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## THE MENO

*David Ebrey*

The *Meno* opens with Meno asking whether virtue (*aretē*) is teachable or comes about by nature or is acquired in some other way (70a). As the dialogue develops, it raises some of Plato's best-known epistemological puzzles and views, as well as presenting classic discussions of what is often called "Socratic ethics."<sup>1</sup>

The *Meno* is often introduced and taught by situating it within a picture of Plato's development. Plato's "Socratic dialogues" are often thought to stay closer to the historical Socrates' interests and to have been the first dialogues Plato wrote. The *Meno* includes important examples from mathematics and an argument that the soul exists before birth – topics which, as far as we can tell, did not especially interest the historical Socrates. Hence, the *Meno* is often seen as coming after the Socratic dialogues. But because its ethical views seem close to those in the Socratic dialogues and because the *Meno* does not describe the forms as non-sensible, divine, or as having other features associated with "transcendent" forms, it is not normally classified as a "middle period dialogue," like the *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, and *Cratylus*.<sup>2</sup> This has led to its being classified as a "transitional" dialogue: transitioning from the Socratic dialogues to the more robust metaphysical and ethical views found in the middle-period dialogues.<sup>3</sup> There is no evidence, independent of the philosophical views developed in the *Meno*, to suppose it was composed after the Socratic dialogues or before the middle-period dialogues.<sup>4</sup> So it is fair to wonder if there might be other reasons for the specific ideas and topics it discusses. There is something especially unsatisfying about the category of "transitional dialogue," since it suggests a mere waypoint between a starting point that Plato was happy to occupy for a while (the Socratic dialogues) and another such destination (the middle period).

In this chapter, I provide an account of the dialogue that explains the topics it discusses in terms of its portrayal of Meno and of Socrates' strategy for engaging with Meno. This reading opens up the possibility that Plato wrote Socratic dialogues after the *Meno* or dialogues traditionally classified as "middle period" before the *Meno*. But my main goal is not to make a point about chronology but rather to provide a more satisfying explanation of why the dialogue discusses the topics that it does.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, I also hope to clarify the dialogue's development and some of its key ideas. At the end of the chapter, I return to the features of the *Meno* used to argue that it is transitional and show that these features can instead be explained on the basis of considerations internal to the dialogue.

It will be useful to have an overview of the dialogue before we begin. We can divide it into three parts. The first part (70a–79e) begins with Socrates arguing that in order to say whether virtue is teachable, one needs to know what virtue is. The discussion then follows the basic pattern of a Socratic dialogue that seeks to answer a “what is it?” question, such as the *Euthyphro* (“what is holiness?”) or *Laches* (“what is courage?”). In these dialogues Socrates and his interlocutors are ultimately unable to find an acceptable answer; these dialogues end with Socrates encouraging his interlocutors to continue searching. Similarly, in the *Meno* they do not find an acceptable answer and Socrates encourages Meno to keep searching for what virtue is, but instead of the dialogue ending here, in the second part (79e–86c) Meno raises his famous paradox (80d–e). This paradox calls into question whether it is possible to inquire, and so whether searching is a viable response to discovering one’s ignorance. In response, Socrates presents his bold claim that we are able to inquire because our souls existed before we were born, allowing us to recollect what we once knew. In the third part of the dialogue (86c–100c), Socrates relents to Meno’s request that they investigate whether virtue is teachable, even though they have not yet discovered what it is. Socrates proposes that they proceed on the model of a technique from geometry (86e–87c); scholars often call Socrates’ method here “the method of hypothesis,” although I think this name is misleading, so I will not use it.<sup>6</sup> Socrates’ application of this geometrical technique reduces the question of whether virtue is teachable to the question of whether it is a type of knowledge. Socrates first argues that it is a type of knowledge, and so teachable (87d–89a), then that it is not teachable, and so not a type of knowledge (89c–96d). He ends by saying that his argument that virtue is a type of knowledge overlooked the possibility that it might be a type of true opinion, rather than knowledge; he suggests that these true opinions could come from divine dispensation (96d–100a). The dialogue closes with him repeating that in order genuinely to know whether virtue is teachable, they need to investigate what it is (100b–c).

### Meno’s Character and Socrates’ Strategy

The *Meno* is unique in having its very first sentence directly pose a philosophical question. In doing so, it provides a distinctive portrayal of Meno as someone interested in such topics, unlike the relatively ordinary people that Socrates often speaks to, such as Ion or Laches or Euthyphro (in the Socratic dialogues named after them). In those dialogues, Socrates typically uses his interlocutors’ interest in more practical topics to draw them into discussing a philosophical question. Meno, by contrast, does not need to be shown the importance of pursuing such questions.

