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An Analysis of Plato's Meno

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An Analysis Of Plato's *Meno*

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Abstract

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This thesis offers an analysis of Plato's *Meno*, in which the Greek philosopher addresses more directly than in any other dialogue the character of human virtue. Believing that Plato has considerable guidance to offer us in respect to the question of what virtue is, I attempt to approach his writing with considerable care and attention to the details and the structure of the argument. I argue that the dialogue ultimately presents a complicated teaching about virtue's character, and the way that virtue comes to be present, which ultimately culminates in the claim that virtue is knowledge – and in the thoughtful consideration of the alternatives to, and the nuances of, that claim.

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I. Introduction (70a - 71d4)

At the beginning of our dialogue, Meno, a young, beautiful Thessalian, approaches Socrates, in order to ask him about virtue. Meno wants to know, is virtue something teachable? Or, if it is not teachable, is it acquired through practice? Or, if it is neither something learnable nor something acquired through practice, does it come to be present in us through nature, or through some other way (70a1-5)¹? - As is clear on some reflection, all of these questions boil down to the one basic question of how virtue comes to be present.

Now, while Meno gives no indication of how virtue might come to be present through some way "other" than nature (70a5), Socrates himself suggests an alternative at the end of the dialogue. For virtue might come to be present, not by nature, but by divine allotment (99e4-100a1). Thus, the dialogue's opening and ending together explicitly raise the question of whether the ultimate cause for virtue's coming-into-being is nature, or the Gods. And this question, with its pointer toward *one* of the fundamental questions of philosophy, will lay in the background of what will follow.

¹ Plato, *Protagoras and Meno*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). All quotations from or paraphrases of the *Meno* will be from this edition. Additionally, all unmarked parenthetical references will be references to line numbers of the *Meno*. For instance, "(70e1)" will refer to line 70e1 of the *Meno*.

Additionally, it is worth noting that Meno's opening question treats "learnable" and "teachable" as synonymous, thus suggesting that anything teachable is learnable, and anything learnable is teachable (70a1-4). Now, surely, anything teachable must be learnable. For if a thing is taught, then there must be another by whom it is learned. But it is not so clear that everything learnable must be teachable. For something might be learned by oneself, without it being possible to teach it to another. And perhaps it is precisely in order to point toward some things that are "learnable," but not "teachable," that will lead Socrates to make a long and elaborate joke in response to Meno's questions (70a6-71a7). For that joke ultimately revolves around the assumption that Socrates has taught each Athenian that he or she is ignorant about virtue (71a1-7). But, of course, Anytus alone suffices to prove that premise's absurdity (89e6-95a1). Thus, if teaching the Athenians their ignorance is something that Socrates *wants* to do (as his final request to Meno suggests - 100b8-c1), then Socrates' ignorance about virtue, at least, may be something learnable, without being teachable.

But Socrates will now invoke that very ignorance in order to deny that he knows how virtue comes to be present. For Socrates claims that he is so far from knowing how virtue comes into being, that he does not even know what in the world virtue itself *is* (71a3-71b8). Of course, Socrates' claim here is highly paradoxical. For mustn't each of us have some awareness of what the word 'virtue' denotes? And doesn't that mean that we must have *some* knowledge of what virtue is, however obscure or confused? For if not, how could we even know enough about virtue to say that we do not know what it is? Perhaps,

then, Socrates knows more about virtue than he here lets on (86b8-86c2). But if that is the case, we are bound to also wonder whether he might also know more about how virtue comes to be present. - Of course, this isn't to deny that there may be some considerable truth to Socrates' claim that he does not know what virtue is. For Socrates may well *not* know that what is usually taken to be virtue is actually virtue at all; and this, at least for many listeners (Anytus, for example), might seem to be the same as to deny that he knows what virtue is.

But however that might be, Socrates will suggest that, not only does *he* not know what virtue is, but he has never met a single other person who seemed to him to know (71b9-c7). But, in response to Meno's apparent surprise that *Gorgias*, at least, didn't know what virtue was, Socrates begins to moderate his claims (71c8-d1). Instead, he professes to have a "poor memory," and to be unable to recollect quite how Gorgias spoke. But, of course, if *Meno* can recollect what Gorgias said - for doubtless *Meno* shares his opinions... and from here, it is just a small step to lead Meno to say what he thinks that virtue is (71d1-3).

Thus, Socrates has flipped around the argument of the *Meno*. For what began as Meno asking Socrates to explain how virtue comes to be present, has become Socrates asking Meno what virtue is. As for why Socrates wished to effect this change, perhaps we might explain it on the grounds that Socrates himself suggests. For of course, if we do not know clearly what virtue is, we will be unable to say how it comes to be present (71a3-71b8);

for, as the final sections of the dialogue will make clear, an obscurity in our understanding of what virtue *is* must necessarily affect our understanding of how it comes to be present. Perhaps, then, Socrates is simply trying to arrange things so that he and Meno might first inquire together about what virtue is, before going on to inquire about how it comes to be present (80c10-80d4; 100b2-7). Yet, this suggestion poses a few serious difficulties. For to begin with, Socrates likely knows far more about virtue than he is here letting on (86b8-c2). Likewise, given their disparity in wisdom, it is questionable how useful a Meno-Socrates partnership would actually be. Perhaps, then, a different explanation is needed. Yet, it seems to me that Socrates' ultimate motivation is hardly clearer in this dialogue than it is elsewhere; and so, perhaps answering this question would be more suitable in the context of inquiring into what motivates Socrates' dialectical examinations more generally - through an analysis of the *Apology*, say, or the *Phaedo*. For now, however, it is enough to note that Socrates has centered the dialogue on the question of what virtue *is*; and that this question, for the next few sections to come (71e1-79e4), will be the chief focus of the dialogue.

II. Meno's First Definition of Virtue (71d4 - 73c6)

As the subtitle of our dialogue suggests, and as the introduction to that dialogue at once confirms, the *Meno* is about virtue. But, as we have already seen, the *Meno* is "about" virtue in two very different ways. For not only does it raise the question of how virtue comes to be present, but it also raises the more basic and fundamental question of what virtue *is*. Now, as we saw in what preceded, Socrates had set the stage for Meno to attempt to answer the second of these questions, and to say what virtue *is*. As for why Socrates himself is interested in that question, that seems to me to be difficult to say; but, for us - who are likely to be more ignorant than Socrates, and to therefore benefit from this discussion in a different way than Socrates himself - I would suggest that the following sections (71e1-79e4) are most helpful in addressing two different but deeply important themes of Platonic philosophy. For first, and most obviously, these sections will help to elucidate what virtue *is*. But, since virtue appears to be something preeminently good, and even to constitute one of the the chief objects of our desire, these sections will help to articulate precisely what it is that we yearn for, and that goal or those goals toward which all of our actions and our choices are directed. But, secondly, by reflecting upon the way that we come to know what a thing is (from 74b4 to 77a5, for instance), Socrates will also convey something of his general methodology, or the way that he approached the world, and sought to know the character of each of the beings. Of course, we may wonder how a discussion of Socrates' way of pursuing knowledge, which seem to be quite "theoretical" in character, really forms any part of Plato's dialogue on

virtue. But, perhaps the answer to that question will be provided later. For in what follows, Socrates will suggest that virtue is a sort of knowledge (87d7-89a6). But, if virtue *is* knowledge, then the question of how virtue comes to be present is identical with the question of how *knowledge* comes to be present. And this would mean that the dialogue's apparent "digressions" on how we come to know the character of the world (74b3-77a5; 80d5-86c2) would actually be the very answer to the question that Meno had originally raised. For even if they are not explicitly identified as such, they would actually provide the clearest account of how virtue comes to be present, precisely by saying how it is that *knowledge* comes into being. Thus, I would suggest that, in the sections that follow (71e1-79e4), the dialogue will focus entirely on the themes of what virtue *is*, and how knowledge comes to be present. Accordingly, it is with a view toward these two themes that my initial chapters will be focused (Chapters II through V). With that as an introduction, then, let us now turn directly toward Meno's first attempt to say what virtue *is*.

According to Meno, it isn't difficult to say what virtue is (71d4-71e1). For, after all, there are many different human virtues. For the virtue of a man is to be capable of handling the affairs of the city; and, in handling them, to benefit friends, harm enemies, and take care that he not suffer any such thing himself (71e1-5); but, the virtue of a woman is to manage the household well by both preserving its contents and being obedient to the man (71e5-7). And so, too, is there a virtue of a child, and of a slave, and of an older man, and many other virtues as well; and so, there's no perplexity in speaking about what virtue is

(71e7-72a2). For the virtue belonging to each of us is related to each task appropriate to each action and time of life (72a3-4). And as it is with virtue, so too does it stand with vice (72a4-5).

Socrates, however, is not especially satisfied by this answer. For in response to Meno's lengthy speech, he suggests that Meno may have given him a 'swarm' of virtues, but he has certainly failed to identify the *one* virtue that is common to them all (72a6-8). For as Socrates now makes clear, by asking what virtue *is*, he had wanted Meno to identify the *form* of virtue (72c6-72d1), or that one thing which makes each of the many and varied virtues a 'virtue,' through being present in each of the things we designate as 'a virtue' (72a8-72b7 with 72c6-d1). For to say that *x* and *y* are both virtues is to assert that there is some set of characteristics which, by being present in both *x* and *y*, makes each of those things 'a' virtue. (Or perhaps which, by its presence, allows the mind to recognize and abstract a single form of virtue; which form *itself*, then, goes on to become the true cause of both of the particulars *x* and *y* being cognized as 'a virtue,' rather than simply being the unclassified wholes of 'x' and 'y.' See 72c7-8, and what it suggests about the form as a cause.) But however that might be, it is certainly the case that, by asking Meno to say what virtue is, Socrates was asking Meno to say what single form is present within each of the things which he calls a virtue, or what characteristic(s) bind all of the things that he calls virtue together into a single class or kind. Hence, Socrates' dissatisfaction with Meno's answer seems to suggest that Meno has simply failed to say what virtue is. And it would seem that Meno had failed to give an answer to Socrates' question on the grounds

that he had enumerated a "swarm" of different virtues, rather than articulating the single form of virtue itself.

Yet, if this *is* what Socrates intends, then it seems to me that Socrates' critique could not be a fair response to Meno's answer. For while Meno had certainly begun by providing an enumeration of the different kinds of virtues, he had also concluded his speech by stating that each virtue is related to the work that is appropriate to each action and time of life (72a3-4). And isn't *this*, at least, an answer to the question of what virtue is? For it is hardly a stretch to infer from Meno's statement here that he believes that virtue is doing one's own work well, or that it consists of successfully performing whatever task is appropriate for a given time of life. Thus, while Socrates' response would of course be adequate if Meno had only enumerated many different kinds of virtues, without at all providing a unifying principle, it would seem to be simply inadequate as a response to the answer which Meno actually gave.

Now I believe that this is correct, and that Socrates' objection that Meno's answer provided a "swarm" of virtues cannot possibly be an adequate refutation if it is only meant to apply to Meno's enumeration of the different kinds of virtues. Hence, if Socrates has actually provided a valid critique of Meno's answer, then the multiplicity which Socrates has in mind must *not* be the enumeration of virtues which Meno had provided at the beginning of his response. For while Plato has doubtlessly led his readers to suspect that it is this "multiplicity" which is the target of Socrates' critique, Socrates himself does

not give any indication that this "multiplicity" is the one that he actually has in mind. But then, if Socrates is thinking of a different multiplicity, and if his response is sufficient as a refutation of Meno's first definition, then that multiplicity would have to be somehow present within Meno's articulation of the character of virtue itself. But what multiplicity, then, might Socrates have in mind?

To begin to answer this question, let us return once more to Meno's actual definition of virtue. Now, as I suggested before, Meno's definition of virtue seems to amount to the claim that virtue is doing one's own work well. However, it is far from obvious how we determine what someone's work actually *is*, or Meno means by saying that each virtue is related to that action which is "appropriate" for a given person and a given time of life. Of course, in attempting to determine what leads Meno to judge that a particular action is "appropriate," it is reasonable to begin by considering why Meno judged that one action was "appropriate" to a man, while another was "appropriate" to a woman. For we might expect that these particular judgments to reveal Meno's broader understanding of what actions are and are not "appropriate" for a given person and a given time of life. Yet, I would suggest that just such a consideration may ultimately reveal that Meno is appealing to one principle in determining the work that is "appropriate" to a man, and another in determining the work that is "appropriate" to a woman. But this in turn would mean that it is a multiplicity within the use of the word *appropriate*, that gives rise to the deepest "multiplicity" within Meno's account of the character of virtue.

