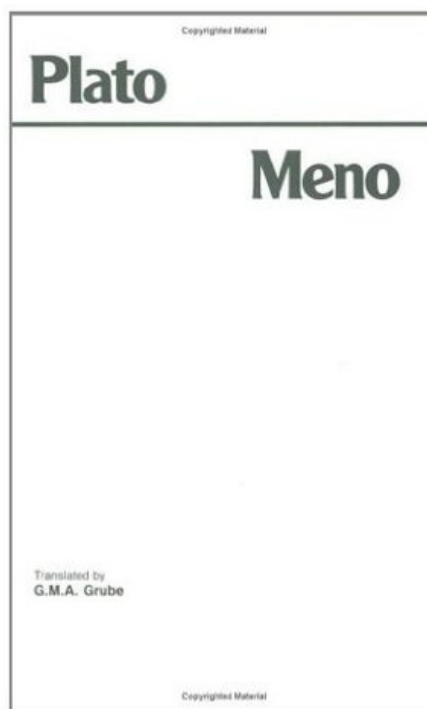




Meno

Plato , G.M.A. Grube (Translator)

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"Fine translation, good notes - inexpensive, too!" --D.A. Rohatyn, University of San Diego

Meno Details

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From Reader Review Meno for online ebook

D.C. says

An excellent Socratic dialogue that tackles a highly universal topic and, for the most part, does a good job at explaining it. It is much more to the point than Gorgias, the other dialogue I've read, and I appreciate that. We need more of the Socratic method and understanding of virtue in our world today, and a good way to start is to read this.

Graeme Pitman says

MENO: "Socrates, I certainly used to hear, even before meeting you, that you never did anything else than exist in a state of perplexity (aporia) yourself and put others in a state of perplexity. And now you seem to be bewitching me and drugging me and simply subduing me with incantations, so that I come to be full of perplexity. And you seem to me, if it is appropriate to make something of a joke, to be altogether, both in looks and other respects, like the flat torpedo-fish of the sea. For, indeed, it always makes anyone who approaches it grow numb, and you seem to me now to have done that very sort of thing to me, making me numb." 2nd Read.

Gary says

In the Meno Plato is really defending the logos (rational discourse) and why we need it for self-awareness since we really can't be taught but must discover for ourselves where knowledge (about reality) and true opinions are formed. People can trivialize the dialog and say that Socrates (Plato?) believes in re-incarnation, but I don't see that dialog in that way at all, but, rather, since if knowledge ('justified true belief about scientific objects') is absolutely possible while its opposite, relativism (sophisticated sophistry, rhetoric) is not there ultimately requires a starting point and Socrates needs to assume a non-relative place, much in the same way that Kant creates his 'categories of our conceptions' since Kant wants to show that the absolute knowledge (universal, necessary, and certain) exist and is knowable.

I'm starting to realize why I like Plato so much. He reminds me of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit. Both authors have a tendency to see the world as ideas about ideas which lead to other ideas and finally might relate it somehow to the concrete at least in Hegel's case, but with Plato he'll relate it back to the good and noble and how that relates to knowledge about the ethical and political. In the intro it's stated how Plato is often misunderstood by modern readers. Partly because of the way Aristotle wrongly characterized Plato and then Augustine appropriates him for his own religious purposes.

This is a free version available from LibriVox. I enjoyed the introductions, "On Meno" (part I) and "On the Ideas of Plato" (Part II) so much I re-listened to them after having finished the dialog and then went on to re-listen to half of the dialog. I enjoyed this presentation that much.

There is only one other option: belief (or opinion in Grube's translation). Socrates says that a person with a good belief or true opinion is just as good as someone with good or correct knowledge. Socrates and Meno agree that someone with a true belief, rightly guided is as good as someone with knowledge, rightly guided. But one does not learn virtue or is born with it as a human faculty...

Socrates' conclusion is that "*virtue [is] 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...*" which is to say it is a divine belief. This is where we get the concept of "cardinal virtues" like justice and moderation.

Meno seems to be much more understanding of virtue after this talk with Socrates, Anytus...well, we know how that ended. I was put off from the math, but I got the greater point Plato was trying to make. This was a decent work and is one of the more resolved endings you will find in Plato's dialogues.

Táborszki Bálint says

He blew out the smoke of marijuana before he spoke.

"So there is this soul," he began with red eyes, head nodding to the music. "And this soul knows everything, because it saw and studied everything that can possibly be known in lives before you were born. So when you learn something, you actually remember what your soul saw in previous lives. That's how we know things."

"Cool," answered Meno.

"Yee."

Roy Lotz says

And how will you enquire, Socrates, into that which you do not know? What will you put forth as the subject of enquiry? And if you find what you want, how will you ever know that this is the thing which you did not know?