But Plato does not present Meno as an intellectual in his own right, unlike sophists such as Protagoras, Gorgias, and Hippias (in the Socratic dialogues named after them). Meno is not portrayed as impressed with his own ideas but rather with those of others. Socrates’ first words draw attention to the fact that Meno has spent time with Gorgias: he says that Gorgias has given them, in Meno’s home region of Thessaly, the habit of answering fearlessly whatever question is put to them (70b–c). Shortly thereafter, Meno is surprised that Socrates did not learn what virtue is from Gorgias (71c). In response, Socrates says that he expects Meno’s views to be the same as Gorgias’, which Meno confirms to be the case (71c–d). Meno later says that he wants an account of color in the style of Gorgias (76c); Meno is very impressed with this account, which draws on Empedoclean ideas (76c–d). Meno seems to be drawn to esoteric ideas in general, not only Gorgias’ ideas. Meno is so

eager to hear what Socrates says he has heard from priests and priestesses that he interrupts Socrates mid-sentence (81a). Later, Socrates convinces Meno to proceed in a certain way by getting him to proceed in a manner used by geometers (86e–87c). The details of the geometry are difficult to follow; it seems unlikely that Meno follows them, as opposed to being simply impressed with the idea of acting like a geometer. In short, Meno is repeatedly characterized as impressed by those with a reputation for wisdom and wanting to learn from them. This, supposedly, is why he comes to Socrates and immediately asks whether virtue is teachable. Throughout the dialogue, Socrates uses Meno's deference to impressive-sounding ideas in order to advance the conversation. At the same time, as we will see, one of Socrates' central goals is to get Meno to investigate by himself, rather than to simply rely on the (supposed) wisdom of others.

But Meno does not simply need to learn to investigate on his own. Our main report about the historical Meno, from Xenophon, emphasizes how thoroughly and incredibly greedy, deceptive, unjust, and impious he was.<sup>7</sup> Of course, Xenophon may have been biased and Plato does not present Meno as quite so despicable in the *Meno*. In any event, Plato does not present Meno as a sterling character. After each of Meno's proposed accounts of virtue, Socrates notes that this account is compatible with being unjust. Each time, Meno claims to see this as a problem (73a–c, 73d, 78d–79a), but his subsequent accounts consistently fall back into it again, in a new way.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, each of Meno's accounts of virtue involves having power and ruling over people. As one would expect from someone with this conception of virtue, Meno repeatedly tries to control Socrates, insisting that Socrates discuss the things Meno wants to discuss, even if Socrates provides principled reasons for not doing so (75a–b, 76a–c, 86d–e). Another one of Socrates' central goals is to convince Meno to change his ethical views and, along with this, his behavior.<sup>9</sup>

In the next three sections, I provide an account of the dialogue in light of Meno's character and Socrates' strategy for engaging with Meno. As we will see, in the third part of the dialogue, tensions in Socrates' own views play an important role in the dialogue's development. Of course, given the shortness of this chapter, much of interest cannot be discussed.

### The First Part: Investigating What Virtue Is (70a–79e)

Meno opens the dialogue with one of the most discussed questions among fifth-century-B.C. intellectuals: whether virtue (*aretē*) is teachable or comes about by nature or is acquired in some other way (70a). Rather than directly respond to the question, Socrates draws attention to how Meno expects such questions to be answered. He says that Gorgias has given them, in Meno's home region of Thessaly, the habit of answering all questions fearlessly, as is appropriate for someone who knows (70a–c). Socrates' implication, of course, is that without knowledge, one should not answer so fearlessly, and indeed Socrates proceeds to say that everyone in Athens would say that they do not know whether virtue is teachable since they do not even know what virtue is (70c–71b).<sup>10</sup> It is highly disputed how exactly to understand Socratic irony, but this seems to clearly be an example, however it is understood. It is absurd to think that nobody in Athens would be willing to say whether virtue is teachable, and absurd to think that every single person in Athens would insist that they need to know what virtue is before they can say whether it is teachable. But Meno does not question this; he simply is surprised that Socrates himself does not know what virtue is. Socrates typically exhibits his irony when exposing an interlocutors' pretensions to wisdom.<sup>11</sup> We do not see it when he is speaking to a close companion or to sympathetic

intellectuals who acknowledge their ignorance. The interesting twist here is that Meno does not claim to possess knowledge. Instead, Gorgias has given him the habit of speaking as if he does. Here in the *Meno*, Socrates' irony helps to expose the folly of expecting that you can rely on others' supposed knowledge and act as if you have it yourself.

Meno's first answer to this "what is it?" question and his defense of his answer are unique in Plato's corpus. When asked what virtue is, Meno describes the different virtues that men and women have and says that there are further virtues for children, both male and female, as well as for old men, both free and slaves, building up to the idea that practically every action and every age has its own virtue (71e–72a). Typically, the first attempt of Socrates' interlocutors to answer a "what is it?" question is far too narrow, only describing a paradigmatic set of cases, rather than an answer that aims to cover all cases (e.g., *Euthyphro* 5d–e, *Laches* 190e, *Hippias Major* 287e, *Theaetetus* 146c–d). Meno's greater sophistication – he says he is providing Gorgias' answer – allows him to provide an account that purports to cover all cases and yet is not the sort of account Socrates is seeking.