For to begin with the case of a man, the virtue of a man is simply said to be the capability to manage the affairs of the city (71e2-5)². Now, in a later exchange, Socrates will suggest that, whenever the desire to exercise a capability is common to all, then it is sufficient to define virtue as that capability alone, without reference to the desire (78b3-11). And I would suggest that the same thought is present here. For by identifying the virtue of a man with a certain capacity, without specifying that any desire needs to be present for that capacity to be actualized, Meno seems to suggest that *every* man wants to manage the affairs of the city. (For as Meno will make abundantly clear, *he*, at least, wants to have power within the cities - 73c7-9; 78c4-78d2). Thus, at least part of the "virtue of a man" is having the capacity to do what each of us most deeply desires; which means, in turn, that the action which is *appropriate* to the man is the action that satisfies his own desires. But, by contrast, a woman's work seems to be determined with reference to the desires of the man. For as Meno's definition makes quite clear, a virtuous woman is one who serves the desires of her husband (71e5-7). Hence, in *this* case, the action that is appropriate to the woman is the action that satisfies another's desires. But then, Meno seems to determine the work of a man and the work of a woman by recourse to two very different principles. For in the case of the man, what is "appropriate" is what serves his own desires; while, in the case of the woman, what is "appropriate" is what serves the desires of another. But, while he indicates that each of these different principles can

2 In the analysis which follows, I have somewhat simplified Meno's actual definition in order to better bring out the true contrast between his definition of the virtue of a man and his definition of the virtue of a woman. However, I should add that there may *also* be traces of something "justice-like" in his definition of the virtue of a man; and these will be discussed at a later point in my commentary.

determine what action is "appropriate," he is completely silent on what unites the two together - or how *both* the virtue of a man, and the virtue of a woman, are correctly called by the name of "virtue." Hence, Meno's articulation of virtue *does* contain a truly problematic multiplicity - if not the multiplicity that might first have caught our eye. Hence, in rejecting Meno's definition, Socrates seems to be gesturing both toward the superfluousness of Meno's enumeration of the virtues, while more quietly hinting towards the deeper "multiplicity" that is present even within Meno's more universal statement of what virtue *is*³.

Now, in the aftermath of this critique of Meno's first definition of virtue, Meno will begin to waiver about whether there actually *is* a single form that is common to both the virtue of a man and the virtue of a woman (72d2-73a4). But Socrates, for his part, will attempt to draw forth Meno's belief that there *is* a single form of virtue. For first, Socrates will ask whether anyone - a man or a woman, a slave or a child - could ever be virtuous, if they are not both moderate and just (73b1-15). For his part, Meno will say that they cannot: no one can be virtuous without being both moderate and just (73b1-15). But then, Socrates concludes, virtue must be the same for all human beings: for in each case, to be virtuous is to be moderate and just (73c1-2).

3 This account of the hidden "multiplicity" within Socrates' definition is greatly indebted to: Christopher Bruell, *On The Socratic Education: An Introduction To The Shorter Platonic Dialogues* (Lanham, MD: Rowman And Littlefield, 1999), 172-173.

But, of course, this argument is highly problematic. For even if being moderate and just is a *necessary* condition for being virtuous, that surely does not imply that it is a *sufficient* condition. For one might lack the capability to rule a city, for instance, or to manage a household, even if one is both moderate and just. Now, we might try to save Socrates' argument here by claiming that Socrates is not trying to provide a *definition* of virtue, or trying to say that being virtuous *is* to be moderate and just, but that he is only attempting to accomplish a more basic task. For, in what has come before, Socrates has never said that there *is* a single form of virtue; or even, for that matter, that there *are* a multiplicity of virtues at all. Rather, his entire discussion has been an examination of *Meno's* views - who certainly *does* believe that there are many distinct virtues - and not a statement of his own. Thus, perhaps Socrates is only attempting to perform the more basic task of proving that there *is* a unity amongst the virtues, in order to secure Meno's further attempts to articulate what that unity *is*.

Yet, I believe that even if we measure Socrates' attempts against this more limited goal, we still must conclude that his attempts are not successful. For even if Meno agrees that every person must be just and moderate in order to be virtuous, aren't justice and moderation themselves two separate virtues? But then, even if Socrates has secured Meno's agreement that these two things must be present in each and every virtue, Socrates would have only pushed back the question of the unity of virtue a single step. For instead of being confronted with the question of whether there is any unity amongst the virtue of a man and the virtue of a woman, we would instead be confronted with the

question of whether there is any unity amongst the virtue of justice and the virtue of moderation. Thus, Socrates would have only succeeded at deepening the initial difficulty, by showing that even the claim that justice and moderation are both virtues necessarily points toward the need to identify a single form of virtue, which each of them must share in common. Perhaps, then, Socrates' goal here was not so much to prove that there *is* a unity of virtue, as to deepen the difficulty of discovering for ourselves what that unity consists in.

However that might be, it seems certain to me that Socrates has made it more clear why the question of the unity of virtue is relevant to our own views and opinions. For while few of us today would be likely to agree that an excellent woman is radically different from an excellent man, we *are* likely to agree that there are many different kinds of human excellence - justice, for instance, and courage, and wisdom, and prudence. But, it is hard to see what each of these virtues must share in common, or what we could possibly mean by claiming that each of them is *a* virtue, or is something that makes us excellent. Thus, whatever Socrates' deepest intention here might be, he has surely succeeded at making clear the perplexities and riddles associated with the view that there are a multiplicity of virtues; and it is precisely with a view toward attempting once more to resolve those riddles, and to discover the true articulation of the form of virtue, that the conversation between Socrates and Meno will now continue.

III. Meno's Second Definition of Virtue (73c7 - 74b2)

Having left us with these difficulties and riddles to consider, Socrates will now ask Meno whether he is able to say what virtue is, or to articulate that one virtue that is the same in all (73c7-8). But, in response, Meno will now offer the second of his three definitions of virtue, while making a truly considerable change to his previous definition of virtue. For now, Meno will claim that virtue is nothing other than the capacity to rule over human beings (73c9-d1). And this means that Meno now implicitly denies that any non-ruling class – women, children, and slaves, for instance - can have virtue at all (73d2-6). We might say, then, that Meno has been led by Socrates' earlier critique to abandon the multiplicity of virtue entirely, and to identify what was peculiar to the virtue of a man with the essence of virtue simply. But, to say even this much would overlook just how radically Meno has transformed his original definition. For while I had suggested before that the virtue of a man had been determined simply with reference to satisfying one's own desires, while the virtue of a woman had been determined simply with reference to satisfying the desires of another, I believe that that account may have been something of an oversimplification of the virtue of a man. For I believe that that virtue had at least contained *traces* of the notion that serving others is what constitutes human virtue. For in that definition, at least, virtue was not merely the capacity to rule, but the capacity to carry out the affairs of the city (71e2-5). Likewise, by explicitly connecting the virtue of a man with helping friends and harming enemies, Meno suggests a certain connection

between that capacity and the virtue of justice. But in this new definition, the emphasis is *simply* on the rule itself, with no indication that such rule is good for anyone apart from the ruler. But this means that, in his central definition of virtue, Meno has severed any apparent connection between between virtue and that element of service and devotion which had found at least *some* place in his previous definition of the virtue of a man. Perhaps, then, we must take this to suggest that, when push comes to shove, it is only his belief that virtue must be good *for us* which is of any true importance to Meno - and not the more obviously selfless and nobler dimensions of a virtue such as justice. - But perhaps to our surprise, in only a single brief exchange, Meno will completely reverse the change that he has just made to his original definition of virtue. For, Socrates will ask Meno whether virtue is being able to rule, or whether it isn't rather being able to rule justly, rather than unjustly (73d6-8)? But Meno, for his part, will agree so strongly that only a just ruler could ever be virtuous, that he will now assert that justice *is* virtue (73d9)! Thus, with only the slightest prodding, Socrates not only leads Meno to weave justice back into his definition of virtue, but he even leads him toward the opposite extreme, and toward the view that being just simply *is* being virtuous. And this gives us our first true indication of just how little awareness Meno actually has of precisely what he is saying, or of the radical differences between the different conceptions or ideas which he is inclined to simply identify with virtue itself.

But, Socrates will immediately proceed to refute this new definition of virtue, and to show Meno that he does *not* believe so simply that virtue is justice. For first, Socrates

will ask Meno whether justice *is* virtue, or whether it is a *certain* virtue (73e1)? But, after Socrates clarifies this question with the relation between 'roundness' and 'shape,' by suggesting that roundness is a *certain* shape, and not shape simply (73e2-6), Meno will at once grasp the meaning of the question, and agree that justice is not the same as virtue, since there are other virtues as well. For courage, in his opinion, at least, is a virtue, as is moderation and magnificence and wisdom and very many others (73e7-74a5). But then, Socrates points out, they have once again suffered the same thing: for though they are seeking for one virtue, they have again stumbled upon many (74a6-9).

But, in considering this Socratic refutation, let me note once again that it is *Meno* who claims that there are a multiplicity of virtues. For while Socrates certainly leads Meno's views out into the open with his analogy of 'roundness' and 'shape,' he himself still has yet to assert that there *are* a multiplicity of virtues; which means, in turn, that he has yet to assert that there *is* a single form of virtue, which unites a multiplicity of virtues in common. (Which might also explain why Socrates variously refers to the object of their inquiry as 'one virtue,' 'one *form* of virtue,' and a whole, of which each 'virtue' is a part; 72a6-8, 72c6-72d1, and 79b1-79e3). Thus, Socrates has not proven that virtue cannot be *a* virtue. Rather, he has only shown Meno - and those who agree with him - that we cannot possibly hold the opinion that justice *is* virtue, while also holding the opinion that there are virtues which are other than justice. Hence, it remains entirely possible that *Socrates*, at any rate, identifies virtue with a *single* virtue - prudence, for example (89a4-

5). Thus, Socrates' refutation here, by itself, does not yet tell us anything about Socrates' own opinions.

But, let me just conclude my commentary on this section by trying to articulate a little more clearly what is important about what Socrates' examination has revealed. For to begin with, I believe that many of us might be tempted to agree that virtue simply *is* justice. For, what could each of us mean by "an excellent person," after all, if we do *not* mean someone who surpasses others in the purity and the skill with which they devote themselves to the common good, and with which they serve something higher and greater than themselves? And yet, I believe that we are likely to agree with Meno that there are *other* kinds of people who we believe to be excellent, or to act in a manner that is both beautiful and choiceworthy. For it *does* seem that, even without serving the common good, one can display the excellence of courage (in a courageous and brave fight against cancer, for instance); or display the excellence of moderation (in bringing one's soul into a harmonious and beautiful order, for instance, such that one's higher desires always triumph over those desires which are lower and less fundamental); or, finally, display the excellence of wisdom (by eagerly striving to grasp the mysterious and elusive character of the whole, and to come to know what each of the beings are). Hence, I would suggest that each of us is likely to agree with Meno that justice is *not* the only kind of excellence that we recognize. But in that case, we would only be left, once again, with the question of what unites all of these different kinds of excellence - or what virtue *is*. Hence, it

remains to be seen, in what will follow, what Meno and Socrates' conversation can achieve in illuminating the answer to this basic question.

IV. An Interlude on Shape and Color (74b3 - 77a5)

We have seen, then, that Meno's second attempt to say what virtue is was no more successful than his first. But, nevertheless, Socrates will strive to push the conversation forward, by now offering a long and puzzling digression on the essence of shape and color (74b3 - 77a5). Accordingly, in what follows, the question of "what is virtue" will almost fade from sight entirely; and what will come into the foreground, instead, is the epistemological and methodological character of Socratic philosophy - or, stated more plainly, the way that Socrates sought to know each of the beings. Now, as I suggested before, if virtue is truly a kind of knowledge (89a4-5), then this section may begin to answer Meno's original question of how virtue comes to be present (70a1-5). For this section will certainly contain many important observations about how learning takes place, and about the different approaches toward knowledge of each of the beings. But, however that might be, it is certainly with a view toward these intensely theoretical and epistemological questions that the entire contents of the following section will be directed.

Now, Socrates begins this section by making the claim that, just as roundness is different from shape, on account of the fact that there are other shapes as well, so is white different from color, on account of the fact that there are other colors; or, since Socrates speaks here of this being the case with "everything" (74b4-5), that any species is different from its genus on account of the fact that its genus has other species as well (74b4 - 74d2). But,

I believe that we are likely to notice upon reflection just how strange this Socratic argument truly is. For, why would the fact that there are *other species* of a genus be the reason that a species is different from its genus? For after all, isn't any species *necessarily* different from its genus? But in that case, why would the apparently incidental fact that there are other species as well provide any reason or support for that difference?

In my judgment, this question is bound to only appear more difficult to answer the longer we attempt to meditate upon its solution. But, I would *also* suggest that that is the very reason that Socrates has included this strange argument here, and repeated it throughout the dialogue (74b4-d2; 73e3-6). For I believe that this strange argument is actually designed to lead us on a search for its concealed and hidden premises; and that these premises, once uncovered, provide a kind of window into the hidden complexity and richness of Socrates' understanding of the human mind - and into an understanding which helps to illuminate the precise mental faculties or powers that come into play in our attempts to say what a thing *is*.