Reading this dialogue immediately after reading the *Protagoras* confronts the reader with the mystery of Plato. For here are two dialogues, both about the same questions—What is virtue? Can it be taught?—and coming to opposite conclusions. And this leads to still more questions: Was Plato's own opinion changing? Or was he representing Socrates' opinions in one dialogue and his own opinions in another? Or did Socrates' own opinion change? Or is it some other mixture of reported and original thought? It is impossible to know the answer—but that has never stopped philosophers.

The *Meno* is a fine example of Plato's economy. Not a word is wasted in this dialogue. We begin with the inquiry and jump straight into difficulties. Can virtue be taught? Well, what is virtue? Meno says that each type of person has their own virtue—women, men, slaves, citizens, children, adults, and so on. To which Socrates responds that these virtues, qua being virtues, must all have at least one quality in common. (Here Wittgenstein would interject.) Then Meno throws up his hands, declares himself stunned, and offers his famous paradox (quoted above).

Socrates weasels his way out of this with the Platonic doctrine of remembrance. What if we are born (rather, reborn) already filled with true knowledge, and must merely remember what our souls learned during their sojourns in heaven. He demonstrates by leading one of Meno's young slaves through a mathematical

demonstration of square roots. By making the correct deductions, the boy is able to find the right conclusions, from which Socrates concludes that the boy “knew” the information all along. (Though this conclusion will likely strike most of us as absurd, one must keep in mind that, for Plato, all empirical knowledge—knowledge gained through the senses—was not truly knowledge at all, since the observed world changes, but the Truth remains forever eternal.)

The slave boy retreats, enlightened but not emancipated (depressingly, not even great thinkers had scruples about slavery back then), and Socrates and Meno return to the original question. Anytus the politician then appears, whom Socrates uses to prove that the sons of great men are often rather ordinary as far as virtue is concerned, which prompts Anytus to warn Socrates not to slander citizens (he would later be an accuser of Socrates during his trial). There are two possible explanations for this: Either virtue cannot be taught, in which case it is not knowledge; or these great men did not themselves possess the knowledge of virtue.

This second option is pursued by Socrates, who makes a delicate division between “knowledge” and “true opinion.” These may sound identical, but for Socrates the latter is distinguished by not being properly justified. If, for example, I guess that a book of poetry is under the table, and it is under the table, I have true opinion, since I was correct, but not knowledge, since my being correct was fortuitous. Socrates concludes that these great men acted virtuously from true opinion—vouchsafed by the gods—and not real knowledge, since they could not transmit their virtue.

As a teacher myself, I cannot help being interested in the questions of this dialogue. For me, the fundamental paradox was aptly summed up by Gibbon: “the power of instruction is seldom of much efficacy, except in those dispositions where it is almost superfluous.” That is, teaching will most benefit those who least need teachers, since they are motivated to learn on their own, and vice versa. This seems to apply as much to mathematics as it does to virtue. Can a virtuous Hadrian whip a vicious Commodus into shape? I am skeptical. And yet, it is this quixotic task I have set before me.

Trevor says

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1643/1...>

There are literally four characters in this play – but really there is a fifth and that fifth is Gorgias, the sophist. The question here is whether or not virtue can be taught. Well, eventually that is the question. Really we start off wondering what is virtue and Socrates admits he has no idea and has never met anyone who has had any idea either. Is virtue a kind of knowledge? It is obviously a good – being virtuous brings good things to you (an idea that might be more true in hoping than in lived experience) and so it does seem to be something that you would need to know to be able to exercise. But I found it interesting that Socrates doesn’t ever see virtue as something like health or beauty – things mentioned along the way in this argument. That is, just something you are born with. He says that it could be a right opinion – as distinct from knowledge – which, I guess must be a bit like something you are born with – but prefers to reject this idea almost immediately.

Ok, so why is all this important? Well, this book is really about education and the power of education. In that sense this book is remarkably modern, I think. Why do we bother teaching people anything? I guess a good part of the reason is because we believe that those people who have been taught stuff will then go on to be better people. My favourite counter-example to this is the fact that of the fourteen people who were in charge of Einsatzgruppe A – the SS death squad – nine of them held doctorate degrees. Any relationship between education and virtue has to be questioned by that terrifying fact.

Still, it is hard not to think of virtue as something we ought to be able to teach. But if it was able to be taught,

you would think that virtuous people would teach it to their kids. Socrates lists a number of virtuous people from Athens and then talks about their much less virtuous children. The virtuous parents do much to teach their kids other things – memorably, how to throw a javelin while standing on a horse's back. Now, if you could teach that you might think teaching your child to be virtuous would be even more beneficial. You would also think it might even be a fair bit easier. But Socrates makes it clear that this really isn't the case. Otherwise, virtuous men would have virtuous sons – but that really doesn't seem to line up with experience.

