offering his services for money. He did not claim to teach virtue but specialised in teaching rhetoric (cf. 95c1–4), and his own oratorical skills were both innovative and widely admired. But at the end

[2] See Klein 1965: 38 and 189, Seeskin 1987: 123 and Scolnicov 1988: 51. For the general thesis that the opening of a Platonic dialogue often anticipates some of its central themes, see Burnyeat 1997.

[3] One can also compare Meno's opening question with his initial reaction to the theory of recollection (81e5). In wording that recalls 70a1, he asks Socrates: 'can you teach me how [learning is recollection]?' Socrates immediately complains that, according to the theory he has just set out, nothing can be taught, causing Meno to reply that he was only speaking 'out of habit' (82a5). There may well be a *double entendre* here: Meno has not only fallen back into a semantic habit, but also into one of expecting an answer to be given on demand. See Klein 1965: 98.

of his work, *Sophistical Refutations*, Aristotle complains that Gorgias never taught his students the principles of his craft, rhetoric – that is, he did not show them how to construct an effective speech from scratch; he merely gave them a collection of speeches or set answers, presumably on topics on which they were likely to be questioned. Aristotle compares him to a cobbler who, instead of teaching his apprentices the fundamentals of the craft, merely gives them several different pairs of shoes to try out on their clients in the hope that one of them will fit.[4] This point resonates throughout the dialogue, especially during the early part: just by memorising what Gorgias told him, Meno thinks that he has learnt to speak well about virtue – not only in the rhetorical sense, but also in the sense that he has actually gained knowledge of what it is.[5]

The assumption that underlies Meno's abruptness in asking his question betrays an approach to education that will be opposed throughout the work: equipped with a collection of speeches, the teacher acts as informant; the learner in turn memorises whatever the teacher has to say. Education is a straightforward process of transmission. The other side of that contrast is the Socratic approach to education, where learning takes the form of a dialogue in which the 'teacher' asks questions, and the learner responds. This is the reverse of Gorgias' model, where the learner asks one short question, and the teacher replies with a speech.[6] The basis of Socrates' approach to education lies in the theory of recollection: learning is a matter of drawing on one's own internal resources rather than receiving information from outside. This approach also turns a learner into an inquirer and casts the 'teacher' into the role of catalyst and questioner; it also helps to explain why the interaction between teacher and learner takes the form of an ordered sequence of questions, facilitating a step-by-step process of recollection.

We shall return to these rival approaches to education in due course.[7] My concern here is merely to show that the contrast between them is foreshadowed in the very opening of the work – in the abruptness of Meno's question and in the sly innuendo that follows in Socrates' immediate reply.

[4] *Sophistical Refutations* 34, 183b36–184a8.

[5] This is not to say that he thinks he has acquired virtue from Gorgias (cf. 95c1–4), only knowledge of its nature.

[6] It is true that Socrates replies to Meno's question with a speech. But his concern is not to answer the question – on the contrary, he avoids it. His underlying point is to make clear to Meno all the work that needs to be done before the question can be addressed directly, as well as to criticise, albeit subtly, Meno's presuppositions in posing the question as he did.

[7] See below pp. 143–4.