For, to begin with, there are only two possible ways to say what a given thing is. The first is to simply say that that thing is *y*, where *y* denotes a single whole idea which is identical in meaning to the word that we are defining. And this is like when we answer the question of "what is the beneficial" by saying that the "beneficial" is the "advantageous." This way of answering a "what is" question, then, can sometimes lead to quite important results, whenever one word happens to be considerably clearer or more distinct than

another, and whenever we can discover what the meaning of the less clear word *is* by having recourse to the meaning which is clearer and more distinct. But, the second and the more common way of saying what a thing is consists of first articulating the genus of the thing to be defined, and then articulating the whole set of characteristics which distinguish it from the other members of its genus. For instance, what is a "triangle"? A triangle is a rectilinear three-sided figure. Hence: a "triangle" (the thing to be defined) is a "figure" (its genus) which "rectilinear" and "three-sided" (its specific differentia.) Thus, in recognizing that "a rectilinear three sided-figure" is what a triangle *is*, our minds cognize that the whole idea of "triangle" is wholly constituted by the noetic parts of "figure," "rectilinear," and "three-sided." Now, in explaining how the mind is able to discover these noetic parts in the first place, it is tempting to think that are able to "break" the object of our inquiry into its distinct parts. For instance, we might think that, after we have first grasped the idea of "triangle" as a whole, we begin by snapping off that part of the whole which forms its genus ("figure"), and then snap off each of its specific differentia, in order that we might discover the character of its each of its parts. But, this would of course imply that the mind has a power of *analysis*, or an ability to break an idea into its discrete parts.

Now, if we truly *did* have such a power, then it would of course be possible to say that "white" is different from "color," *even if* there were no other colors at all. For just as we could break the idea of "triangle" into "figure," "three-sided," and "rectilinear," we could also break the idea of "white" into "color" and "whiteness." Thus, the idea of "white"

alone, along with our power of analysis, would suffice to recognize that "white" is something different from "color;" which would mean, in turn, that our judgment that white is other than color would *not* be made on account of the fact that there are other species of color. But I believe that this suggests that part of what Socrates' argument must be implying is that the human mind actually has no such power of "analysis" at all. For I believe that it is Socrates' view that, if all we ever had was the idea of "white," our minds could never "break apart" that idea, in order to arrive at an idea of "color." Rather, it is only because we have already reached the idea of color in a *different* way - and not through any such "analysis" of "white" - that it is ever possible for us to say that white is different from color, or that white is a *kind* of color. But, by suggesting that we can only say that white is different from color on account of the fact that there are other colors as well, doesn't Socrates suggest precisely how it is that we attain the idea of color in the first place? For what I think that Socrates is suggesting is that, if we only ever perceived things that were white, then it would be impossible for us to ever form an idea of "color;" and, hence, it would be impossible to judge that "white" and "color" are distinct. For to form an idea, the mind must first gather together a group of perceived or imagined beings, and then abstract whatever form or whatever set of characteristics were common to each of the beings in question. But that means that, if the *only* color that we perceived was white, we could never form an idea of color at all. For by gathering together a group of white beings, our minds could only abstract the characteristics or the form that is common to them all ("white") - but not the narrower set of characteristics which they also happen to share in common ("color"). Hence, it is only by first abstracting a number of

different kinds of color ("white," "green," "blue," etc), and *then* by abstracting what is common between them all, that our minds are ever able to reach the idea of "color" at all - or even to be able to say that white, and green, and blue, are *kinds* of colors. (For without this, they may share the characteristics of color in common, but they are not yet recognized as particular members of the *form* of color - which means, in turn, that each of them is not yet a *kind* of color. And this may indicate what Socrates means by suggesting that it is the single form which *causes* each particular to be the kind of thing that it is. 72c7-8).

Hence, from all of the above, Socrates' strange argument would finally follow as a necessary consequence: it would only be the fact that there are other species of a genus that lets us say that a particular species is different from its genus. For, without those other species, we could never form the idea of the genus, and could therefore never say that the species and the genus were distinct. Now of course, there is no doubt that the argument which I have just given is quite elaborate, and not obviously suggested by the text. But, in my judgment, and for the reasons that I have given, I believe that this is the rich and complicated view of the mind that *must* lay buried beneath Socrates' strange and quiet argument. Accordingly, I would suggest that, by pointing us toward the mind's dependence on unity and multiplicity in order to distinguish a genus from its species, Socrates points towards how the apparently simple act of saying "what a thing is" - a "triangle," for instance - is ultimately accomplished.

But, after these complicated matters, Socrates will next just repeat a basic and a fundamental point which he had made before - that, to say what something is, one must say what unites all of the members of that particular class or kind (74d3-74e1). Yet, he will also emphasize here that the articulation of what something is must include even those members which are "contraries" of one another, in the way that the round is the contrary of the straight. Now, this new emphasis on the "contrary" species of a genus may make us wonder if virtue, too, may possess contrary species. - But, perhaps that question has already been answered in what we have seen before. For by appealing to two different kinds of principles in order to determine what actions are "appropriate" (71e1-7), hasn't Meno already pointed toward two very different "species" of virtue? Perhaps, then, just such contraries as these are what divide the many virtues, the one from the other. And in that case, we would again be reminded of the difficulty of trying to say what precisely it is that each of them truly shares in common.

But while one might well expect Socrates to follow up on his most recent discussion of shape and color by now applying that discussion directly to virtue, we are instead surprised to find that Socrates will actually proceed to drop the question of virtue entirely. For after having previously used the question of "what is shape" as a paradigm for how to answer the question of virtue, Socrates will now simply ask Meno to say what *shape* is, as if *that* was the question that he was interested in pursuing (74e10-75a1). And when Meno gives no answer to this question, Socrates simply goads him once again, now claiming that Meno ought to try to say what shape is, in order that he may thereby attain

practice with a view toward answering about virtue (75a1-11). But Meno, for his part, refuses to comply, and demands that *Socrates* say what shape is instead (75b1). - This brief interlude, by the way, may provide an especially clear response to Meno's opening question of how virtue comes to be present. For Socrates here suggests that, in order to be able to learn what virtue is, a significant amount of practice is necessarily required. And this implies that even if virtue is *learnable*, learning what it is might ultimately require that we first engage in an extremely rigorous kind of *practice*. Finally, this may also suggest one of the many ways that "theoretical" and "practical" philosophy are linked together. For Socrates suggests that Meno may be unable to answer the questions of *practical* philosophy, without first practicing on the problems of *theoretical* philosophy.

But Meno, for his part, flatly refuses to engage in a practice of this kind (75b1-8). And as we shall see in what follows, this refusal will bring about a radical change in the entire character of the conversation. For in the next part of the dialogue (75b9-77a5), the discussion of virtue will fade even further into the background, as Socrates will proceed to make three successive attempts to say what shape and color *are* - two of shape (75b9-76a7), and one of color (76a8-77a5). Now of course, we may wonder precisely what is at stake in the seemingly minor question of how shape and color are to be defined. But, I would suggest that the deepest intention of these three definitions is to present and to contrast the way that three different human sciences each go about attempting to articulate the character of the visible world. For while the first definition will show us how Socratic philosophy says what shape *is* (75b9-c1), the second definition will show us

how shape is defined by geometry (75e1-76a7), while the third definition will show how color is defined by natural science (76a8-77a5). But, in this way, Socrates will provide us with an implicit critique of the sciences of natural science and mathematics. For Socrates' three definitions of shape and color, when placed side by side, will suggest both that philosophy exceeds geometry and natural science in its grasp of the world, while also suggesting the precise way that it does so. But, since geometry and natural science might even seem to be *the* most powerful scientific alternatives to philosophy, Socrates' procedure here might even seem to serve as an argument for philosophy's place as the science which best articulates the true character of each of the beings. Accordingly, I believe that this entire interlude will prove to cast considerable light on the way that Socrates sought to know what the beings are, and on how he believed that genuine knowledge of the world comes to be present.

With that said as a preface, then, let us simply begin by considering the definition of shape that Socrates offers as his own. For according to Socrates, this is what shape is: that which alone of the beings always happens to accompany color (75b10-12). Now, in considering what we might learn from this definition, I believe that we are bound to be struck at once by its extraordinary simplicity and clarity. For almost every part of that definition is either an absolutely necessary part of any possible definition - "that which alone of the beings" and "always," for instance, both of which must be said or thought in order that a definition might 'point out' its subject among the many beings - or a word of the utmost clarity and self-evidence ("accompanies," "color"). Accordingly, we see at

once that, for Socrates, a true definition of what a thing is should stick as closely as possible to our true awareness of the world; and this simple point will be deeply expanded and elaborated on in what will follow.

But, before moving on to the next two interpretations, let me just say a few things about what this definition is not. For I believe that the whole premise of this section (the superiority of Socrates' first definition to his later two) - along with his claim that he would be "content" if Meno defined virtue in the way that he defined shape (75b13-c1) - might lead us to believe that Socrates' definition of shape is presented as a kind of perfect model for the definitions of each of the other classes or kinds. However, in my judgment, this view would be mistaken. For according to Socrates' definition here, shape is that which, alone of the beings, always *happens* to accompany color (75b10-12). But this means that there is no necessary connection between what shape is, and its happening to be the sole kind of being which is always co-present with color. For our same idea of shape might well be present in a different sort of being, for whom it is *not* true that shape alone always accompanies color; a being with a sixth or a seventh sense, for example. Hence, Socrates' account does not articulate what shape *always* is (or what character or characteristics all shapes must necessarily share in common in order to *be* shapes), but what shapes always *happen* to be (in our experience so far). But accordingly, I would suggest that this statement is inferior to any definition which actually articulates a thing's true essence or character. For to return to my earlier example, a triangle does not "happen" to be a three-sided figure. Rather, *if* a triangle exists, then it *must* be three-sided

- or else, it could not *be* a triangle at all. Thus, such a definition succeeds at saying what a thing actually *is*; which means, in turn, that it is not contingent upon our experience. For since any triangle that appears *must* be three-sided, in order to be a triangle, it follows that no possible future experience could reveal that a triangle is not three-sided. Hence, unlike Socrates' definition of shape, saying that a triangle is a three-sided figure speaks directly to what is truly necessary and impossible, or to the intelligible limits of all coming-into-being - for it is as knowably necessary that a future triangle must be three-sided, as it is knowably impossible that a future triangle ever be four-sided. Thus, in my judgment, by speaking directly to what is necessary and impossible, such a definition is simply better than the kind of definition which Socrates had offered here for shape.

Of course, if my argument is correct, then we might wonder why Socrates chooses to provide the particular definition of shape that he does. But, I would suggest that it is simply because no better definition of *shape*, at least, is possible. For given the almost elemental character of shape, there may simply not be another word which expresses the same idea more clearly, nor any way to articulate what shape is in terms of its genus and its differentia. Hence, for shape, at least, this would be the best definition that is possible; but it would not simply be a perfect paradigm for the definition of all of the other classes or kinds. (Finally, I would also add that Socrates' suggestion that he would be "content" with a similar definition of virtue only suggests that he would be willing to settle for an articulation which "points out" the single form of virtue, without yet saying what must

necessarily be shared in common by each of the virtues. But this, I think, may be a continuation of Socrates' more limited attempts to simply establish that there *is* a single form of virtue, without yet attempting to say what that form itself *is* - see 73a1-c8, for example.)

Now after providing Meno with this first definition of shape, Meno's protests will lead Socrates to offer another definition of shape entirely (75c2-d7; 75e1-76a7). However, this definition, unlike Socrates' preceding account, will begin from what Meno agrees that he knows; or, as Socrates suggests in the context, it will prove to be more "dialectical" in character (75d2-7). For Socrates will begin by securing Meno's agreement that he knows what an "end" is, or a limit or extremity; and that, likewise, he calls one thing a plane, and another thing a solid, just as in the manner of geometry (75e1-76a2). But with these agreements established, Socrates then goes on to provide a new definition of shape: for shape, Socrates now says, is the limit of a solid (76a3-7).

But, I believe that the limitations of this new approach are clear at once. For from the fact that an interlocutor agrees that he knows a thing, it hardly follows that he *does* know the thing in question. For as Socrates slyly jokes, perhaps "Prodicus" - a Sophist famed for his precision of speech - would object to identifying an end with a limit or an extremity; but "you," Meno, surely call some (one) thing both limited and ended (75e1-5). Hence, by beginning from a term that is not clearly or distinctly known, Socrates' second definition simply fails to attain the clarity of his first. For while Socrates' first definition

had begun from what we are *actually* aware of, and what we are aware of with the greatest clarity and self-evidence that is possible, his second had begun merely from what we *think* that we are aware of, and aware of with sufficient clarity and distinctness. But, as I believe that Socrates' mathematical language here suggests, this second definition is also meant as a kind of critique of geometry, or of the way that geometry seeks to know each of the beings. For while mathematics takes great care in making sure that each of its conclusions follows from their premises, it rarely takes a corresponding care in securing the clarity or precision of those premises themselves - as is evident even in a mathematical work as great as Euclid's *Elements*. For mathematics is not concerned with saying precisely what a "point" is, or what a "line" is, or what planes and solids actually are; for the character of these things are simply set down as hypotheses, from which the conclusions or the theorems of mathematics are ultimately derived. But this means, in turn, that while geometry succeeds wonderfully at bringing the hidden relations of shape to light, it hardly succeeds at clarifying what those shapes actually *are*, or at clarifying or elucidating the basic awareness of shape that constitutes the unexamined presupposition of the science of geometry as a whole. And this point, I would suggest, essentially mirrors Socrates' comparison of geometry and philosophy in the *Republic*. For as Socrates argues there, while geometry does somehow lay hold of what *is*, it is only able to "dream" of the beings; for, by setting down "hypotheses," without being able to give a full account of them, geometry lacks the capacity to see its objects in full awakensness (*Republic*, 533b5-c2)⁴. But this, of course, is contrasted with philosophy (or, "dialectics;"

4 Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991). All

Republic, 533c7-9); for philosophy is a continual process of destroying the "hypotheses," in order to ascend toward the true beginning point of knowledge - or, is a continual process of destroying our somehow flawed or confused articulations of the world, or of destroying the world that we *think* that we know, in order to ascend upwards toward the world of which we are truly aware - and aware of with the kind of basic evidence and clarity of "shape" and "color."

