

MENO

We must first define Platonic Dialogue and then consider the *Meno*.

A Platonic Dialogue is a likeness in words of a conversation on a general question, disposing desire for philosophy and exercising reason therein.

The *Meno* is more useful as an introduction to logic than to ethics. In this paper, we shall limit ourselves to the *Meno* as an introduction to logic, without denying its interest or importance for ethics.

After Meno's original question of whether virtue can be taught (70A), the dialogue naturally falls into three parts. The distinction and order of these parts can perhaps be best understood from the definition and division of logic given by Albert the Great in his work *De Praedicabilibus*, Tractatus I.

Albert teaches us that logic is about how to go from a knowledge of the known to a knowledge of the unknown. And he divides logic into two parts, corresponding to the two unknowns which it helps us to know: the simple unknown (we do not know what this or that is) which is made known especially by definition and the complex unknown (when we don't know whether or why this is that) which is made known by syllogism or some other argument

The first of the three main parts of the dialogue (70B-80D) is concerned with the simple unknown and the problem of defining. The example in which this can be seen is taken from ethics: what is virtue and how is it defined.

The third of the main parts (86D-100B) is concerned with the complex unknown, the example being the original question of Meno (whether virtue can be taught).

Plato has separated these two parts by placing between them a discussion of what is common to both of them: the possibility of investigating by reason what you don't know. What is common to both is imaginatively placed between them, a master-stroke.

FIRST MAIN PART OF THE DIALOGUE (70B-80D)

The first main part of the dialogue is useful chiefly for the logic of definition. The first thing to be learned here is a three part distinction in regard

to what is to be defined: the distinction between *examples*, the *name* and the *definition* of what is to be defined. Socrates especially distinguishes between examples of a thing and its definition. Reason is exercised here in trying to find the difference between examples of a thing, the name of it and the definition of it. Some of these differences are brought out by Socrates.

When the distinction of these three is understood, one must try to understand their order. Meno is only one of many characters in the Dialogues who give examples when asked to define something. Plato is here true to our experience where people give examples when asked to define. Two questions naturally arise here: why do people give examples when asked to define? And granted their difference, is there a road from examples to the definition? The first question leads us back to a road before the road considered in logic: the natural road from the senses into reason. The second question leads to the recognition of the two roads to a definition studied in the second book of the *Posterior Analytics*.

Likewise, we could ask why we usually name a thing before we define it. This leads us back to another aspect of the natural road in our knowledge: we know a thing in a confused way before distinctly.

We can also ask whether all things that have a name in common can also have a definition in common. Socrates points out in his example of figure (74D-E) that the name is said equally of the things of which a common definition is being sought. One could also ask whether this condition is necessary and whether it is sufficient.

Looking at Meno's difficulties, we see that there are two ways in which he fails to hit the definition. He overshoots it or undershoots it. When he defines by examples, he undershoots. But when he defines at 77B, he overshoots. Definition should not go beyond the limits of the thing (like an argument that proves too much or too little). This difficulty of hitting a definition is like the difficulty of virtue, the difficulty of hitting a mean between two extremes. Did Plato, like a good poet, arrange these coincidences?

The two definitions of figure and the definition of color also raise interesting questions for the logic of definition. Why is the second definition of figure better than the first and why is it better than the definition of color?

The Epilogue of this part (79E-80D) is useful for seeing when the examination discussion should be followed by a dialectical discussion. This is when neither partner knows.

SECOND MAIN PART OF THE DIALOGUE (80D-86C)

The second main part of the dialogue is begun by Meno's sophistical objection against the possibility of investigating the unknown. Socrates has proposed a joint dialectical investigation of what virtue is since apparently neither he, nor Meno, knows what virtue is. But Meno's objection against the possibility of any reasoned investigation of the unknown prevents the proposed investigation from beginning. Meno's objection concludes that reason or art cannot direct us to the unknown. If reason knows what it is looking for, it does not have to seek it. If it doesn't know what it is looking for, it has nothing to aim at. If reason doesn't know what the goal is (as a teacher does), how can reason direct to that goal? Further, how would reason know when it has come to know if it did not know before what it was trying to know?