Socrates says that Meno seems to be providing a swarm of virtues and asks whether there is some single being (*ousia*) shared by virtue (72a–b). He goes on to ask whether there is some *one* form (*eidos*) possessed by each virtue, because of which it is a virtue (72c–d). But Meno says that virtue is unlike the case of bees, as well as unlike the case of strength and health, which he says are the same for men and women (72d–73a). In Socratic dialogues like the *Euthyphro* (5c–d) and *Protagoras* (330c–d), as well as elsewhere in Plato's corpus (e.g., *Phaedo* 64c, *Hippias Major* 287c–d), Socrates asks his interlocutors whether the thing under discussion (e.g., holiness, justice, death, or fineness) is *something* (or is *some one thing*). Once his interlocutors agree to this, Socrates' discussion continues on the assumption that there is a single thing they are searching for. Meno's time with Gorgias allows him to provide an example of how one could deny this and so deny that there is some one being or form of the sort that Socrates is seeking when he asks his "What is it?" question.

Socrates argues against Meno's fragmentation of virtue on the grounds that Meno agrees that there is something common to each of these cases (73a–c): in each case one needs to act with justice and temperance, rather than without it. As noted earlier, leaving these out does not seem to be simply an oversight on Meno's part but reflects his basic understanding of virtue: he thinks that the good life involves having power and ruling over people, not being just or temperate, and so he consistently leaves them out. But at the same time, he is not someone who has, in a principled way, decided to reject conventional ways of thinking about virtue, such as Callicles in the *Gorgias* or Thrasymachus in the *Republic*. Meno at least superficially accepts the idea that virtue should involve justice and temperance, but his repeated failure to incorporate this into his accounts reveals that he does not truly believe it.

Plato's Socrates famously defends the view that believing something to be good goes hand in hand with pursuing it. This is normally thought to prioritize thought over action and so to give Socrates an "intellectualist" position. But it equally means that the things one pursues are the things one genuinely believes to be good. As long as Meno keeps acting the same way, he has not truly changed his views about the good. Thus, in order for Socrates to convince Meno of a new conception of the good, Meno would need to stop pursuing power by any means possible. This is part of why it is so difficult for Socrates to change his interlocutors' minds: genuinely rejecting an ethical view does not simply require a new theory but an entirely new way of life. Socrates notes that he will not have much time with Meno (76e). Socrates does not have enough time to change Meno's views and way of life; if Xenophon's description of Meno is accurate, this may be why he ended up the way he did.<sup>12</sup>

### The Second Part: Meno's Paradox and Learning as Recollecting (79e–86c)

Meno raises his famous paradox (80d–e) after Socrates' questioning has revealed Meno to be unable to formulate an account of virtue that is consistent with his other commitments. Meno does not think that this failure reveals his ignorance; instead, he claims that Socrates has numbed him like a numbing fish, making him unable to say what virtue is (80a–b). Socrates' response is that whether or not Meno knows, he is like someone who does not know, so they should inquire together into what it is (80d).

Meno's paradox questions whether it is possible to inquire. If it is impossible, this could hardly be how one should respond to recognizing one's ignorance. Here is how I suggest we translate the paradox, as Meno articulates it:

And how will you search for something, Socrates, if you don't know at all what it is?  
[1] For what sort of thing, from among those you don't know, will you put forward when you inquire? [2] Or even if you were to hit upon it with complete success, how will you know that this is the thing you didn't know?

(80d5–8)<sup>13</sup>

There are questions about every part of the paradox.<sup>14</sup> However one interprets it, it calls into question our ability to get started on inquiry ([1]) and our ability to complete this process ([2]). In my view, it points to a serious difficulty in formulating viable answers to Socrates' "what is it?" questions, as well as a serious difficulty in identifying a correct answer, if encountered. According to Fine's influential reading, it poses a problem for inquiring while in a cognitive blank.<sup>15</sup>

What I want to emphasize here is how it is appropriate for Meno, in particular, to raise such a paradox, given his portrayal in the dialogue. On practically any interpretation of the paradox, it provides Meno with good reason to try to learn from others, rather than to search on his own. Meno may or may not have a theory of how other people acquired their knowledge. Some, such as Empedocles, claim some special divine insight. Perhaps the gods always have had knowledge and they have passed it on to some of us. But Meno may not have a general account of how wise people acquired their knowledge. Regardless of how they got it, the only way for us would be to learn from them.<sup>16</sup>

Socrates says that he thinks Meno's paradox is not a good argument (81a). This need not mean that it does not pose a serious challenge – Socrates may simply mean that the conclusion does not follow. When Meno asks why Socrates thinks this, Socrates says that he has heard something from men and women who are wise in divine matters. Meno, clearly excited, interrupts to ask what they have said and who has said it. Socrates' answer to *who* has said it is surprising: "priests and Priestesses, *however many (hosois)* have taken care to be able to give an account of their practices" (81a10–b1, emphasis added).<sup>17</sup> Socrates then says that the same view is held by Pindar and other poets, *however many (hosois)* are divine. Surprisingly Socrates is claiming universal support for his view: any priest or priestess who takes care to give an account of their practices and any divine poet will hold this view. Socrates is presenting this as the correct divine view, the one any genuine priest or divine poet will provide.