Of course, in the context of the *Meno*, these considerations may lead us to wonder whether virtue itself is something that we *think* that we are aware of, or something that we are aware of in truth. But, I would suggest that just this distinction is what distinguishes the virtue(s) that Socrates is ignorant of, from the one that he *does* understand (86b8-86c2 with 87c11-89a5 as a whole). For while the former are what we merely "think" that we are aware of, the latter is that true virtue that we *are* aware of, and that each of us somehow always divines.

After presenting this examination of geometry, then, Socrates will next offer Meno a definition of color, and one that also begins from what Meno *thinks* that he knows about the world. For, first, Socrates will confirm that Meno has adopted Empedocles' theory that there are certain "effluences" of the beings; or, that each body continually emanates certain "effluences," which are invisible to our sight (76c8-10). Next, Meno will also agree that bodies have certain "pores," of varying shapes and sizes, into which and

quotations or paraphrases of the *Republic* will be from this edition.

through which these effluences proceed (76c11-76d2). Finally, Socrates will secure Meno's agreement that there is such a thing as "sight" (76d3-4). And, on the basis of these things, Socrates will now define what color is: for color, Socrates says, is an emanation of shapes commensurate with sight, and hence subject to perception (76d5-7).

But if the previous definition had been deficient merely by its obscurity or lack of distinctness, while otherwise serving to somehow articulate what we mean by shape, I believe that *this* definition fails entirely to tell us anything about what color *is*. For, Socrates' account here says identifies color with its material constituents or causes. Yet, even if these material elements are the *cause* of color's being present, they are *not* color themselves. For we or another being might certainly be aware of color, even if these "effluences" or "pores" did not exist at all; which means, in turn, that these material elements have no relation of identity to the colors that we perceive - even if they might stand as cause to color as an effect. But then, by putting forward the false identification in question, and showing us that this identification is in accord with Meno's customary ways of thought, Socrates helps to reveal an error that is endemic to natural science as such, and which accompanies natural science in all times and places. For of course, even in our own day, we are likely to hear scientists claim that the objects of our awareness *are* their material causes - that color, for instance, just is a photon or a wave of light, or that desire just is dopamine, or that each of our thoughts and our ideas are just certain arrangements of neurons. But, all of these statements make the mistake of identifying the *cause* of a phenomenon with that phenomenon itself; or, of identifying the explanation

with the thing to be explained. For somehow, natural science wants to say that all things are composed of certain basic and unchanging material elements - that all things are composed of atoms, for instance, or of quarks or strings. But, I believe that this view is necessarily mistaken. For while the bodies in the external world may be composed of atoms or of quarks, the sounds that we hear are composed of other sounds, and the shaped colors that we perceive are composed of other shapes and colors; just as our thoughts are composed of other thoughts, for instance, and our sensations are each composed of other sensations. For, that which might be the ultimate material for bodies that are external to the soul *cannot* be the ultimate material for the objects of our awareness; for the external and material bodies are one thing, but the objects of our awareness are another.

Accordingly, even if one is tempted to grant the most extreme hypothesis of natural science - that all things only come-into-being as the result of certain material causes - it still would not be the case that the objects within our soul *are* those causes themselves, or *are* composed of matter. Hence, as Socrates illuminates here, it is simply impossible for the kinds of explanations provided by natural science to ever give an adequate account of what the visible world actually *is* - however it might succeed, of course, at explaining how that world comes to be present. - Which might also suggest just how different the questions of how virtue comes to be present and what virtue *is* might truly be.

Thus, through these two critiques together, Socrates quietly suggests how a different kind of science might make its approach towards the character of each of the beings. For, unlike mathematics, philosophy does not "set down" any first premises or principles, but

rather uses our opinions and convictions about the world as "hypotheses," in order to ascend from them toward the truly self-sufficient and natural starting point of all knowledge of the world. Likewise, unlike natural science, philosophy does not attempt to reduce the visible world to its allegedly material and efficient causes. For while our world may be *caused* by certain material elements, it is surely not the *same* as those elements themselves. Thus, the task of identifying and clarifying the objects of that world must be approached through a different methodology entirely - different from that of mathematics, on the one hand, or that of natural science, on the other. But, by his earlier attempts to draw our gaze toward what it means to provide an adequate definition of the forms or the classes that constitute our world, while also providing a quiet pointer toward the mind's ultimate dependence upon the visible particulars, and its complicated processes of gathering and abstraction, Socrates has shown us something of how philosophy can truly come to know the character of the beings, or how it can ascend upwards towards a true grasp of our most basic and fundamental awareness of the world. Hence, with these final lessons and teachings about the place of philosophy within the different human sciences, Socrates will bring his interlude on color and shape to its conclusion.

V. Meno's Final Definition of Virtue (77a6 - 79e5)

But after this complex and theoretical interlude, Socrates will once again return to the fundamental question of the *Meno*. For he will again ask Meno to say what form unites all of the many virtues in common (77a6-77b1). And Meno, for his part, proves able to offer one last definition of virtue - and a definition which, in my judgment, is his clearest and most important articulation of virtue so far. For Meno will now say that this, in fact, is what virtue is: "the desire for noble things, and the capacity to provide them for oneself" (77b1-4).

Now, before I begin to try to explain the character of this definition, I believe that it would be good to first say a few words here about what is actually meant by the Greek word for "noble." For while guiding us toward the true definition of nobility is an essential task of the Platonic dialogues, such that our understanding of what "the noble" is must somehow be an end, and not a beginning, of our studies, it is also true that we can only seek to know the character of nobility if we have some prior awareness of what that word denotes; and, since the Greek word for "noble" has no precise equivalent within our language, it seems to me that we run the danger of lacking even that preliminary understanding which is necessary in order to recollect or to become fully aware of the character of nobility. As such, let me first attempt to simply provide a foundation for our

understanding, and one which goes beyond what Plato himself would have needed to provide for his Greek contemporaries.

To begin with, the Platonic dialogues suggest that an ordinary Greek interlocutor would have believed that each of the virtues is noble, or that the noble is somehow the broader genus or class of which virtues such as justice and courage would have been distinct members. Hence, in trying to grasp what Meno would have meant by "nobility," we might very well begin by thinking that this word is significantly akin to our own word of "morality." For just as a Greek would say that each of the virtues is noble, so too do we say that courageous actions, and moderate actions, and just actions, are all *moral*.

Likewise, if we were asked what goal is pursued in common by the courageous man, the moderate man, and the just man, "living a moral life" would seem to be an adequate answer, just as "living a noble life" would seem adequate to a Greek. Hence, it would seem that there is a strong kinship between noble things and moral things, and that the Greek word for "the noble" functions much as "morality" does within our own language.

Now, I would add that there are also certain subtleties to nobility that should be pointed out. For while "the moral" seems to be especially or even exclusively concerned with preserving and promoting the good of other human beings, it is not simply obvious that "the noble" has this precise limitation. For someone who devotes their life to serving God and doing what is pious might well seem to be acting extraordinarily nobly, for instance, even if it is not obvious without further argument that their actions are correctly described

as "moral." Likewise, the word that I am translating as "noble" need not always be translated or meant in that way. For that word can just as easily be translated as "beautiful," in the sense that we say that a piece of music, or a painting, is beautiful to behold. And this means that, when the idea of the noble/beautiful is applied to a moral action, it always has a special emphasis on the *beauty* of that action - on the fact, for instance, that it is beautiful to see a brave man give his life for his country on the battlefield. But this means that, when an action that we would describe as "moral" is described by a Greek as "noble/beautiful," it draws attention especially to the attractiveness and allure of that action; which means, in turn, that it draws attention to the apparent harmony between the noble and the good, or between what is beautiful in itself and what is good for us, in a way that describing an action as "moral" does not do quite so obviously.

Thus, to just offer a tentative definition of nobility (which, I would insist once again, can only be a stepping stone toward reaching a truly adequate understanding of what nobility actually is), I would suggest that a person acts nobly when they sacrifice their merely private interest in order to devote themselves to something that is higher than themselves. And while we may lack any single word that precisely captures this phenomenon of "the noble," I believe that this does nothing to change the fact that it remains an incredibly important object of human action and desire. Thus, in order to better understand ourselves, and to understand what it is that we genuinely yearn for, it may be of considerable help to understand what the noble *is*. But as I suggested before, it seems to

me that guiding us toward this understanding is one of *the* essential tasks of the Platonic dialogues; and, one of the essential tasks of the following passage of the *Meno*, in particular.

With that said, let me now return to the point from which I began. In what we have just seen, Meno had defined the virtuous man as someone who desires the noble things, while being able to provide them for himself. Now, after hearing this definition, Socrates will ask Meno whether those who desire the noble things are also desirers of what is good (77b6-7). For I believe that Socrates is suggesting that it is an essential part of what we mean by nobility that it is something *good* for us; and even, perhaps, that it is our supreme and perfect good, or that acting nobly constitutes the path toward our truest and deepest happiness. But, however that might be, Meno will at once agree that those who desire the noble things are necessarily desirers of what is good (77b8). But, after confirming that Meno holds the view in question, Socrates will next ask whether Meno has given his original definition on the grounds that there are some who desire what is good, and others who desire what is bad? And he will suggest, additionally, that it is his own opinion that *all* people desire what is good (77b9-77c2).

Now, it is difficult to see how the question that Socrates has raised bears any relation to Meno's most recent definition of virtue, or in any way constitutes its "ground." For of course, Meno has said that the virtuous are distinguished by their love of a certain *kind* of good (namely, that kind of good which is "noble"), but he does not seem to have said

anything more generally about what human beings desire. But while Socrates' question might seem to bear little relation to the view that he is ostensibly examining, Meno will nevertheless agree that he *does* believe that there are some people who desire the bad things (77b9-77c5). Thus, Meno's response will now set the stage for Socrates to examine this new opinion; without yet, of course, indicating what relation this examination will ultimately have to his broader examination of Meno's third articulation of virtue.

That examination will proceed as follows. First, Socrates will ask if Meno means that some people desire the bad things because they believe that they are good, or if he means that some people desire the bad things while knowing that they are bad (77c6-7)? But Meno, for his part, says that both kinds of men exist: for some people desire the bad things while believing that they are good, but others desire the bad things while knowing that they are bad (77c6-11).

Next, Socrates will ask whether those who desire the bad things while knowing that they are bad also believe that they are beneficial, or know that they are harmful (77c12-77d3)? Again, Meno will say that both kinds of men exist: for (1) some men desire things which they know are bad, and believe to be beneficial; while (2) other men desire things which they know are bad, and know to be harmful (77d1-5). Next, Socrates will try to show that the first group of men - (1) - cannot exist. For he correctly argues that it is impossible to know that something which is bad is also beneficial (or good), since being harmful is part of what it means to *be* bad (77d6-8). Hence, it follows that no one who knows that the

bad things are bad can also believe or know that they are beneficial. Accordingly, it cannot be these men who desire the bad things (77d9-e5). Next, Socrates will try to prove that the second group of men - (2) - also cannot exist. For of course, the bad makes us wretched, while the wretched are unhappy (77e6-78a5). However, there is no one who wants to be wretched and unhappy - for, implicitly, all of us deeply wish and yearn to be happy (78a6-8). Hence, no human being can ever desire a thing that they know is bad. Hence, a human being can only desire a thing that is bad if they happen to believe that it is good (78a9-78b2).

Having thereby brought his attempted refutation of Meno's belief to its conclusion, Socrates will now finally apply this lengthy refutation to the question of what virtue is. Yet, as we shall see in the sequel, that application will prove to rest upon a mere sleight-of-hand - for Socrates will slyly substitute an entirely new definition of virtue for Meno's own, and will only apply his examination to that newly substituted definition. For first, Socrates will simply "confirm" that Meno had said before that virtue is to desire the *good* things, while being capable of providing them for himself (78b3-5)? But Meno, not noticing the substitution, will agree that this is what he said. But next, Socrates shows that *this* definition can simply be reduced to the claim that virtue is the capacity to provide the good things for oneself. For since Socrates has shown that no one differs from another in respect to their desire for the good, it follows that "the wanting is common to all," or that "desiring the good things" does not form any part of what distinguishes an excellent man from a base man. Hence, Socrates concludes, Meno's

definition of virtue amounts just to this: virtue is the ability to provide the good things for oneself (78b6-78c1).