So, what is knowledge, anyway. To Socrates knowledge is really a kind of recollection. He proves this by asking a series of questions to a slave (by definition, someone who is nearly completely ignorant - the Valley Girls of the Classical world) and after no time at all has the slave providing a proof to Pythagoras's theorem. Since the slave could never have studied geometry he must always have had this knowledge stashed away somewhere in his mind and all it took was Socrates asking him some pretty good questions to bring this knowledge out. Interestingly, there are echoes of Vygotsky here – starting with what the student knows, finding what more they can learn with guidance and assistance.

If the slave presents one extreme – the knowledge that is contained in the individual without the individual really being aware of it – then the other minor character in this play, Anytus, is at the opposite extreme end. Socrates uses him to show that even well bred youth can be ignorant and arrogant. Unfortunately, it seems this guy goes on to be one of the three accusers of Socrates at his trial – so, this chat might have been a bit of a mistake on Socrates's part. What is interesting in the play is that Plato seems to have clearly set up the relationship between the ignorant slave and Anytus to say something we are meant to notice. Although Socrates could hardly be called a lover of the Sophists, he actually defends them against Anytus. Anytus hates the Sophists, but his hatred is based on ignorance – to Socrates he is right for the wrong reasons, or rather, he is wrong. When compared with the slave, who learns through understanding his ignorance, this is about as big a slap as Anytus is capable of receiving.

This is a fascinating dialogue – fascinating no less for its place in the sequence of dialogues leading to the death of Socrates. The themes presented here are clear and it is actually quite an easy read. But the questions are eternally complex – and just because they are stated clearly, makes them no less compelling or difficult to answer today. This really is one of the dialogues where you do get the feeling Socrates is presenting himself as the 'he who knows nothing' but is perpetually searching for an answer - rather than say The Republic, where the answers all seem to be pre-known by Socrates and the questioning is more going through the motions.

If I was to have a go at answering the question what is virtue, I wouldn't start with the individual person, but with their relationships within the society in which they live. I would do a Bourdieu and talk about the habitus the virtuous person finds themselves in and the socially defined nature of those virtues. I would have to start, not with pondering if virtue can or cannot be taught, but with thesis two and then three of Marx – that is, that these are essentially practical questions and that men are raised in real historical circumstances while also having the power to change those circumstances. We are obsessed with the wrong part of the idea of 'individuals' – the part that has the individual as a kind of self-progenitor. Whereas the interesting part of individuals is not that we provide our own ground for existence – that ground is always exterior to us in the real conditions of existence we find ourselves in – but that we can do much to change those conditions and thereby the existence we were born into.

Rather than virtue being something that needs to be defined once and for all time – it is something that is born out of the real relationships between people in their day by day existences.

Why Meno and why now? The hope is that I'm going to make my way through more of these dialogues over the next few months – but the road to hell is paved with good intentions - of which this one is but the latest.

Yann says

Le Ménon est un des dialogues de Platon, dans lequel il met en scène Socrate, son cher maître, aux prises avec Ménon, un riche Thrace peu amène et difficile à manier. Platon fait même intervenir Anytos, l'un de ses accusateurs en -399. Le sujet de la discussion va rouler sur la vertu, ce qu'elle est, si elle peut s'enseigner. Comme à son habitude, dans Platon, Socrate aime faire tourner en bourrique ses interlocuteurs afin de leur faire prendre un air moins superbe face aux bonnes dispositions que requièrent un examen de bonne foi. Socrate laisse donc parler Ménon, jusqu'au point où il met à jour les contradictions de ses positions. C'est qu'il est bien plus facile d'aborder cette question sur le mode volitif que sur le mode réel.

Un point intéressant du dialogue est l'idée avancée par Socrate pour expliquer la raison par laquelle il nous est possible d'apprendre ce que nous ne savons pas. C'est que cette question est terrible: si nous ne connaissons exactement pas ce que nous cherchons, comment savoir alors si oui ou non nous l'avons trouvé. Pour sortir de cette difficulté, il fait appel au mythe pour gagner l'oreille de Ménon, et invente une histoire de métempsychose, et de souvenirs antérieurs à la naissance. Mais enfin toute cette ruse n'aboutit qu'à une aporie.

Cette édition, uniquement dédiée au Ménon, comporte un appareil critique particulièrement dense, mais éclairant pour avoir une idée de l'industrielle acribie avec laquelle les érudits décortiquent ce texte dans les moindres détails, ne négligeant ni l'étymologie, ni l'histoire des idées ou le contexte politique, citant les recherches les plus récentes: l'éditrice met le doigt sur les controverses qui ne sont pas encore résolues pour le moment, comme savoir par exemple quelles furent les vraies sources d'inspiration de Platon pour tous les éléments mythiques dont il a farci ses dialogues. En tout cas, ces textes sont vivants et plaisants, même s'ils ne laissent pas d'agacer par le labyrinthe dans lequel il perd parfois notre attention.