Note that Socrates manages to entice Meno with the esoteric views of priests, priestesses, and poets, without simply deferring to them. Instead, he presents himself as able to judge which account is correct. Socrates manages to draw Meno away from his roadblock

to inquiry with esoteric views, while presenting this as something that any priest who cares to give an account will come to. Socrates reports that these wise people think that the soul is immortal and reincarnates, and so we should be as holy as possible (81b–c).<sup>18</sup> Socrates, rather than the priests or the poets, seems to be the one who draws from this the conclusion that:

[Since the soul] has seen both what is here and what is in Hades, and in fact all things, there is nothing it has not learned. And so it is no matter for wonder that it is possible for the soul to recollect both about virtue and about other things, given that it knew them previously.

(81c6–9)

This brief description raises many questions that do not seem to be answered in the dialogue. For example, was the soul somehow able directly to see the form of virtue in Hades, and this is why we can recollect what virtue is? Or is one somehow able to learn what virtue is from seeing many cases of virtue across many lives, both here and in Hades? If the latter, how does seeing many individual cases avoid Meno's paradox? If the former, why mention that he has seen things not only in Hades but also here?

Socrates holds a conversation with one of Meno's slaves in order to exhibit the claim that learning is recollecting (81e–86b). The choice of a slave is, of course, marked: Meno has strong aristocratic tendencies and seeks the views of those with a reputation for wisdom. Socrates is showing that inquiry is possible for everyone by showing that this unnamed slave can come to realize that he has mistaken views about geometry and then come to see the correct view. Socrates repeatedly says that he is not teaching the slave – a claim that often leaves students in disbelief. Socrates is certainly not denying that he is asking a structured set of questions that are designed to guide the slave to the correct answer. Socrates' point is that the slave has within himself the resources to answer Socrates' questions. The important point for Socrates is that the slave clearly is judging these matters on his own, rather than accepting them on the basis of Socrates telling him the answer. This, of course, is what Socrates wants Meno to do as well: to form judgments on his own, rather than to accept them on someone else's authority. Socrates argues that the slave's ability to formulate the correct answer is a sign that the knowledge has been within him all along.

Socrates never clearly explains how recollecting makes inquiry possible. This has become a central interpretive question for scholars.<sup>19</sup> Most scholars agree that having previously had knowledge must provide some advantage to us now, which makes it easier for us to learn things that we once knew, but it is unclear how exactly it makes this easier. I will leave this question aside, and instead focus on Socrates' description of the possible effect of Meno's paradox on the two of them. After he first presents the view that learning is recollecting, he says, "hence we must not be persuaded by that eristic argument, as it would make us lazy and is pleasant news to feeble people, whereas the present argument encourages us to search energetically" (81d5–e1).<sup>20</sup> Socrates appeals to Meno's desire to be active and strong rather than passive and weak as a way of reframing why Meno should search for knowledge. Socrates returns to this after finishing his argument that learning is recollecting:

In defense of the argument, I would not affirm the other points very strongly, but that we would be better, more manly, and less lazy by believing that one should search for what one doesn't know than if we believed that we cannot discover what we do not



know and should not even search for it – that is something over which I would fiercely contend, if I were able, in both word and deed.

(86b6–c2)

Socrates' primary goal is not to get Meno to accept that the soul is immortal or that learning is recollecting but rather to break him of his intellectual deference so he will search on his own. We can think of Socrates' strategy this way: Meno's deference in intellectual matters does not match his desire to be active and in control.

### The Third Part: Is Virtue Teachable? (86c–100c)

Meno responds to Socrates' exhortation by agreeing to search but says that he wants to return to his original question: whether virtue is teachable, comes by nature, or is acquired in some other way (86c–d). Socrates says that if he controlled Meno, they would investigate what virtue is before investigating whether it is teachable, but since instead Meno is not controlling himself but is controlling Socrates, they will have to investigate whether it is teachable before they know what it is (86d–e). However, Socrates suggests that they do so using a technique that geometers use, which Socrates describes using the term "hypothesis." Socrates seems to be referring to the technique of analysis and synthesis here, which is much more sophisticated than the simple geometry he had used earlier.<sup>21</sup> Again, Socrates entices Meno with something esoteric without requiring Meno to accept anything on someone else's authority.

Socrates application of this technique is to argue that if virtue is a type of knowledge, then it is teachable, and if it is not a type of knowledge, then it is not teachable, and so one can reduce the question of whether it is teachable to the question of whether or not it is a type of knowledge (87b–c).<sup>22</sup> Socrates then tries to answer this question simply on the basis of the idea that virtue is good and so beneficial – something that Socrates and Meno take to be obviously true (87d–e). The basic idea of his argument (87d–89a) is that wisdom is the only thing that, in and of itself, guides the soul well, thereby being beneficial. Everything else can be either beneficial or harmful depending on whether wisdom or folly is added to them; they are not in themselves (*auta kath' hauta*) beneficial or harmful (88c–d). Since virtue is (without qualification) beneficial and wisdom is the only thing we can identify as (without qualification) beneficial, virtue must be a type of wisdom, and thus a type of knowledge. Put differently, anything that is not wisdom might sometimes not guide the soul correctly, thereby being harmful, rather than beneficial.