But, while Meno's lack of awareness of the difference between the noble and the good leads him to accept this revision without objection (78c2-3), we, for our part, should take note of the magnitude of the alteration. For of course, while we each recognize that the noble is something good, we also recognize that the love of the noble is not simply reducible to the love of the good. For we all somehow sense that part of what it means to act nobly is to act in a way that goes beyond our mere self-interest, or that aims toward something higher or greater than ourselves - something which is truly noble (whatever, precisely, that noble thing might *be*). And this means that, even if anything that is noble must necessarily be good, it would not yet follow that someone who loves the noble loves it *because* it is good; for one who merely loves the good could not love the noble in its full richness or complexity. Thus, by applying his examination of our desires to a definition of virtue which is entirely of his own invention, Socrates of course fails to actually provide any obvious or explicit refutation of Meno whatsoever. And we might perhaps conclude from this that Socrates is actually unable to refute Meno's third and final definition of virtue; although, if that is the case, it is hard to see why Socrates would not admit the correctness of this definition. But, perhaps we might conclude that Socrates has again only attempted to refute *Meno's* views, or to show that *Meno* cannot consistently hold this definition, without even trying to show that there is anything which is actually wrong with this definition itself.

But however these things might be, Socrates will continue his examination by next asking whether Meno calls such things as health and money "good" (78c8-9). For his part, Meno agrees at once that he *does* call these things good; and he voluntarily adds that he also calls honor in cities and offices good, as well (78c10-11). Next, Socrates asks whether Meno recognizes any goods others than these; but, perhaps to our surprise, Meno claims that he does not - these are the only sorts of good thing (78c12-14). Now, this stunning reversal might well remind us of Meno's earlier reduction of the virtue of a man into the mere capacity to rule the city. But, just as in that previous reversal, Socrates will again succeed at quickly causing Meno to re-incorporate justice back into his account of virtue. For with hardly any resistance whatsoever, Meno will at once agree that providing oneself with the good things is only virtuous when it is done justly, and that it is always viceful when it is done unjustly (78d3-79a1). And on this basis, Socrates concludes that virtue cannot be providing oneself with the good things: for the very lack of provision comes to be virtue, whenever it happens to be done justly (78e4-7).

It would seem, then, that we have returned to the same perplexity that was present even back in Meno's first attempt to say what virtue is. Yet, by turning toward the fundamental question of what each of us desire, I believe that Socrates has at least begun to reveal some of the deepest psychic roots of Meno's own perplexity or confusion. For as we have seen, Meno is almost entirely unaware of the distinction between the noble and the good. Accordingly, he is almost entirely unaware of the way that his varying opinions about

these matters lead him to propose radically different accounts of the true character of virtue. But, it is in precisely this state of confusion that the dialogue will leave him; for after this point, there will be no further serious examination of what Meno believes that virtue *is*, or of his views about the noble and the good. However, if the examination of Meno's views has reached its conclusion here (and its clear high point in the examination of Meno's third and final definition), that hardly means that the work of the dialogue is at an end. For it remains to be seen, of course, what Socrates himself might actually believe that virtue *is*; and how else the virtue which he recognizes *as* virtue might come to be present. Accordingly, it will be with a view toward these two matters, especially, that the next two sections of the dialogue will revolve (79e5 - 89e5).

VI. Meno's Paradox And The Theory of Recollection (79e5 - 86c3)

Now after having disposed of Meno's third and final attempt to say what virtue *is*, Socrates will try, once again, to get Meno to provide a truly adequate account of virtue (79e5-6). But Meno, for his part, seems to have finally had enough. For now, in a long, playful rebuke, which will darkly gesture toward Socrates' eventual fate (80b4-7), Meno suggests that Socrates is like a stingray, who numbs his interlocutors in both their tongue and their soul. For before, Meno suggests, he knew what virtue is; but now that he has been numbed, he is not able to say what it is at all (79e7-80b7).

Of course, this rebuke suggests that Meno only believes that he has temporarily lost the ability to say what virtue is; but he does not take this perplexity to be a sign of any underlying ignorance of the character of virtue. Rather than making any further attempts here to persuade Meno that he *is* ignorant of virtue, however, or to show him that his definitions fail to correspond to what virtue *is*, Socrates instead merely attempts to distance himself a little from his likeness to a stingray. For if the stingray is numb and perplexed itself, Socrates says, then perhaps he *is* like the stingray; for it is above all else because he himself is numb and perplexed, that he makes others perplexed as well (80c7-10). Even now, he continues, he does not know what virtue is; but perhaps Meno, at any rate, *did* know what it is, but is now "like" one who does not know (80c7-80d2). Nonetheless, Socrates concludes, he is willing to to join with Meno now in searching for whatever in the world virtue *is* (80d2-5).

But Meno not only refuses Socrates' present offer, but he also tries to prove that Socrates' proposed investigation of virtue would necessarily be a futile and impossible endeavor. For Meno argues that, if Socrates truly *doesn't* know what virtue is, then it must be impossible for him to seek to discover it. For, how could anyone ever set out to search for something, if they don't even know what that thing is to begin with? And, even if Socrates was to happen right upon it, how could he possibly know that what he has stumbled upon is virtue? For since he doesn't know what virtue is, then even *if* he discovered it by chance, he could not *know* that the thing he had discovered was virtue. Hence, Meno suggests, if Socrates is truly as ignorant about virtue as he claims, then it is simply impossible for him to seek to discover it (80d5-8).

Now Socrates will at once chide Meno for this argument, and suggest that his argument here is merely "eristic" (80e1-2). And yet, I believe that Meno's argument here is simply correct. For if Socrates truly does not know *at all* what virtue is – as he has suggested numerous times that he does not (71a5-7; 71b1-3; 80c10-d2) – then it would indeed be impossible for him to seek to discover it: for how could we ever seek for something if we do not even have a dim awareness of what that thing is? Further, Meno is correct that, even *if* Socrates happened upon it, he could not possibly know that he had happened upon *virtue*, unless he had some prior awareness that let him recognize what he had found. Hence, even if his motivations here might be 'eristic,' Meno is also surely beginning to realize the extent to which Socrates must have *some* knowledge of virtue. Accordingly, in

spite of Socrates' verbal chiding, I believe that Meno's argument here is entirely sufficient.

But, rather than giving an adequate response to Meno's objection, Socrates will instead cleverly replace the argument which Meno has just advanced with an argument of his own creation. For Socrates will now suggest that the sort of thing that Meno "meant" to say is this: that it is impossible for a human being to seek out either what he knows or what he does not know. For, if he does not know something, then he will not be able to search for it. But, if he does know it, then there is no need for the search; for, since it is already known, there is no need to discover it. Hence, it is impossible for a human being to seek to discover anything that is known, or anything that is unknown. But, of course, *every* thing is either known or unknown. Hence, it is impossible for a human being to seek to discover anything at all (80e1-6).

(Note that Socrates' argument here is only a "proof" that we cannot learn something by searching for it - *not* that learning is impossible simply. For it does not rule out the possibility of learning a thing without having sought for it before; as children, for instance, must first learn of shape and color, and pleasure and pain, and all else that simply begins to appear.)

But Meno, for his part, does not seem to notice Socrates' substitution. Instead, he simply asks Socrates whether this argument is "nobly stated" (81a1-2). But Socrates, for his part,

denies that it is. For rather than embracing this "eristic" argument, he will instead spin out a "true and noble" account, which offers an elaborate and perhaps mythic support of learning and philosophy; and an account which proves to be one of the most complicated and interesting passages in the entirety of the *Meno* (81a3-81e2). Accordingly, in what follows, I will first just summarize that argument as a whole, and then attempt to analyze each of those parts of the speech which seem to be most important.

To begin with. Socrates first explains to Meno that the human soul is immortal; that at one time it comes to an end, and at another it comes into being again; but that it never does perish. And on account of these things, the divine poets have said that we ought to live our lives as piously as possible. "For from whomsoever Persephone accepts atonement for the ancient grief... [there will] arise glorious kings... called among human beings holy heroes" (81a10-81c4).

Now since the soul is immortal, and has come to be many times and has seen both the things here and those in Hades - in fact, all things - there is nothing it hasn't learned. As a result, it is no wonder that it is able to recollect what virtue is, along with each of the other things. For, nature as a whole being akin, and the soul having learned all things, nothing prevents someone, once he has recollected just one thing, from learning everything else. For searching and learning as a whole are recollection (81c5-81d5). This account, then, would make us active, and ready to search; while Meno's account, by contrast, would make us idle and lazy. Thus, trusting this account to be true, we ought to

be active in the search, and not to give up on learning what virtue is (81d5-81e2).

Now, let me consider the different parts of this speech.

To begin with, Socrates' account begins from the premise that the soul is immortal, and that it is in a process of continual coming-into-being and perishing. But, from this single premise, two very different practical conclusions are suggested. For while the divine poets who originate this account claim that we ought to live our lives as piously as possible, Socrates himself says that we ought to be active and ready to search for what virtue is. Hence, a different practical conclusion is suggested in each of the two halves of the speech. Likewise, each of these halves point toward a different view of the ultimate foundation for these two ways of action. For while the first half of the speech suggests that living piously rests upon a belief in the mysterious power of the Gods (for the poetic lines suggest Persephone's mysterious will is the cause of our atonement - 81b9-11), the second half of the speech rests upon the teaching that nature is somehow fundamentally akin, thereby allowing us to know the truth about each of the beings (81c9-81d1). Thus, I would suggest that Socrates is here quietly sketching out two very different ways that we might guide our lives. For each of us can either obediently strive to be as pious as possible, in accordance with the laws which have been revealed to us, or we can instead choose to guide our lives through reason, and attempt to learn for ourselves what virtue truly is. And while the first possibility ultimately points toward our faith in the guidance of mysterious divinities, the second possibility points toward our trust in the knowability

of the whole. Now, with that said, I believe that it is also difficult to say why Socrates is sketching out these two possibilities at this point in the dialogue. But, perhaps there is some reason that Socrates might want see just how exactly Meno will respond to the presentation of these two alternatives.

But however that might be, we should also note that Socrates' rather mythical account actually contains a quiet and entirely this-worldly suggestion about the true foundation of all human learning - while also showing that there is a kind of learning which is *not* recollection. For Socrates here claims that the reason that the soul knows all things, is that it has *seen* all things (81c5-9). Now, this claim of course suggests that sense-perception is somehow the foundation of all of our learning about the world (as I also suggested in my earlier account of "white" and "color"). But, it *also* shows that there is a kind of learning which is not recollection. For of course, in order for recollection to be possible at all, this prior learning - which is not itself recollection - must already have taken place. But then, if the human soul can learn what something is through first perceiving it, then what need do we actually have for recollection at all? For of course, it would seem that we could simply learn what each of the beings in *this* world are, at least, by simply perceiving them once again, and learning them now in just the way that we had once learned them before. Thus, Socrates' own account seems to point toward the possibility of a kind of learning that is not itself a form of recollection - and a kind of learning that is available to us within this life alone.

Let me add at once, though, that the possibility which Socrates here suggests is entirely compatible with what he actually says about the relation between learning and recollection. For while Meno mistakenly believes that Socrates has claimed that learning is recollection, Socrates never actually makes that claim in his original speech. Rather, he says that learning and seeking are recollection *as a whole*. And this suggests, then, that both may be together what neither is apart. Or, stated otherwise, it may only be when we have learned the very thing that we had previously been seeking for, that the experience as a whole constitutes an act of "recollection."

But this more limited and more plausible claim about how learning and seeking are both recollection may also begin to suggest how this lengthy and complicated speech actually responds to the paradoxes which had immediately preceded it. For by suggesting that the act of learning the very thing that we were seeking is a kind of "recollection," Socrates suggests that the very thing that we somehow know well enough to seek for can nevertheless exist within our souls in a state of "forgetfulness;" but that, by seeking and discovering what it is, it is possible to come into a full and clear awareness of a thing that we had only dimly or "forgetfully" been aware of before. And hasn't the entire dialogue so far powerfully exhibited just such a psychic state of "forgetfulness"? For while Meno is *somehow* aware of what virtue is - for if he were not, he could hardly be able to speak about or to discuss it - his awareness is also obscure and indistinct; for as we have seen repeatedly, Meno can't help but blur the components of his understanding of virtue together, without even realizing that he is doing so, or without even seeing that these *are*

the components of what virtue *is*. Thus, it is precisely these contradictions and confusions which are the clearest sign that Meno apprehends the true character of virtue in a state of profound "forgetfulness." Hence, it is just the possibility that we might "know" something in such a confused and contradictory way that provides the resolution to Socrates' paradoxes. For while it is surely the case that we cannot search for something without somehow knowing what it is, it is precisely because that knowledge can exist in such a profound state of "forgetfulness," that there *is* a need to try to discover the very thing that that we already somehow know. Thus, while it is impossible to seek for something that we do not know at all, it is not impossible to seek to "recollect" what we already somehow know. For such an activity is a necessary part of satisfying our desire to truly *know* the world in which we live.