This objection would destroy logic if (as Albert teaches) the end of logic is to direct us to a knowledge of the simple unknown or the complex unknown. If such direction is impossible, logic is impossible.

One could also say that the objection is especially against the dialectical part of logic in particular. Meno's argument that we can neither know what we are looking for, nor when we have found it, reminds one of the second and third reasons given for dialectic by Aristotle in the beginning of the third book of the *Metaphysics*. (Objections against the other parts of the art of reasoning in particular, such as the art of demonstration and the sophistic art, are found in other dialogues, such as the *Charmides* and the *Sophist*.)

Meno's objection and Socrates' attempted solution (even if the latter contains only a part of the truth and perhaps a sophism or two of its own) indicate one very important way that our mind investigates or finds the unknown which is by untying the knot of apparent contradiction. (This falls under the first of the four reasons given for dialectic in the beginning of the third book of the *Metaphysics*. The fourth and also last reason is exemplified in the third part of this dialogue.)

When Socrates shows in his two discussions with the slave-boy (the first is an examination conversation and the second is a teaching conversation, even though Socrates denies that he is teaching) is that the conclusions of geometry come out of what the slave-boy knows already. This however is not sufficient for saying that the slave-boy is recalling the conclusions of geometry. But it certainly does arouse wonder. Socrates by his questions is not only leading the slave-boy to recall statements he knows already, but to recall them *together*

and in a certain *order*. If this is the first time the slave-boy has put together these statements, this will be the first time that he has seen what follows from them. But what follows from them is a conclusion of geometry. Hence, he may not be recalling the conclusion, but coming to know it for the first time.

This kind of coming to know (which Aristotle speaks about in the beginning of the *Posterior Analytics*) involves recalling, *not* what you come to know or learn, but that through which you come to know. You recall the premisses, not the conclusion. One should perhaps not say that learning is recalling because what is learned is not recalled. But nevertheless there is a recalling of that *through which* one learns.

We have noted above that there are two conversations with the slave-boy. The first is an examination conversation in which the slave-boy contradicts himself, thus showing his ignorance of the way to double a square. The second conversation is a teaching one in which Socrates' ordered questions enable the slave-boy to put together statements already in his mind from which follows necessarily the way to double the square. By asking questions, Socrates not only hides that he is teaching, but also shows that good teaching imitates the way of discovery. If the slave-boy had sufficient ability to bring together by himself the statements which become premisses, he would discover the conclusion by himself.

One can ask here why the examination of the slave-boy is followed by a teaching conversation while the examination of Meno should have been followed by a dialectical conversation as Socrates proposed. The reason is that Socrates knows how to double a square and hence he can teach the slave-boy who does not know. But Socrates does not know (or at least he says that he does not know) what virtue is and hence he cannot teach Meno. But if one guesses that Socrates does know what virtue is, then the reason may be on the side of desire. The slave-boy is humble and hence teachable. Meno is not humble and teachable and his sophistical objection is perhaps a sign of this.

If there is a road from what we know already to what is unknown to us (such as the road from the premisses of a syllogism to its conclusion or the road from examples of a thing to its definition) as the conversations with the slave-boy exemplify, do we have an answer to Meno's objection? Not entirely, because we have not untied or broken down the apparent contradiction that what we are looking for is both known and unknown to us. One cannot know what road to follow (even if there is a road to follow) without knowing where one is trying to go.

Meno's objection uses the fallacy of *simpliciter* and *secundum quid*, of simply and in some way. There is a distinction between what is fully or completely or perfectly so and what is so partially and incompletely and imperfectly. What we are looking for is unknown to us, but known in some way. For example, one can direct oneself to knowing the number of people in a room by counting, not because one knows that number before one counts, but because it is known in some way. If the number is 31, it is not known before the counting. But since one knew that he was looking for the number of people in the room before he counted and 31 is the number of people in the room, it was known in some way. To know 31 in general as a number is not to know it fully or perfectly and hence one can say simply that one does not know the number of people in the room before counting. But knowing in some way what one is looking for (the number of people in the room) is enough to know the road to take to what one does not know (31) which road is by counting.