After presenting this argument, Socrates wonders if they were wrong to agree that virtue is a type of knowledge. He spells out concerns over a long stretch of the dialogue (89c–96d) that point to virtue not being teachable, in which case (given what they have agreed to using the geometry-inspired technique), it must not be knowledge. In this part of the text, Anytus – one of Socrates' official prosecutors for impiety, mentioned in the *Apology* (18b, 23e) – is brought into the discussion (89e–95a). Anytus is presented as settled in his views and as taking offense at what he thinks are Socrates' views (92a–93a, 94e–95a). His behavior highlights that Meno, whatever his flaws, is still relatively open to genuine inquiry. At the very end of the dialogue, Socrates says that if Meno convinces Anytus of what Meno has been convinced of, Anytus would become a gentler person (100b–c).

Commentators have been particularly unimpressed with Socrates' reasoning in this part of the dialogue. Given that Plato frequently presents Socrates as thinking that virtue is a type of knowledge, and given that this would make it teachable, it is widely thought that

Socrates must think that virtue is teachable and that we readers are supposed to see that Socrates' reasoning is flawed.<sup>23</sup>

There are some *prima facie* considerations against such an interpretation, which are worth considering before examining Socrates' reasoning. First, what Socrates says is at fault in the *Meno* is not his reasoning here but rather his argument that virtue is knowledge (96d–97a). Moreover, Socrates, who is famous for often holding back his own views, says in the *Protagoras*: “There is no point in my saying to you anything other than *exactly what I think*. The truth is, Protagoras, I have *never* thought that this [virtue] could be taught, but when you say it can be, I can't very well doubt it” (319a9–b1, emphasis added). After Socrates lays out his reasons for thinking this, he says “looking at these things, Protagoras, I just don't think that virtue can be taught” (320b4–5). Plato presents Socrates in the *Protagoras* as having always believed that virtue cannot be taught but being willing to suspend his doubt to hear Protagoras' position. So, in the two dialogues where Socrates discusses at length whether virtue can be taught (the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*), he presents himself as seriously doubting its teachability. Moreover, the end of the *Protagoras* points out how this belief is in tension with his belief that virtue is a type of knowledge (361a–b), exactly the tension that the *Meno* explores here. At the end of each of these dialogues, Socrates says that the only way to resolve this issue would be to learn what virtue is – something that Socrates consistently claims not to know. Hence, I suggest that both of these dialogues explore, in different ways, what is supposed to be a real tension in Socrates' beliefs. This, in turn, allows us to take seriously Socrates' proposed account of virtue at the end of the *Meno*, rather than reading it as a view that we are supposed to recognize must be wrong.

The point is that while Socrates does seem to believe that virtue is a type of knowledge, or at least very closely connected to knowledge, he has no proof that this is the case. What he presents in the *Meno* and *Protagoras* is best seen, I think, as a set of reasons to believe that it is not teachable, rather than a proper argument. Socrates uses arguments to show interlocutors that their beliefs are inconsistent, but of course most beliefs – including philosophical beliefs – are not formed on the basis of arguments, even if they are adopted for good reasons. Socrates has no proof that virtue is knowledge, so it would be naïve to ignore the various signs that it is not teachable, which he lays out in the *Protagoras* and *Meno*: societies are set up on the assumption it is not teachable (*Prot.* 319b–e), people thought to have virtue do not seem to pass it on to their children (*Prot.* 319e–320b, *Meno* 93b–94e), people do not want to send their children to the sophists, who are the professed teachers of virtue (*Meno* 91b–92c), and even the supposed teachers of virtue, the sophists and the poets, cannot agree whether it is teachable (*Meno* 95b–96b).

To be sure, if one knew that virtue is knowledge, one could explain away each of these signs. It could be that societies are set up incorrectly and that there has been practically no one with genuine virtue. Plato's *Republic* develops an account of a society where virtue is taught. But even in the *Republic* Socrates does not claim to know that this society is possible. Another objection to Socrates' reasoning in the *Meno* is that he is fallaciously assuming that if something is not taught, then it is not teachable. If one thinks that Socrates is trying to provide an airtight argument, this is a reasonable objection. But it is fair to treat virtue's not being taught as evidence that it is not teachable. In cases where there are clear examples of something (e.g., having curly hair) and nobody seems to teach this, that is a good sign that it is not taught. Of course, the fact that calculus was not taught in Plato's time was not a sign that it wasn't teachable. To know whether virtue is more like curly hair or calculus, we would need to know what virtue is. But that, of course, is precisely what they



do not know. Since Meno insists on pursuing whether it is teachable before pursuing what it is, they must rely on defeasible considerations such as its not being taught. In any event, it is certainly reasonable for Socrates to explore the consequences if he turns out to be wrong that virtue is knowledge.