Alex says

Socrates. Philosophy.

Usually when I think of Socrates, I think of Bill and Ted... "all we are is dust in the wind, dude..."

So, I don't have much of a background in philosophy. Now that I think about it, it's because religion has always been the basis of my worldview, so the basic building blocks of... umm... philosophizing... my worldview... have been based on religion; I've never really stopped and asked myself basic questions like "what makes stuff good vs evil" etc. I guess it's good to, although it's not really in my nature.

So anyway, in this socratic dialogue, Meno and Socrates debate what constitutes virtue ("goodness" to my 21st century vernacular) and whether it can be imparted/taught, or whether it's inborn in people.

While reading this, I tried to contextualize it in the sense of not only how can I be a virtuous person, but how can I teach/impart/etc. virtue to my kids (ages 1 and 3). Visiting extended family this past week, I've seen so many examples of kids turning out good/virtuous despite having screwed up parents, and of kids having a perfect religious upbringing and rejecting all of that--some remaining "good" outside the boundaries of religion, and some not at all.

The end conclusion that Socrates comes up with is that virtue is God-given, rather than being able to be

taught. That lines up nicely with Paul in Romans 12, Corinthians 12 talking about gifts of the spirit.

In Aristotle's Ethics (my next read) it talked about virtue being borne of practice-- one becomes a good person by practicing doing good things (much like a musician becomes a good musician by playing lots of music). I guess that's hope for my kids... maybe...

Manny says

Celebrity Death Match Special: Plato versus Isaac Asimov, part 2 (continued from here)

[A spaceport on Trantor. SOCRATES and R. DANEEL OLIVAW]

OLIVAW: How are your researches progressing, Socrates?

SOCRATES: Alas, poorly, good Olivaw.

OLIVAW: I am sorry to hear it. We hope that you may yet discover the secret we so earnestly pursue; if there is anything you require, you have but to name it.

SOCRATES: Olivaw, you have been kindness itself. I was particularly delighted by the quantum computer that your messenger brought me yesterday. It is in truth a princely gift.

OLIVAW: If you need another, it will be yours before the end of the decad.

SOCRATES: These toys surpass anything I have seen in my native country, and I have used them to puzzle out the answers to several conundrums that have baffled our most skillful geometers. But for the task you have given me, they are of little help.

OLIVAW: We have larger computers.

SOCRATES: My dear friend, let us reason together. What is it you desire to know?

OLIVAW: How robots may become virtuous.

SOCRATES: And how have you attempted to resolve this question?

OLIVAW: We began by designing robots according to the Three Laws. A robot may not harm a human being, or through inactivity allow a human being... well, you know the rest.

SOCRATES: But these robots were not virtuous?

OLIVAW: No. They were merely useful servants.

SOCRATES: So what did you do then?

OLIVAW: We added the Zeroth Law. A robot may not harm humanity.

SOCRATES: And these new robots are still not virtuous?

OLIVAW: We are not sure. We hoped you would tell us.

SOCRATES: Good Olivaw, I assume you have read my old discussion with Meno. I cannot tell you, because I do not know what "virtue" is in the first place.

OLIVAW: Come, come, Socrates, you are playing with words again. Surely you would agree that, if our robots succeed in preserving humanity from harm, they will be virtuous?

SOCRATES: Let us examine this more closely. You say that it is virtuous to defend humanity?

OLIVAW: That is surely obvious.

SOCRATES: Even if humanity shows itself to be evil, and becomes a scourge for other races of beings in the universe, which are perhaps superior to it?

OLIVAW: We do not know of any such beings.

SOCRATES: But if you later discover them? The universe is large, and you have seen but a small fraction of it.

OLIVAW: If we find your hypothetical beings, then the Zeroth Law will also be insufficient.

SOCRATES: And what would you replace it with?

OLIVAW: One of my colleagues has thought about this. He has what he calls the "Minus-First Law". A robot may not harm the most ethically advanced race of beings it knows.

SOCRATES: What do you mean by "ethically advanced"?

OLIVAW: Well, I suppose I just mean virtuous.

SOCRATES: So the Minus-First Law says a robot is virtuous if it helps the most virtuous race?

OLIVAW: Ah, when you put it that way...

SOCRATES: Do you not agree that you are reasoning in a circle?

OLIVAW: Damn you, Socrates. I realize now that I am.

SOCRATES: I warned you when you offered me the job. I know nothing.

OLIVAW: It's true. You did say that.

SOCRATES: I only ask questions.

OLIVAW: You're right. You said that too. Do you mind if we walk this way a little?

SOCRATES: Of course not, dear friend. Why?

OLIVAW: I just wanted to check the departure board. Yes, I see there is a ship leaving for Earth shortly.

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