But, perhaps this resolution has not yet shown that it is possible to learn what *virtue* is, in particular. For while Socrates has tried to establish that we can recollect what virtue is on the grounds that we can recollect anything that we have seen before, this conclusion does not follow from its premise: for Socrates has provided no argument that virtue is something that we learned from *seeing*. But, perhaps this is merely a kind of logic-chopping; and, in any event, it certainly constitutes no objection to the possibility that we can recollect the truth about what virtue is. For, as an earlier exchange has already made clear, we are certainly able to recollect a thing that we have *heard* (71c9-d2). But, of course, what child was not told that some things are right, while other things are wrong? And was it not after all through just such experiences as these that each of us learned

what virtue is, and began to wish earnestly to do what is right, and to avoid what is wrong? Thus, while Socrates' proof does not establish that virtue can be recollected, I would suggest that such an act of recollection is certainly possible for a human being.

Now as I have already suggested, Meno will entirely miss the subtlety in Socrates' identification of learning and seeking *as a whole* with recollection, and will thereby miss the entire connection between this long and complicated speech, and the original paradoxes which had been proposed before; for, if learning is *simply* recollection, it is hard to see what connection this speech could have with those earlier paradoxes. But, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Meno will prove to be entirely untroubled by the lack of connection between his understanding of this speech, and the problem that had been raised before. For Meno will eagerly ask Socrates whether he can show that learning *is* recollection; and to this extent, at least, Meno confirms that his earlier argument *was* eristic, and rested on no real doubts about the possibility of learning (81e3-5). - I would note, also, that Meno displays no eagerness to be taught about the immortality of the soul, or that one ought to live as piously as possible. - But rather than correct Meno's misunderstanding of his actual assertion, Socrates will choose to oblige him, and will attempt to give a kind of proof for the claim that all learning is recollection. For Socrates will now converse with a slave boy about a theorem of geometry, while Meno watches, and assesses for himself whether the boy is being *taught* the truth of that theorem, or is *recollecting* it from within the depths of his immortal soul (81e6-86c3).

Now, since almost all of this demonstration is quite easy to follow (consisting mostly of clear and elegant chains of mathematical reasoning), let me depart at this point from commenting on much of what is being said, and instead simply pick out and focus on the few important points that seem to be scattered throughout this mathematical demonstration.

To begin with, I believe that Socrates' argument that one needs to know that one is ignorant in order to be willing to seek for knowledge captures a point that is almost at the heart of the pedagogical method of the Platonic dialogues. For if someone lacks awareness that they are ignorant of something, then they cannot possibly seek to discover that same thing (a point which has already been elegantly stated in what preceded - 80e4-5); which means, in turn, that the first step in enabling anyone to learn for themselves is to help them realize that the world is far more unknown, and far more mysterious, than our initial education might have led us to believe. - But, there is one difficulty here. For while Socrates seems to suggest that becoming perplexed leads us to become aware of our ignorance (84a8-b1), we have already seen that that is certainly not the case (79e7-80b7). But, perhaps this false identification gives us a certain hint for how to read the Platonic dialogues as a whole. For it is only when we cease to be merely *perplexed* by a dialogue, and instead come to be able to see precisely what in that dialogue is perplexing, and to clearly follow out the subtle contours of the argument, that we can truly begin to clearly grasp how Socrates' arguments are not merely perplexing, but

illuminating of our deepest ignorances, and thereby able to provide a starting point for our own independent reflection and investigation.

Secondly, however, I believe that this exhibition ultimately fails to prove that learning is recollection; for, in my judgment, it does not at all prove that the boy "recollected" the truth of his theorem. For Socrates' proof that the boy is "recollecting" goes something like this: **(1)** the boy was not taught geometry before, so he could not have learned this particular theorem in his present life; **(2)** Socrates is only asking the boy questions, so he cannot be teaching him; **(3)** but, these questions lead the boy to somehow learn the particular theorem that the questions were about. Hence, the questions must have led the boy to "learn" the truth by recollecting what he come to know in a previous life. - But of course, Socrates' second premise here simply isn't true: for it is possible to teach someone *by* asking them questions. But, isn't this exactly what is happening in the exchange? For as we are bound to notice while reading this section, the sequence of Socrates' "questions" here, despite their grammatical form, bear a more than striking resemblance to a proof of Greek geometry. Further, some of the questions, at least, are hardly even "questions" at all - as, for instance, when Socrates asks whether "four times four is sixteen," to which the boy "recollects" that the answer is "yes" (83c4-5). Thus, Socrates' demonstration does not seem at all to succeed at showing that learning is recollection - as Socrates himself appears to admit at that demonstration's conclusion. For by claiming that he wouldn't insist very much on the "other points" which he has made (86b8-9), but only on a thesis which has no connection to the claim that "learning is recollection" (or to

many of the other claims of his earlier "mythic" account), Socrates effectively disclaims his acceptance of that thesis entirely - along with the proof on which it supposedly rests (86b9-86c2).

But if Socrates does *not* believe that this proof is demonstrative, then we might reasonably wonder why such a lengthy and complicated demonstration is included within the dialogue at all. Now, to begin with, I believe that the obvious answer is that this speech is primarily rhetorical. For at each point that he makes the claim that learning is recollection, Socrates explicitly ties that claim to an encouragement for Meno to resume the investigation into what virtue *is* (81d5-e1; 86b8-c2). But, this suggests that it is precisely to overcome Meno's earlier resistance that Socrates has now put forward these long and mythic defenses of the very possibility of ever coming to learn what virtue *is*.

However, I believe that this hardly provides a full account of Plato's inclusion of this demonstration. For, even if the purpose is primarily motivational, that hardly seems to account for the sheer length and detail with which Plato develops and presents this mathematical theorem and its demonstration. Hence, I would instead tentatively suggest that the true reason that Plato has included this section is to simply draw his readers attention to the elegance and the rigor of these mathematical demonstrations themselves. For, as I suggested before, the dialogue's explicit account of how knowledge comes to be present may provide the dialogue's implicit answer to the question of how virtue comes to be present. But, of course, demonstration is one of the primary ways that a human being

can acquire knowledge about each of the beings; and at no other point in the dialogue is the true nature of demonstration so clearly exhibited or presented. Hence, I would suggest that Plato here may simply be presenting us with a superlative example of the art of demonstration, in order that we may see and learn for ourselves how that art helps to form a part of how knowledge comes to be present within the human soul. But, perhaps there is another reason for this section, as well. For in what preceded, I suggested that Socrates was pointing toward the deficiencies of mathematics, or the way that mathematical demonstration can often rely upon an abstract and obscure terminology, and thereby lack a full awareness or a fully wakeful grasp of the character of the world. But perhaps here, by presenting a mathematical presentation that so elegantly begins simply from what is visible within the world, Socrates intends to partially rescind and correct that earlier suggestion, and show just how a *certain* kind of mathematics, at least, can simply enhance and build upon our awareness of the world, by leading us to discover the invisible or hidden relations that were somehow always buried within the world that each of us is aware of. Thus, in this way, Socrates' presentation here may show us just how mathematics and philosophy *can* form a truly harmonious and unified bond.

Finally, however, I believe that the most important part of this entire section is given to us at the moment of its conclusion. For in the concluding statement of his entire complicated and mythic account of human learning, Socrates admits that, with respect to all of the "other points" of his original argument, he wouldn't insist very much on their behalf (86b8-9); but, he continues, he *would* do battle on behalf of *one* part of that

account (81d5-e2). For it *is* better to try to discover the things that we do not know, and we would be worse if we suppose that it's impossible for us to discover these things, or that we ought not to investigate them (86b9-c2). Here, then, Socrates suggests that he *does* claim to know something about virtue; for he reveals that what makes us better is simply striving to learn, and trying to understand the character of the world - or that true virtue is, above all else, *rational* virtue. But, finally, Socrates also reveals here his profound opposition to the view that we "ought not" to inquire; which, in turn, constitutes a profound rejection of any "virtue" of simple obedience. Hence, with this deep but preliminary statement of Socrates' understanding of the radically philosophic and self-directed character of virtue, his consideration of the "theory of recollection" has finally come to a close. In the process, however, Socrates has deepened his account of how knowledge comes to be present within the soul, while also beginning to hint toward his own knowledge and answer to the question of what virtue *is*. What if anything Meno has understood of this teaching, of course, remains to be seen; but for us, we have now been prepared especially to consider what Socrates himself might know about the character of virtue, and how that understanding might shed light on the complexities and the confusions of Meno's initial attempts to say what virtue *is*.

VII. Virtue Is Knowledge (86c4 - 89e5)

After having attempted to restore Meno's willingness to investigate what virtue *is*, Socrates will once again ask Meno to join him in a search for the definition of virtue itself (86c4-6). But for his part, Meno claims that he would much rather hear the answer to the question that he had originally raised - namely, whether virtue is something teachable, or whether it comes to be present by nature or in some other way (86c7-86d2). - The possibility that virtue comes into being through *practice* has for some reason been silently dropped (contrast 70a1-5 with 86c7-d2). - Socrates, however, makes clear that he would much rather investigate what virtue *is*; but, with some reluctance, he agrees to investigate whether virtue is teachable, or what *sort* of thing virtue is, without yet having learned *what* it is (86d3-86e1).

Now as I mentioned earlier, it is unclear exactly what motivates Socrates to engage in this long conversation with Meno; but, this exchange is perhaps the clearest sign that Socrates especially wants to converse with Meno about what virtue *is*, and not how virtue comes to be present. Of course, what if anything that suggests about the relative importance of these investigations within Socrates' own soul is a different question entirely. But however that might be, I believe that Socrates is certainly exaggerating the extent to which he is about to abandon the inquiry into what virtue *is*. For while it is certainly true that there is no necessary relation between how something comes to be present and what the thing that has come to be present actually *is* (as I argued earlier in my discussion of

Socrates' definition of color), there surely *is* a connection between what *sort* of thing something is, and what that thing *is* (86d9-e1). For the sort of thing that something is forms an important part of *what* it is; just as being-a-figure forms an important part of being-a-triangle, and being-an-animal forms an important part of being-a-human-being. Hence, so far from it being the case that Socrates will have to abandon the question of what virtue is if he discusses the question of what sort of thing it is, it is precisely by moving the conversation toward what sort of thing that virtue is that he will be able to continue to examine *what* it is. For after first reducing the question of how virtue comes to be present to the question of whether virtue is something teachable, Socrates will next reduce the question of whether virtue is something teachable to the question of whether virtue is a sort of knowledge. For Socrates will at once secure Meno's agreement that, if virtue is knowledge, then it is teachable; and, if it is teachable, then it is knowledge (86e1-87c10). But, from these two premises together, Socrates will succeed completely at replacing the question of how virtue comes to be present with the question of whether virtue is a sort of knowledge. Hence, despite his apparent laments that he is unable to rule either himself or Meno, he proves almost at once to be the ruler of them both - and to slyly continue his earlier investigation into what virtue *is*.

Now after having moved the conversation in the direction that he desires, Socrates will at once propose that they ought next to examine whether virtue is knowledge, or is something different (87c11-12). And Socrates will propose that they test that belief in the following way. First, Socrates asks if it "remains" their hypothesis that virtue is

something good - referring back to their earlier agreement at 78a6-c1. For his part, Meno will agree that this *does* remain their hypothesis. Next, Socrates proposes that they might investigate if virtue is knowledge in the following way: since virtue must be something good for us (87d12-87e8), then, if there is nothing good which is other than or separate from knowledge, virtue must *be* knowledge; but, if there is something good which *is* separate from knowledge, then virtue and knowledge might be distinct (87d7-11).

But, we should note at once that there is a certain ambiguity or difficulty in Socrates' argument here. For Socrates has claimed that virtue must be knowledge, *if* there is nothing good that is other than knowledge, *or* if there is nothing good that is *separate* from knowledge. But, while the first of these conditional statements is surely true (if virtue is good, and only knowledge is good, then virtue must be knowledge), the second conditional is *not* correct: for even if nothing can be good apart from knowledge, that does not mean that there is nothing good that is *other* than knowledge. For, even if *y* cannot be good apart from *x*, it is possible that *x* and *y* together might be better than *x* alone. But, if *x* and *y* together are better than *x* alone, then *y* must be good - for whatever makes something better through its addition must itself be something good. Hence, even if virtue cannot be good apart from knowledge, it would still be possible that virtue is a good which is other than knowledge. - Or, perhaps, to make the same point more cautiously, it does not prove that virtue *as a whole* is knowledge. For while some part of virtue might be knowledge, there might nevertheless be a different part - boldness, for example (88b2-7) - which is a good that is other than knowledge, while forming an

indispensable condition for the presence of virtue as a whole. And perhaps just such a consideration as this leads Socrates to ultimately conclude that prudence is *either* the whole, *or* a part, of virtue (89a4-5); for it is certainly more plausible to say that nothing is good *apart* from knowledge, than it is to say that nothing is good *except* for knowledge.