Up to Socrates' argument that virtue is not teachable, the overall arc of the dialogue is largely shaped by Meno's character and Socrates' strategy for managing Meno. But if the argument I have just provided is correct, in the last part of the dialogue Socrates uses the opportunity of Meno wanting an answer to whether virtue is teachable in order to explore a tension in Socrates' own thinking, one that can only be completely resolved by learning what virtue is. This illustrates for Meno how one can inquire without knowledge. Doing so involves intellectual humility: in this case, being honest about one's mistakes and exploring the tensions in one's own views.

After presenting his long case for thinking that virtue is not teachable (89d–96c), Socrates says that there was a flaw in his earlier argument that virtue must be knowledge (96d–e). He had argued that only knowledge leads to correct action, thereby being beneficial, but now he suggests that correct opinions can guide our actions just as well as knowing does (96d–97c). At first, Meno suggests that someone with knowledge would succeed all the time, whereas someone with true opinion only some of the time (97c). Socrates responds that someone who had true opinion all of the time would also succeed all of the time. This leads to a famous puzzle about what the value of knowledge is, if true opinion leads to the same outcome (97c–d).<sup>24</sup> Socrates answers by comparing true opinions to the mythical statues of Daedalus, which he suggests were so lifelike they would escape if not chained down. Similarly, Socrates says that true opinions are not prepared to stay with one for long if not tied down by an account of the cause.<sup>25</sup> I interpret Socrates' view as that if someone acted on a correct opinion all the time, they would succeed all the time, but that this is very unlikely to happen unless the correct opinion is tied down by an account of the cause, thereby becoming something one knows.<sup>26</sup>

More important to the structure of the dialogue is what Socrates says next. In order for actions to be beneficial, they need to be guided by a correct opinion or knowledge. But they have agreed that virtue is not teachable, and so not knowledge. Thus, virtue must be some sort of correct opinion. But what about the instability of correct opinion? Socrates says that politicians who run their city correctly – and so have virtue – must be like oracles and prophets, since they too say *many* true things when inspired, despite lacking knowledge (99c). Socrates in general thinks that poets, oracles, and prophets, when they say true things, should be seen as not having knowledge but rather as being divinely inspired (e.g., *Apology* 22a–c and *Ion* 533d–536d). Socrates' idea is that this divine inspiration can similarly explain how politicians can be guided by the truth, without having knowledge. While true opinions in and of themselves are unstable and need to be tied down, divinely inspired true opinions could remain for as long as the gods want.

Being divinely inspired would explain how a politician could consistently make correct decisions for decades without being able to pass virtue on to their children or teach it to anyone else. Again, many readers think Plato wants us to reject this idea.<sup>27</sup> But note how well it fits with the very Socratic ideas that (1) poets speak true things without knowledge but rather with divine inspiration, (2) we are radically inferior to the gods, and (3) we have no guarantee that we can acquire the knowledge that we are seeking. Socrates thinks we must try to search for knowledge, given its importance, but not that we are guaranteed to find it. The *Meno* shows how there could be virtue even if the highest degree of wisdom we can acquire

is the human wisdom that Socrates claims to have in the *Apology* (20d–e, 23a–b). Even still, we could be in a state that is only beneficial, not harmful, because it is a gift from the gods.

While I have emphasized that this account of virtue has good Socratic pedigree, Socrates may also be developing it here because it is an option that Meno is more likely to find acceptable. It does not require denying virtue to any of the politicians traditionally thought to have had it, nor does it require Meno to completely rethink what things are genuinely good. We can see why Socrates could convince Meno of this view, unlike the more radical views he develops, for example, in the *Gorgias* and *Republic*.<sup>28</sup> As noted earlier, those dialogues involve interlocutors who, unlike Meno, explicitly reject conventional claims about virtue and justice. In general, my suggestion is that since Socrates claims to lack knowledge, it makes sense that different dialogues explore different possibilities that are consistent with his broad commitments. These ideas can be fitting for his interlocutors and, at the same time, ones that Socrates takes seriously and thinks may well be correct.

After laying out the case that virtue is true opinion, Socrates says that, however, if one politician could make another one a politician (and so they were wrong to think that virtue is not teachable) this person would be like the real thing compared with shades regarding virtue (99e–100a). As I understand it, Socrates thinks that virtue is the best state our soul can be in, a state that is (unqualifiedly) beneficial. If virtue is not teachable, then the best state is a type of divinely guided true opinion. But if it is teachable, then it is a type of knowledge, and those with divinely inspired true opinions would not possess the best possible state for the soul.<sup>29</sup> In Socrates' final comment to Meno (100b–c), he highlights that all of these conclusions have been based on his reasoning thus far, but that in order to know the truth they need to first come to understand what virtue is, in and of itself (*auto kath' hauto*).