Logic is like the art of counting and calculating. When you ask what virtue is, you know in some way what you are looking for. You are looking for the definition of virtue, but you do not know yet that definition. Hence, if there is a road, or roads, to take to the definition of a thing (such as the two roads distinguished in the second book of the *Posterior Analytics*), you can know the road to take to what you do not know.

Socrates' solution also involves the mistake of simply and in some way. The conclusion of geometry was not in the slave-boy's knowledge before his conversation with Socrates. The slave-boy did not know how to double the square. In fact, he was mistaken about how this should be done. But in some way, how to double a square was already in the slave-boy's knowledge. The conclusion was in the ability of the statements which became premisses when brought together. But the conclusion did not actually exist until the statements were brought together.

There is also the equivocation of *exist in* whose meanings are distinguished in the fourth book of *Natural History* (usually confusingly called the *Physics*) In English, this is especially crucial because we speak of thinking *out* a definition or division or conclusion (or reasoning *out* a conclusion) and *out* has three different meanings here.

It is interesting to note that Socrates calls the syllogism here a *recollection* while Aristotle in his treatise on recollection and memory calls recollection a *sylogism* in some way (453a 10) The likeness between syllogism and recollection is important and worth investigating further.

One may also note that the argument from recollection for the pre-existence of the soul is much stronger in the *Phaedo* than in the *Meno*. Hence, too, it is more difficult to answer.

THIRD MAIN PART OF THE DIALOGUE (86D-100B)

The third part of the dialogue is useful for the second part of logic in Albert's division which is ordered to the complex unknown.

The dialectical discussion whether virtue can be taught (87B-96C) exemplifies three fundamental beginnings about dialectical reasoning. (It is also of considerable interest for ethics, but we have limited ourselves to the *Meno* as an introduction to logic.)

The first is that dialectic is able to reason to opposite or contradictory conclusions.

The second is that it reasons from probable opinions which need only have a part of the truth. One of the opinions is clearly seen later to contain only a part of the truth.

The third is the form of the syllogism used in dialectic. Although the categorical and hypothetical syllogisms can be used in both demonstrative and dialectical matter, yet the categorical syllogism fits demonstrative matter more and the hypothetical syllogism is more suitable for probable matter. Hence, Aristotle puts together the book on the categorical or simple syllogism, the *Prior Analytics*, with the book on demonstration, the *Posterior Analytics*, even though he notes that the dialectician can use that form too. Likewise, in discussing the fourth tool of dialectic, Aristotle notes its usefulness for the hypothetical syllogism. The ability to see a likeness of ratios is connected with the hypothetical syllogism for four terms cannot be put into the categorical syllogism. And in the formal fallacy opposed to dialectic, he considers the fallacy of the consequence (in the book *On Sophistical Refutations*). Socrates uses the two forms of the if-then or hypothetical syllogism here, reasoning from the affirmation of the antecedent to the affirmation of the consequent and from the denial of the consequent to the denial of the antecedent.

Socrates' solution of the question (96D-99D) is useful for logic as well as for ethics. First we may note that he is untying a dialectical knot while in the second main part (80D-86C), he was trying to untie a sophistical knot (that is a

knot produced by a sophistical argument). Untying either knot can be most useful in finding something or in understanding it better.

Socrates is also in a better position to judge after he has heard both sides. This exemplifies the last of the four reasons given for dialectic in the beginning of the third book of the *Metaphysics*. This dialogue then exemplifies the first and fourth reasons given there and objects to the second and third reasons, the solution of which objections enables us to understand those reasons as well. The second and third reasons are, of course, closely related to the first. For seeing the knot tells where something is hidden; and when you can untie the knot, you have a sign that you have arrived. Hence, the second and third reasons are exemplified as well.