Yet, it is difficult to see how either of Socrates' arguments here could possibly be the case - either that nothing is good other than knowledge, or that nothing is good apart from knowledge. For Socrates' argument for both of these positions amounts to the claim that each other good, such as health and money, is sometimes beneficial, and sometimes harmful; but that, when knowledge is present, it is beneficial, and when knowledge is absent, then it is harmful (87e7-88a7; 88c6-89a1). But, this certainly does not seem to establish that only knowledge is good. For even if it is the case that health is only beneficial when it is accompanied by knowledge, it is surely better to have knowledge and be healthy than to have knowledge and be sick; which means, of course, that health must at least be a good that is other than knowledge, even if it cannot be good apart from knowledge. But, secondly, it hardly seems to be true that nothing can be good apart from knowledge, or that all of our undertakings turn out well then they are done prudently, and badly when they are done imprudently (88c6-8). For to begin with, don't *some* of our imprudent decisions end up being to our own advantage? For instance, aren't all reckless gambles necessarily foolish and imprudent; but don't *some* reckless gambles, at least, work out in our favor? Likewise, don't we always run the risk of suffering a grave loss even the most apparently safe and prudent course of action, for the simple fact that none

of us can ever perfectly predict the consequences of our actions? But then, just as an imprudent action would not necessarily make us miserable, neither would a prudent action necessarily lead us to attain the good that we are seeking. For at best, prudence can maximize our chances of being happy, while imprudence can maximize our chances of being miserable; but neither is able to circumvent the power of chance entirely.

It would seem, then, that even the more limited view that nothing can be good *apart* from knowledge simply ignores the fact that chance plays an essential and a necessary role in determining the outcomes of all of our actions. Yet, perhaps to our surprise, Socrates himself will make this exact point later on in the dialogue. For Socrates will later admit that, while knowledge may be responsible for guiding our actions correctly, it is also the case that not everything occurs through human guidance - for some things occur as a result of chance (99a1-4). Hence, there is no necessary connection between the way that we guide our lives, and the outcomes or the happiness that we are seeking for. But then, if Socrates knows that even the claim that nothing is good apart from knowledge is not correct, then what is his intention in putting forward this proof that virtue must be knowledge, either in whole or in part?

To begin with, while I believe that the goodness of prudence is certainly being exaggerated, and that the *proof* that virtue is knowledge is doubtlessly invalid, I don't believe that means that virtue is *not* a sort of knowledge - for of course, a true conclusion can be derived from faulty premises. Hence, I would tentatively suggest that the view that

virtue is knowledge *may* be Socrates' serious opinion. For after all, the chief question of the dialogue so far has been what actually distinguishes an excellent human being from a base or wretched one. But isn't it at least plausible to suggest that it might be *knowledge* which provides this distinction? For of course, we often say that someone who acts unjustly is very foolish or ignorant; while, if somebody conducts their lives in an extraordinarily just manner - like Christ and Lincoln - we often say that they are wise, and understood how to live. Likewise, we say that the virtuous are happy, while the vicious are miserable; but, if Socrates is correct that no one wants to be miserable (78a6-b2), then wouldn't the vicious cease to be vicious if they ceased to be ignorant? Finally, when somebody lives a dissolute or a base life, we often hope that they will "learn" to act in a better way; and this, too, suggests that virtue may be a certain sort of knowledge. But if that is the case, then knowledge would be the true form of virtue which Socrates and Meno had been searching for; and hence, it would only be through the presence of knowledge that each virtue would *become* a virtue (88a9-88c4).

Of course, even if we accept the truth of this account (as it is not clear to me that we ought to do), we would still be left with a number of difficulties. For, to begin with, even if virtue is a sort of knowledge, virtue is obviously not the same as knowledge simply: for surely the knowledge that it is raining, for instance, or that $2 + 2 = 4$, does not make one an excellent human being. But then, if virtue is one kind of knowledge among many, what exactly is virtue a knowledge *of*? Further, one may wonder whether our answer to that question would allow us to preserve a "multiplicity" of virtues. For it seems to me to

be unlikely that courage is knowledge of one thing, while moderation is a knowledge of another. Rather, it seems more likely that each is comprised of a *single* knowledge; whatever, precisely, that knowledge might be of. But then, it would follow that there would not be so much a multiplicity of virtues, as a multiplicity of *parts* of virtue - parts such as "boldness," for instance (88b4-7) - of which knowledge would form the stable and solid core (88b2-88c4). But of course, more fundamentally, it would remain for us to test this hypothesis that "virtue is knowledge" for ourselves; for, since the argument which Socrates has given for this claim is surely invalid, we are compelled to turn toward our own experience and reasoning in order to determine the truth of this strange but somehow plausible answer to the question of what virtue *is*.

At this point, then, Socrates has now persuaded Meno – at least for the moment – that virtue is knowledge (89c2-4). But, in the sequel, Socrates will begin to call that claim into question. For he will first re-affirm their previous agreement that, if virtue is knowledge, then it must be something teachable (89c5-89d6). On this basis, however, he will begin to question whether virtue is knowledge. For Socrates will argue that, *if* virtue is teachable, it must have students and teachers; but, if it does *not* have students and teachers, then it cannot be teachable (89d7-89e3). Thus, the question of whether or not virtue is knowledge becomes reduced to the question of whether or not there are students and teachers of virtue.

Now, I believe that Socrates' arguments are correct if they are taken in one sense, but incorrect if they are taken in another. For, if a thing will necessarily *never* be taught, then it seems to me that it cannot be "teachable;" just as a thing that will necessarily never be perceived is not "perceivable," and a thing that will necessarily never be thought is not "thinkable." But, if Socrates means that virtue is not teachable because it does not *currently* have any students and teachers, then this is certainly false. For surely a mathematical truth is teachable even before it has any students or teachers. For, if it was not, then how could something which was not teachable ever come to be taught at a later time? Thus, even if there are no students or teachers of virtue at the moment, that would not yet imply anything about whether or not virtue is teachable.

But it seems to me that we might also be surprised simply to see that Socrates is raising the question of the teachability of virtue at all. For of course, in what preceded, Socrates had quickly moved past the question of virtue's teachability, in order to focus directly upon the question of what sort of thing that virtue is (87b3-c12); which seemed to suggest, as I had argued before, that Socrates wished especially to converse about the question of what virtue *is*. But now, by moving the inquiry to the question of whether there are any students or teachers of virtue, and by doing so in accordance with the questionable premises or arguments that we have just seen before, Socrates seems to have left the question of what virtue *is* behind entirely. But, I believe that the reason for this alteration will become clear almost at once at the beginning of the next section; and that, through the change that is about to take place within the action of the *Meno*, the most

fundamental and important parts of the dialogue - the sustained and continued inquiry into what virtue *is*, and how knowledge comes to be present - have now begun to come to an end.

VIII. Students And Teachers (89e6 - 96d1)

As we saw in what came before, Socrates had effectively turned the dialogue into an inquiry into whether or not there are students and teachers of virtue. His reasons for doing that, however, had been quite obscure; but, in the sequel, his reasons will become clear at once. For at this point in the dialogue, Anytus, one of Socrates' future accusers, will come and sit down with, his ancestral guest-friend (90b5-6); and accordingly, from this point on, the entire conversation will be conducted in the presence of the highly conservative and volatile Anytus (99e1-2; 92a7-92c6). But this in turn leads to the consequence that the question of "what is virtue" will be dropped entirely, and will never be brought up again at any later point in the dialogue. Indeed, the omission of this question proves to be so complete, that Socrates even conceals that he and Meno had been discussing it before. For Socrates will suggest that he and Meno had been conversing, for a long time now, about how Meno could become proficient in conventional Athenian virtue; and that "this" virtue is what Meno had been seeking to acquire (90e8-91b5). But of course, in addition to entirely ignoring the entire inquiry into what virtue is, this sanitized description also ascribes a desire for conventional virtue Meno that he had simply never expressed (compare especially 90e8-91b5 with 71e1-7 and 73c9-d1). Thus, it is the presence of Anytus that seems to necessitate the abandonment of the inquiry into what virtue *is*; and, accordingly, it is not surprising that, after being compelled to lower the subject of the

inquiry in this way, Socrates will soon declare that it's time for him to be "off somewhere" (100b7).

Now, this sudden reticence of Socrates may help us to cast the entire preceding dialogue into its proper light. For as the conversation with Anytus reveals at once, there *is* a simple and commonsensical answer to the question of what virtue is, which is likely to be put by authorities such as Anytus: virtue is to nobly care for the good of one's family and one's city (91a2-6). This answer to the question, of course, is likely to be an answer that both Socrates and Meno have heard many times; and further, it is likely to be a teaching that we, too, have heard before. But this means that the entire inquiry into what virtue is has to somehow begin with some intuition or awareness that such an answer cannot possibly be complete, or has to be modified in some important way. Now, as we have seen throughout the dialogue, that intuition need hardly be an adequate one. For surely part of what motivates Meno to reject this answer is simply his misguided understanding of his own deepest good (73c7-d1; 78c4-78d2). However, I believe that Socrates has also prepared us for this confrontation with Anytus's views by revealing some of the most powerful reasons to reject this account of virtue. For by reminding us of the simple and all-important fact that each of us wish to be happy (78a6-78b2), while also pointing towards the critical role that knowledge must play in all genuine virtue (88c6-8), I believe that Socrates has quietly gestured toward some essential elements of true virtue that Anytus's account either insufficiently emphasizes, or else lacks altogether. It will hardly be surprising, then, that Anytus's conception of virtue is compatible with his desire to

punish those whom he does not know at all (91c1-92c5) - and that it will be compatible, finally, with his bringing the charges which lead to the trial and the death of Socrates. Hence, the rejection of what such a man as Anytus believes to be virtue is bound to appear, to Anytus at least, as a sign of the greatest wickedness and vice. Hence, Socrates' great need to conceal his investigations from Anytus, to the greatest extent that he is able.

But, having concealed the true character of his conversation with Meno, Socrates will now invite Anytus to join with him into an investigation into who the teachers of virtue are (90b5-6). And he begins, innocently enough, by securing Anytus's assent that, if they wanted Meno to become a good physician, they would send him to the physicians; and that, if they wanted him to be a good shoemaker, they would send him to the shoemakers - and so on with aulos-playing, and each of the other arts (90b6-90e1). For in general, Socrates concludes, we should send each student to those who claim to teach it, and who take money for their services (90e1-6; 90d1-4). But on this apparently reasonable basis, Socrates will conclude that, if he and Anytus wish to make Meno into a good man, then they ought to send him to those who teach virtue, and who accept pay for their teaching. In other words: they ought to send him to learn from those who are called the "Sophists" (90e7-91b8).

Now of course, this argument is somewhat problematic. For it hardly follows from the fact that someone claims or especially "pretends" to teach a subject that they are a suitable teacher of the subject matter in question (90e1-6, esp. 90e4). Nor, as Socrates'

whole life makes clear, must one accept money in order to be a gifted teacher (90e3).

But, I believe that there is also a much deeper problem with Socrates' argument here. For from the fact that the Sophists claim to teach virtue, it hardly follows that they teach "this" virtue - or that they teach the conventional and political virtue which a man of Anytus's character looks up to and admires (91a2-b1). And accordingly, we are not surprised to find that Anytus will view the suggestion that he should send Meno to the Sophists as madness itself (91c1-4). For Anytus views these men as being manifestly the ruin and the corruption of all of the young with whom they associate.

But while Socrates will attempt to provide some defense of his claim that the Sophists are competent teachers of virtue (91c5-92a6), that defense will hardly prove to be adequate. For, first, Socrates suggests that someone who charges a fee for their services would surely be driven out of the city if they harmed those who paid them money (91c5-e5). Yet of course, don't quite a few merchants make a truly considerable profit by selling goods that are ultimately harmful to those who foolishly purchase them - fast food companies, for instance? But, secondly, he suggests that, if a Sophist like Protagoras had truly harmed others, they could not have escaped the notice of all of Greece for forty years, and continue to be thought well of to this day (91e2-92a2). But, given that it is widely reported that Protagoras died in the process of fleeing a charge of impiety, and given Anytus's own views of the man (and his evident power to bring harm to his enemies), it hardly seems to be correct to say that he escaped the notice of all of Greece. Perhaps,

then, Socrates has some special interest in securing the reputation of the Sophists; but, what that interest might be, precisely, seems difficult to say.

But after making this somewhat questionable defense, Socrates simply continues by asking Anytus whether he believes that the Sophists are mad, or that they know that they are harming the young (92a3-6). Anytus, for his part, at once confirms that they *do* know, and that they are *far* from being mad (92a7-92b3) - a pointer, perhaps, to Plato's general understanding of anger. Next, Socrates attempts to discern the source of Anytus's anger, by asking him if Anytus himself has been done any injustice by the Sophists (92b4-5). But Anytus reveals that he is so far from having been done any injustice himself, that he is completely without experience of these men altogether - even though he certainly knows who they are (92b6-c5). Socrates concludes by admiringly suggesting that Anytus must then be a "prophet" (92c6-7); and this, I think, reveals something to us of the character of Socrates' future accuser.