### The Meno's Relation to Plato's Other Dialogues

I have offered a brief account of the progression of the *Meno* in terms of who Meno is and how Socrates tries to engage with him. We are now in a position to re-evaluate the evidence for this being a transitional dialogue.

The ideas that the soul is immortal, that it reincarnates, and that learning is recollecting are not found in the Socratic dialogues. The presence of these claims in the *Meno*, perhaps more than any other, is thought to positively point to this not being Socratic dialogue. But, of course, these claims arise here because Meno argues that it is impossible to inquire. No such claim is made in the Socratic dialogues. And we have seen how it is fitting for Meno, in particular, to argue for such a claim, since it fits with his deference to those who are supposed to have knowledge. It is unsurprising that Socrates is presented as only making stronger claims when they are needed or useful for the discussion at hand. Moreover, their esoteric source is exactly right for enticing Meno.<sup>30</sup> The situation is similar for mathematics, which plays a prominent role in the *Meno*, but not in the Socratic dialogues. Socrates needs an example where someone comes to recognize that they are mistaken and then can be seen to acquire correct views without doing so on the basis of authority. Mathematics is perfect for this purpose.

Might it be the case that when Plato wrote the Socratic dialogues he felt compelled to stay closer to the historical Socrates' interests and was not as interested in immortality, reincarnation, recollection, and mathematics? Perhaps, but we do not have sufficient evidence to help us decide these questions. What seems clear is that the internal dynamics of

the Socratic dialogues are sufficient to explain why these topics do not arise in them and the internal dynamics of the *Meno* make it appropriate for them to arise here.

We can similarly explain why in some ways the *Meno* is more like Socratic dialogues than so-called “middle period” dialogues. The overall structure of the *Meno* is similar to that of many Socratic dialogues: Socrates aims to get his interlocutors to recognize their own ignorance on an important ethical topic, ultimately with the hope that they will see the need to inquire further. Meno’s sophistication helps him raise epistemological and methodological obstacles to this inquiry, but ultimately Socrates thinks Meno needs the same thing as the interlocutors in the Socratic dialogues: to recognize one’s ignorance and learn to investigate such questions oneself.

The ethics of the dialogue is also similarly “Socratic,” rather than presenting the sort of ethical views found in the middle dialogues.<sup>31</sup> Before Meno is ready to hear such views, he needs to recognize how fundamentally misguided his basic view of virtue is and come to accept some basic features of Socrates’ ethical framework. The interlocutors in the middle dialogues, by contrast, typically already recognize their own ignorance and are committed to basic Socratic views, and so are ready to investigate along with him. Even those who are not very sophisticated lack Meno’s specific flaws, which helps to explain why Socrates treats them differently.

What remains is to address why Socrates does not describe the forms in the *Meno* in the ways that he does in middle dialogues. The first question is whether Socrates’ arguments in the *Meno* would be aided by describing forms as not sensible, divine, unchanging, or in another way found in the middle dialogues. In parts of the dialogue, this is clearly irrelevant, but Socrates does argue in the *Meno* that learning is recollecting, just as he does in the *Phaedo*, and his argument in the *Phaedo* apparently relies on some of the middle-period features of the forms.<sup>32</sup> In the *Phaedo* Socrates describes this argument as “another way” to conclude that learning is recollecting (73b), apparently in contrast to the way described in the *Meno*. So why did Socrates not use features of the forms to argue for recollection in the *Meno*? My suggestion is that if Socrates had described the forms in the full glory found in the *Symposium* or *Phaedo*, Meno would have been in awe of them and treated them as some further bit of esoteric wisdom he had learned. Socrates sees one of Meno’s main problems as being too deferential to other people’s wisdom. Given Meno’s problems, he would not be aided by hearing about these awe-inspiring features of the forms. To be sure, Socrates is willing to use Meno’s love for the esoteric to advance the conversation, but this brings dangers with it, which Socrates then needs to mitigate. We can see why Socrates would, when talking to Meno, use a more straightforward argument that emphasizes how everyone, even a slave, can recollect.

## Conclusion

Plato masterfully composed the *Meno* so that the interaction between the characters of Socrates and Meno explains why certain topics arise and others do not. Because of Meno’s sophistication and love for the esoteric, Socrates discusses with Meno topics not found in the Socratic dialogues. But because he has not yet accepted his own ignorance or basic features of Socratic ethics, he is not yet ready for the more advanced discussions in the so-called middle-period dialogues. In this unusual conversation, the *Meno* explores ideas not explored elsewhere, from Meno’s principled denial that virtue is a single thing, through his argument for the impossibility of inquiry, to Socrates’ exploration of a tension within his own views about virtue.

