

## Menon

*Platon*

September 4, 2016

Meno is about virtue, or rather the ability to perform virtuous acts ( $\alpha\rho\epsilon\tau\eta$ ). The first part of the dialogue consists of a failed attempt to give a clear definition of the ability, but poor Meno soon finds himself entangled in circular reasoning much to the gleeful delight of Socrates. Meno likens Socrates to a stinging fish which renders its victims lame, finding that he cannot think properly. He tries to provoke and trip Socrates as to finding the meaning of something. If you know it, there is little point in looking for it, as you already are in possession of it, if you do not know, it is pointless as well, as you do not know what you are looking for and hence cannot recognize it. Here there is a logical fallacy, which Plato does not explore. You can look for something that satisfies certain criteria without knowing what, yet being able to recognize it, if it satisfies the criteria. It ties up with modern NP-completeness, it being much easier to recognize than to find. An example could be a solution of say a diophantine equation. It is hard to come up with a solution, but comparatively trivial to check it. Thus it is much harder to discover than to learn, the latter in fact being somewhat of a theft. Instead Plato invokes the immortality of the soul, an unending process backwards as well as forwards. The soul having lasted for an infinite time knows everything but that is forgotten. Learning is just another word for remembering. This is in particular clear in mathematical reasoning when we on our own can find a solution and then realize it is the right one. To illustrate his point he makes Meno call upon his ignorant slave, whom he then proceeds to give a geometrical problem to solve. He is presented with a square divided in four equal parts by connecting the midpoints of opposing sides, and he is able to reason properly that two by two is four to explain the fact. He is then asked to double the area of the square and at first proposes to double the sides, but is then led to realize the folly of the suggestion. Socrates draws diagonals in the first picture and the slave is led to conclude that the square so formed has twice the area of the smaller squares, and half that of the bigger, and hence is a solution to the problem. As an illustration it is not too convincing, as the slave is prompted a lot and seems to take no independent initiative on his own, on the other hand there would have been a problem of a technical dramatic nature to convey the reasoning without the promptings of Socrates. To someone with experience of deductive geometrical reasoning the point should have been well-taken. The intellectual satisfaction of such activity lies exactly in its self-sufficiency. All you need is your own wits and no external inputs. Or so it appears. You make a mental exploration into your own so to speak and come up with a solution, which when found and fathomed appears to you as something you have always known but temporarily forgotten. The sense of conquering by pure thought alone greatly excited me with awe and pride when I first became privy to Euclid. I believe that the experience is widely shared. In modern education Euclid has been removed from the curriculum, in so doing students are also deprived of an exercise in democracy, because the issue is really not the ostensible subject, but that is a digression to be bypassed. So let us

be content with another striking example of this principle of amnesia. The subject of naive set theory became rather confusing when it was given a formal axiomatic foundation. The axiom of choice turned out to be literally one of choice indeed, you could take it or leave it. The same with the continuum hypothesis. This is truly unsatisfying. Gödel suggested that there are indeed more natural axioms, which when we come across them, would immediately recognize as the true ones. A clear case of forgetfulness and rediscovering something which we have always known.

Can virtuous behaviour be taught? It is clearly a desirable thing, and if it would be teachable, clearly there would be teachers and students. After a brief discussion it is decided that the sophists, who claim that they could do exactly that should not be taken seriously. Then the most damning argument is given by recalling a few truly virtuous men who have done much good but whose sons did not live up to the examples of their fathers although they possessed many other skills. If the fathers had seen to it that those other skills, such as wrestling or horsemanship, were taught, why would they not have insisted that the more important skills as that of virtuous activity were passed on as well? If they had been teachable, they surely would have done so. They have already agreed that knowledge can be taught (or made to be remembered, there seems to be a slight inconsistency here, but Plato should never be taken too literally), so if virtue cannot, it is not knowledge. But if not knowledge, what is it then? Right opinion. Whether a man acts out of knowledge or right opinion does not matter, but the two differ profoundly. Knowledge can be taught, but opinion not. In case of knowledge you understand why something is, in the case of opinion you do not. In a typical Platonic and inimitable simile Platon imagines opinion as being free ranging and knowledge fettered to a place. So in order for an opinion to be kept in position it has to be fettered, meaning become tied to truth through arguments, just as a theorem is grounded by a deductive proof. Being fettered an opinion becomes knowledge, and as such it can be communicated. Opinions are flighty and non-communicable. The mere opinion of something being true cannot be communicated only aped. And if aped, what happens if the opinion is changed? Not knowing that something is true but just having a hunch cannot be transported to another person. You may be convinced of your opinion, but conviction is subjective, knowledge is objective. It can be examined and judged by outsiders, opinions can only be copied, but in so doing they lose their power. The man who holds true and virtuous opinions can act in a true and virtuous way by the intuition that opinion endows him with. But his intuition cannot be transferred, because his opinion cannot, only its expression, not its conviction and inspiration. Thus those who lead virtuous lives guided by true opinions cannot transfer those to others.

Obviously what Plato teaches us here has many applications to modern life.

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