In his solution, Socrates distinguishes between right opinion and knowledge in the strict sense and between guessing and knowing. This distinction is perhaps the most fundamental one in the art of reasoning or the art of argument. In demonstration and hence in reasoned out knowledge, the effect of demonstration, the conclusion is tied down by the bond of the cause. We could say that the knot tied by demonstration is distinct from the knots tied by sophistic and even by dialectic in that the first is a knot that cannot be untied.

The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Act V, Sc. 2, Duke:

She's fled unto that peasant Valentine,
And Eglamour is in her company.
'Tis true; for Friar Laurence met them both,
As he in penance wander'd through the forest;
Him he knew well, and guess'd that it was she,
But, being mask'd, he was not sure of it;
Besides, she did intend confession
At Patrick's cell this even, and there she was not.
These likelihoods confirm her flight from hence.

And it is most interesting that Socrates, who is generally reluctant to claim to know anything, here insists that he knows and is not guessing that there is a difference between right opinion and knowledge. Indeed if Socrates knows that they differ, they must surely differ. But if you say that Socrates is guessing and does not know for sure that they differ, your assertion is making use of the distinction between knowledge and opinion, or assuming it in saying that Socrates does not know the difference, but has only opinion on the matter.

In both the prologue (86D) and the epilogue to this part (100B), Socrates asserts that we will not *know* whether virtue can be taught before we now what virtue is, before we have the definition of virtue. If we put this together with what he says at 97D-98A about knowing by the cause, we may say that he insinuates a connection between cause and definition. This is, of course, of immense importance for logic.

Socrates' solution also involves the use of the disjunctive syllogism so that all three kinds of syllogism are found in the dialogue. We may also note that all four kinds of conversation or discussion distinguished in the second chapter *On Sophistical Refutation* are here exemplified (although some more fully than others).

We have indicated how this dialogue is useful for exercising reason in that part of philosophy called logic. (One could also consider how this dialogue is useful for exercising our reason in ethics, but that would be to go beyond the limits set for this paper.) However, since in our definition of a Platonic dialogue, we said that it also disposes desire for philosophy, we can conclude our remarks by some observations on the role of desire (we mean by *desire* both the will and the emotions) in the philosophical life as exemplified here.

Plato represents the desire of the characters who partake in the conversations. There are four characters here: Meno, Socrates, the slave-boy and Anytus. In Socrates and the slave-boy, we see more dispositions of the desire that help one in the philosophical life. But in Meno and Anytus, we see more the reverse.

In Anytus, we see especially the impediment of anger. Meno suffers from curiosity or the disordered to know. This is seen by his desire to know out of order at the beginning of the third part (86D) and also in his preferring (like Hippias) the flowery and elegant sounding definition to the plain one (76A-E). Both Anytus and Meno are too proud to admit or admit fully their ignorance. Anytus becomes angry and Meno says that Socrates has bewitched him (80A) and attempts to put down Socrates with a sophistical objection (80D).

But the slave-boy is humble enough to admit his ignorance and his refutation arouses his desire to know, as Socrates observes (84A-C). Contradiction or apparent contradiction seems especially to arouse the desire of a philosopher or to strengthen that desire. Both the slave-boy and Meno have been led into contradictions, but the slave-boy has a strong desire to learn how to double the square while Meno hardly seems interested in finding out what virtue is. We must praise the slave-boy, as Samuel Johnson praised the boy who ferried him and Boswell across the waters.

Besides humility to admit ignorance and the desire to know, Socrates also exemplifies the fear of being mistaken (100B) and the fear of taking things up out of order (86D). both of these fears are necessary for the true philosopher. In his attempted solution of Meno's sophistical objection or a the end of it (86B-C), we see how concerned he is about avoiding despair in the investigation of truth and having hope that we can overcome the difficulties that so often face us in that investigation. Just as that despair is the end or destruction of the philosophical life, so also the hope of coming to know is most necessary in that life. This is brought out even more strongly in the *Phaedo*.

Duane H. Berquist