Notes

- 1 I recommend Sedley and Long's 2010 translation of the dialogue. The term "Socratic ethics" indicates the ethics of what are typically called "Socratic" or sometimes "early" dialogues.
- 2 On the basis of stylometry, we can be fairly confident it is not a middle-late dialogue, such as the *Republic* or the *Phaedrus*, let alone a late dialogue. For a sensible discussion of what can and cannot be plausibly concluded from stylometry, see Kahn 2002.
- 3 Vlastos 1991, chapter 2, is a classic argument that *Meno* is post-Socratic. The view that the dialogue is transitional is very common. For example, see Sedley and Long 2010, xii.
- 4 See note 2.
- 5 Ebrey and Kraut 2022 provides a brief, general account of how to use the differences between the interlocutors to explain differences between the dialogues. Ebrey 2023 (esp. chapter 1) provides this sort of account of the *Phaedo*. I take the *Meno* to be, at least prima facie, one of the more difficult cases, given how entrenched the view is that it is transitional.
- 6 In the *Meno*, *Phaedo* and *Republic* Socrates describes methods of investigating that involve hypotheses. He does not use a single name for these methods. I argue that they are significantly different in Ebrey 2013; Ebrey 2016; Ebrey 2023, ch. 9, section 8, and so that it is misleading to use the same name for them.
- 7 Xenophon, *Anabasis* 2.6.21–27.
- 8 In English, "virtue" has nineteenth-century moralizing connotations, but it is worth recalling that the word "*aretē*" in Greek can also be translated as "excellence" and is thought of as the quality one wants to inculcate in one's children, the quality that will allow one to live a good, happy, and successful life.
- 9 For a different, and in some ways complementary, account of Meno's character and how Socrates engages with Meno, see Scott 2006, esp. chapters 5 and 16.
- 10 For a discussion of the idea that one should not even *say* whether it is teachable unless you know what it is, see Ebrey 2013. The priority principle is discussed by many commentators, including Scott 2006; Politis 2015; Fine 2022.
- 11 See Trivigno, forthcoming.
- 12 For reasons of space, I leave aside (i) Socrates' clarification of what it means to identify justice as a virtue (73d–75a), (ii) the account that Meno gets Socrates to provide of what shape is and what color is (75b–76e), and (iii) Socrates' refutation of Meno's final accounts of virtue (76e–79e).
- 13 For a discussion of different ways to translate the paradox, see Ebrey 2017.
- 14 Fine's view has recently been revised and updated in Fine 2022 [original, 1992]. Other readings include Nehamas 1985; Dimas 1996; Scott 2006; Franklin 2009; McCabe 2009; Ebrey 2014; Benson 2015.
- 15 Ebrey 2014, 2017.
- 16 Of course, this is not to say that Meno would need to hold such a theory to want to learn from people thought to be wise. His respect for social hierarchy may be sufficient. Nonetheless, the paradox provides him with a stronger reason for his deference.
- 17 Here and for the remainder of this chapter, translations are from Sedley and Long 2010, occasionally modified (as here).
- 18 For a discussion of how the *Meno*'s account of recollection and reincarnation fit into Plato's broader engagement with Greek religion, see Betegh 2022.
- 19 In addition to the papers mentioned in note 14, see Gentzler 1994; Bronstein and Schwab 2019; Shepardson 2022.
- 20 For a discussion of why Socrates calls it "eristic," see Ebrey 2014.
- 21 For a discussion of its application in the *Meno*, see Menn 2002; Wolfsdorf 2008; Ebrey 2013. For a discussion of what evidence this provides about terminology of Greek mathematics, see Ebrey 2023, ch. 9, section 8.1. For a careful account of the structure of analysis and synthesis, see Acerbi 2021, ch. 2, section 4 alongside Appendix B. Acerbi noted to me that this passage (87a–b) from the *Meno* mixes the language of Greek demonstration and Greek construction in a way that does not occur after Euclid's *Elements*. For a discussion of these distinct "stylistic codes," as Acerbi calls them, see Acerbi 2021, ch. 1.
- 22 As I discuss in much greater detail in Ebrey 2013.
- 23 For a different defense of this part of the dialogue, see Scott 2006, ch. 13 and 15.

- 24 In contemporary epistemology, this is referred to as “the *Meno* problem.” Bjelde 2021 discusses the relation between the *Meno* and this contemporary problem.
- 25 Schwab 2015 discusses how to understand what it means to be tied down by a cause.
- 26 For an alternative, see Bjelde 2024.
- 27 For a discussion, see Scott 2006, 185–93.
- 28 By contrast, Scott 2006, ch. 15, argues that the *Gorgias* must have been written after the *Meno* since Socrates advocates more radical views there.
- 29 For a discussion of why, see Glasscock 2021.
- 30 Perhaps the most likely candidate is the immortality of the soul, which seems relevant at the end of the *Apology*. For a discussion, see Ebrey 2023, ch. 1, section 4.
- 31 Brickhouse and Smith 2010 discuss the *Meno* within a book-length treatment of Socratic ethics. Kamtekar 2017 argues, in a manner sympathetic to my approach here, that Socrates’ specific interlocutors in the Socratic dialogues influence the moral psychology he presents in these dialogues.
- 32 Exactly which features is a matter of scholarly debate, one partially determined by which manuscript reading one takes of a crucial line (74b7–9). For a discussion, see Ebrey 2023, ch. 5, sections 4 and 5.

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