
Socrates, Who are the Teachers of Virtue?

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SOCRATES, WHO ARE THE TEACHERS OF VIRTUE?

*Can you tell me, Socrates, can virtue be taught or is it not teachable but the result of practice, or is it neither of these, but men possess it by nature or in some other way?*¹

This question, which begins Plato's *Meno*, serves as the axis around which the dialogue revolves. At first glance, the dialogue appears to answer this question in the negative: Socrates concludes that virtue cannot be taught because there are no teachers of it. This interpretation, which will be referred to as the traditional interpretation, of the dialogue's conclusions, however, is unsatisfying because it ignores key components of the dialogue. When the dialogue is analyzed in light of these components, an entirely new interpretation is required. By conducting such an analysis, I will demonstrate a new interpretation which is that virtue can be taught, and that its only proper teacher is the philosopher. To accomplish this, I will demonstrate why the traditional interpretation is untenable. Secondly, I will address the argument in favor of the traditional interpretation: that if a subject has no teachers it cannot be taught. Lastly, I will illustrate why Plato believes that the philosopher is the only proper teacher of virtue.

The entire discussion of virtue in the *Meno* rests on Plato's intellectualism or his belief that if one knows what is the right action then one will perform it. This makes knowledge the key factor in correct action, or virtue, because Plato sees the will always desiring the true good, and therefore acting in accordance with the true good if it is aware of the true good.² With this in mind, the *Meno's* final argument can be understood. This argument begins by asking how men can act rightly if they do not use knowledge of the good to determine how to act. It culminates in the conclusion that men act correctly, and are thus virtuous, not by acting in accord with knowledge of what the correct action is but by right opinion about correct action. This

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replacement of knowledge with opinion leads to the interpretation of the dialogue that it concludes that virtue is not knowledge and therefore cannot be taught.

This interpretation, however, is unsatisfactory because it completely ignores the Doctrine of Recollection. Because the doctrine sees learning as the transformation of opinions into knowledge it makes opinions the starting point for knowledge. This transformation occurs through the examination of opinions to see if they are true. By the dialectical process true opinions are turned into knowledge and false ones are eliminated. This process is demonstrated in Socrates' famous inquiry of Meno's slave. In his encounter with Socrates, Meno's slave had false opinions, was freed from these and came to possess true opinion through Socrates' use of the dialectical process.³ If Socrates continued his dialectic he would transform the slave's opinions into knowledge. The encounter concludes with the following passage:

SOCRATES: These opinions have just now 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 acute as anyone's.

MENO: It is likely.⁴

By applying the doctrine to virtue, it can be seen that if one has right opinions about virtue, then examination will turn these opinions into knowledge. This application shows that the Doctrine of Recollection incorporates the conclusion that virtue is opinion but moves beyond it by showing that opinions about how to act can be turned into knowledge of how to act virtuously. This refutes the traditional interpretation of the dialogue by showing that virtue can become knowledge and thus has the potential to be taught.

The objection to the interpreting the dialogue as concluding that virtue can be taught is that because Socrates cannot find any teachers of virtue, he concludes that it cannot be taught. This conclusion, however, dismisses Plato's characterization of Socrates as both teacher and student of virtue. Socrates demonstrates that he is a teacher of *knowledge* by helping Meno's slave to

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recollect the geometrical principles. A teacher is one who helps a student to learn. Since under the Doctrine of Recollection, remembering is synonymous with learning, therefore one who helps another recollect is a teacher. Since Socrates helps the slave recollect knowledge, of which virtue is a kind, then he is seen to be a teacher of virtue. In addition, Socrates is definitely trying to come to knowledge of the truth himself through the dialectical process. This is seen throughout the dialogue and especially in Socrates' various attempts to learn what virtue is.⁵ This search makes Socrates the student because he is trying to transform his opinions about virtue into knowledge. By his actions Socrates' shows that there are teachers of virtue, as well as students.

If there are teachers of virtue, then who are these teachers? Three arguments can be used to demonstrate that they are the philosophers. The first argument is built on two verbal pictures of the teachers of virtue that Socrates paints in the dialogue. The first picture is ironic in tone.

Socrates asks:

*Can you mention any other subject of which those who claim to be teachers not only are not recognized to be teachers of others but are not recognized to have knowledge of it themselves, and are thought to be poor in the very matter which they profess to teach?*⁶

This statement is applicable to philosophers of every generation. They are not recognized to be teachers of virtue, are thought to know nothing about it, and most of all are thought to be poor in virtue, or vicious. This also brings to mind the simile of Ship of State from the *Republic* where the philosopher is seen as useless because he is not perceived to know how to rule, which, ironically, is his function in the state.

The second picture characterizes the teacher of virtue in tones which bring to mind other passages from the *Republic*. Socrates states:

...unless there is someone among our statesmen who can make another into a statesman. If there were one, he could be said to be among the living as Homer said Tiresias was among the dead, namely, that "he alone retained his wits while others flitted about like

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shadows.” In the same manner such a man would, as far as virtue is concerned, here also be the only true reality compared, as it were, with shadows.⁷

We can see from the *Republic* that this passage clearly applies to the philosopher. He is charged to make philosopher-kings of others by bringing them out of the Cave through education,⁸ and he is awake compared with the rest of the men who do not actually know but operate in the realm of opinion.⁹

The second argument is that the sequences in which the arguments are presented in the dialogue argue that the philosopher is the proper teacher of virtue. Near the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates states that Athenians do not know what virtue is.¹⁰ Meno then proposes definitions of virtue formulated by the sophists and poets. Socrates shows that the definitions are false, thereby showing that neither the sophists nor the poets know what virtue is. If this is coupled with his proof that there are no teachers of virtue, because neither the sophists, nor Athenian gentlemen, nor poets can teach virtue,¹¹ it serves to clear the ground of the traditional teachers of virtue leaving a vacuum for the philosopher to fill.

The third argument is that dialectic is seen as the proper method for transforming opinion into knowledge. The teacher is one who employs dialectic to help the student complete this transformation. Since dialectic is another name for philosophy, then the philosopher or dialectician becomes the teacher of virtue.

This analysis of the *Meno* has shown that interpreting the dialogue as concluding that virtue cannot be taught it is completely opposite to what Plato intended the conclusion to be. By elucidating the issues which are raised by the Doctrine of Recollection, the figure of Socrates, and the definition of the philosopher the new interpretation, proposed in this paper, compels the reader of the *Meno* to at least rethink the dialogue and at most accept the interpretation.

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¹ Plato. *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*. Second Edition. Edited by John M. Cooper. Translated by G. M. A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2002. *Meno*, 70a

² *Ibid*, 77b–78b

³ *Ibid*, The discussion with Meno's slave is found at 81e–85b

⁴ *Ibid*, 85b-d; Cf: *Meno* 97e–98a

⁵ *Ibid*, 71a-b; 86b-c

⁶ *Ibid*, 96a-b

⁷ *Ibid*, 99e-100a

⁸ Plato. *Republic*. Edited by C. D. C. Reeve. Translated by G. M. A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1992. 540b

⁹ *Republic* 484c, 476c

¹⁰ Plato. *Meno*, 70c – 71b

¹¹ *Ibid*, 89c – 96d