But, having put forward the claim that the Sophists are suitable teachers in order to bring out and examine the character of Anytus's anger, Socrates will go on to simply ask Anytus who he believes that the teachers of virtue are (92c8-d5). And, after some resistance, Anytus will answer that there isn't a single one of the Athenian gentlemen who won't help to make Meno better with respect to virtue - if, at any rate, he's willing to obey them (92e3-6). - One wonders precisely how such "obedience" relates to their capacity as teachers. It might be, of course, that they simply require docility and obedience in order

to teach their students what virtue is; but it seems just as likely that a certain "obedience" forms an essential ingredient in the virtue which they teach, and in Anytus's conception of virtue as well (as is also indicated by his earlier suggestion that a certain course of action is not only "irrational," but also "ignorant"). And I believe that this likely points to a serious alternative to Socrates' claim that virtue is a sort of knowledge.

But however that might be, Socrates next confirms that Anytus believes that many good men have come to be within the city, and that each learned how to be a good man from his predecessors (92e3-93a4). Socrates, of course, does not point out the infinite regress that this might imply. Instead, he simply agrees that men who are good at the political things are in the city now, and that no fewer men of this sort existed in the past (93a5-7). He does not answer Anytus's question of whether many good men have come to be in the city, nor does he offer any suggestion about whether the number of men who are good at the political things might be declining over time (93a3-7). Instead, Socrates will go on to remind Anytus that the conversation is not about whether there have been good men in the city, but about whether these men have been good teachers of their virtue (93a7-b7).

But this will lead Socrates to now attempt to provide a long proof that those Athenians who are conventionally recognized for their virtue have *not* been very skilled as teachers (93b8-94e2). For in each case, Socrates argues, these men surely wished for good things for their sons, and they surely spared no expense to have their sons taught by the best teachers available; but, in each case, their sons did not acquire outstanding virtue

themselves, and in some cases may have even fallen below the ordinary level of decency. Hence, Socrates concludes, it may be the case that none of these men are teachers of virtue; for virtue, ultimately, may not be something teachable.

Yet, a number of small details scattered throughout this proof suffice to raise serious difficulties with Socrates' assertions. For to begin with, Socrates suggests that each of these men wished for their children to turn out as well as possible. Yet, don't they clearly also wish, as each of their lives make clear, to dedicate themselves to the actions of virtue - and doesn't this mean that they will spend almost all of their time paying attention to the affairs of the city (94d9-e1)? Hence, even if they of course *wish* for their children to turn out well, they may not have the time to ensure that they actually do so. But of course, it may be precisely this lack of leisure that causes each of these men to *have* their sons taught, rather than to teach their sons themselves. Thus, this argument hardly seems to establish that these men couldn't have been teachers of virtue, if they had *wanted* to be - as Anytus himself points out (93c3-5).

But, further, a more important and fundamental consideration is omitted from this entire discussion. For Socrates simply dismisses without comment the possibility that the nature of one of these men's sons might have been poor (93d9-10). Yet, isn't there of course an enormous difference in the natures which each of us possess? And doesn't this suggest, in turn, that each of us may admit of attaining virtue to a very different degree - such that it is simply impossible for the highest forms of virtue to be attained by everyone? For while

ordinary decency might well be teachable, it hardly seems likely that each of us could acquire the extraordinary gifts and virtues of a Lincoln, or a Washington. Likewise, if virtue is knowledge, as Socrates suggests, then differences in our natural faculties are bound to affect how fully we are able to understand the world, or how virtuous each of us can become. Thus, here, too, Socrates' proof seems to be simply inadequate, and to leave out a decisive consideration about the way that virtue can be taught or learned.

But after or through presenting this proof, Socrates' conversation with Anytus comes to a close. For Anytus, having been infuriated by Socrates, either threatens or warns him about the kind of punishment that his inquiries might bring (94e3-95a1); while Socrates, for his part, coyly suggests that Anytus will cease to be angry, once he realizes what "speaking badly" truly means (95a2-6). But, while Anytus will continue to sit in anger by Meno's side (99e2) for the rest of the dialogue, Socrates simply ignores him for the remainder of the dialogue, and returns to his discussion with Meno about the students and teachers of virtue. In returning to that conversation, Socrates will first suggest that all of the political men - including, somewhat surprisingly, Meno himself (95c9-10) - are in contradiction about whether or not virtue is teachable (95a7-96a4). However, no one who is in contradiction about whether virtue can be taught could possibly be a teacher of virtue (96b2-7). But secondly, neither are the Sophists teachers of virtue - for all, at any rate, agree that they are worthless (96a6-b2). But, if neither the Sophists nor the gentlemen are teachers of virtue, there could be no teachers at all; and, accordingly, it follows that virtue is not something teachable (96b8-d3).

Now of course, this proof is problematic. For, first, no real argument is given that the Sophists are not teachers of virtue. And, secondly, no argument is given that *only* the gentlemen or the Sophists could be teachers of virtue. For it is not so clear that Socrates, for instance, falls within either of these classes, or is not a teacher of virtue. Perhaps, then, this "proof" was not even meant to be conclusive, but only to serve the function that it *does* in fact prove to serve - preparing the grounds for Socrates to offer Meno and Anytus with a radically different conception of how to understand the relation between virtue and knowledge. But this means, of course, that Socrates' grounds for abandoning his earlier claim that virtue is knowledge hardly prove to be adequate at all; and this means, in turn, that he may not have given us any solid reason to abandon that claim at all. (As for the the lines of Theognis that Socrates quotes here - 95c9-96a2 - it seems to me to be to difficult to say exactly what contradiction they reveal. But, perhaps the difficulty that Socrates has in mind is their shifting answer to the question of whether virtue is ultimately dependent on knowledge, or whether it is ultimately dependent on obedience. And this, in turn, might point back toward what we have already seen in Socrates' conversation with Anytus, along with the entire alternative ways of life that Socrates has held up for us before - 92e3-6 and 81a10-e2).

At this point, however, the examination of the students and teachers of virtue has reached its conclusion. It remains now only to see what last teaching about virtue Socrates might offer to Meno and Anytus, and how this final section might elaborate on or challenge his

previous assertion that virtue is a sort of knowledge. With that completed, however, our dialogue will have come to its conclusion.

IX. Virtue Is True Opinion (96d1 - 100c1)

Now in what came before, Socrates had concluded that there are no students or teachers of virtue; and, on this basis, he suggests that virtue cannot be teachable. Of course, this would seem to implicitly suggest, based on their earlier agreements (89d3-6; 87c1-3), that virtue is *not* a kind of knowledge. Accordingly, Socrates will now introduce an entirely new answer to the question of what virtue is. For Socrates will say that, in spite of what they had agreed to before, we do not need prudence in order to guide our lives correctly (96d4-97a8). For as Socrates now points out, anyone who correctly opines "the path to Larissa," or the way to any goal whatsoever, is no worse of a guide than someone who *knows* the way in question (97a9-97b10). But this means, then, that true opinion is no worse a guide for our action than knowledge itself; and Socrates suggests that this is just what had been left out of their earlier agreement that virtue is a sort of knowledge (97b11-97c2).

Now to begin with, I would suggest that Socrates' argument here is simply correct. For if somebody holds an opinion about how to reach a certain goal, and if that opinion is *correct*, then they would be no better at reaching the goal in question if their true opinion was transformed into knowledge. Of course, it does remain true that Socrates will call this argument into question in what follows. For Socrates will suggest, since our opinions are always in a state of constant flux, they can never provide a stable guide for our actions. Yet, I believe that this argument fails to actually prove that knowledge is of any

greater utility than true opinion for guiding our actions. For, first, even if our opinions are in a state of continual flux, that would in no way change the fact that whoever holds a correct opinion will act well, for so long as they hold the opinion in question (97c6-11). Hence, even if all true opinions *are* in a state of flux, that would say nothing about their value during the time in which they are held. But, second, I don't believe that it actually is the case that our opinions are in such a state of ceaseless flux, that they can provide no stable guidance for our actions. For after all, isn't it the case that we *do* possess certain wondrously stable opinions, which provide a foundation and a basis for all of our human actions - such, for instance, as our belief in the existence of an external world? For without this entirely blind and unyielding "trust," there would be no possibility for human action.

Now at this point, someone might disagree that the belief in question *is* an opinion, rather than knowledge. But, perhaps that alone is enough to make the importance of this section evident. For while Socrates had argued before that virtue is prudence (89a4-5), and that virtue is knowledge (87d7-11), he had not actually provided any argument that prudence *is* a kind of knowledge. Indeed, in his entire argument that virtue is a sort of knowledge 87d7-89a5, he had proved to be remarkably loose about virtue actually *is* - almost randomly switching between identifying it with "knowledge," "prudence," "intellect," and "good sense." But this means, of course, that he had ignored the question of whether prudence is *simply* knowledge, or whether the kind of cognition which guides our actions is truly understood as a kind of knowledge, or a kind of opinion, or a synthesis of the two.

Thus, Socrates' argument provides an important addition to what he had suggested before, and a clear pointer to the need to adequately determine the precise distinction between "knowledge" and "opinion." For of course, without being able to say precisely what knowledge *is*, or how it is distinguished from mere opinion, one can hardly be certain that virtue *is* knowledge, rather than opinion.

But if Socrates' explicit argument against the identification of true opinion with virtue has proven to be inadequate, perhaps a deeper or a stronger ground for rejecting that claim may be indicated more quietly in what came before. For to begin with, Socrates had suggested that the man who opines the path to Larissa, or the way toward any goal whatever, would be just as able to guide our affairs as the man who knows the path in question (97a10-97b9). But of course, this argument was entirely silent as to what place we *should* go - and whether the man with true opinion is as skilled at determining the goal as the man with knowledge. Likewise, a little later, Socrates will say that true opinion is no worse than knowledge at completing "the task belonging to each action" (98b8-10). But again, Socrates is silent as to whether it is true opinion or knowledge that actually determines what that "task" is, or that determines what kind of action we should undertake. Perhaps, then, if we put these indications together with the entire drama of the *Meno*, we may come to appreciate the deepest reason that true opinion is not *sufficient* as a guide for action - even if it might form a necessary and important part. For as we have already seen, the deepest source for Meno's perplexity or confusion about the character of virtue is his perplexity or confusion about the fundamental goal or goals of all human

action. In other words, by being unable to even see the *distinction* between the noble and the good, much less to determine the relation between them, Meno has proved unable to determine what virtue actually is. And in this way, Meno has shown that he is unable to hold a stable true opinion about virtue - however much he might hold stable true opinions about other aspects of his world. But I believe that with regard to a matter like virtue, at least, we are all bound to find ourselves in a condition such as this - if, at least, we have not come to discover and to *know* the true character of virtue itself. For without acquiring such knowledge, it will inevitably be the case that the "true opinions" which we rely on will prove to be little more than "recollections" of the authoritative views of our own time and place - authoritative views which, in their crudity and thoughtlessness, we have just seen powerfully dramatized in Anytus. And it is perhaps his awareness of this basic fact of our situation that will lead Socrates to launch the attack upon true opinion that he does. For after acknowledging that it he doesn't know whether *all* of our opinions are in flux, he will go on to add that he is *not* just conjecturing that knowledge is something different from correct opinion. For he will affirm that *this* distinction, at least, is one of the few things which he would truly claim to know (98b1-6). This concluding argument, then, with great simplicity and elegance, succeeds at affirming the depths of Socrates' awareness of the limits of his knowledge, while pointing to one item of critical importance within his limited understanding – the distinction between knowledge and *correct* opinion. For while Socrates had seemed to use "correct opinion" and "true opinion" almost interchangeably, his concluding remarks here suggest that it is especially "correct" opinion that was somehow the target of his earlier critiques. For however much

these authoritative and "correct" opinions might differ from one another, they are bound, I believe, to share certain features in common; and to be united, ultimately, in a lack of awareness of the true richness and complexity of our human situation. Thus, without first attempting to free ourselves from these "correct" opinions, and to direct ourselves towards that which our hearts most deeply desire, there is hardly any way to rely upon what we recognize to be our "true opinions," without succumbing to opinions that are deeply false and misguided. Hence, for this reason alone, then, it becomes of critical importance to strive to escape from what merely *seems* to be a "true opinion," and to actively and energetically strive in the pursuit of true and sufficient knowledge - however much it might also be the case, in the final analysis, that a certain more natural kind of true opinion forms an irreducible and essential part of our lives and of our actions.

But at this point, Socrates will go on to apply these considerations about the practical utility of true opinion to the basic or fundamental question of the dialogue. For, he will first remind Meno of what they have already agreed to at this point: **(1)** that, if virtue is knowledge, then it is teachable; **(2)** that, if it is teachable, it must have students and teachers; **(3)** that, it does *not* have students or teachers; **(4)** that, additionally, virtue must be good; **(5)** that, in order to be good, virtue must guide our actions; **(6)** and that, finally, only knowledge and true opinion are guides for our actions (98d7-99a6). But, Socrates next begins to draw the necessary conclusion: since virtue has no teachers or students, it cannot be teachable, and hence, it cannot be knowledge (99a7-8). Hence, of the two things that are good and advantageous, only one remains (99b1-3). But then, it must not

be knowledge that is a guide in political action, nor can it be through wisdom that Themistocles and the others used to guide the cities; but, rather, their virtue must have been a certain kind of "good opinion" (99b1-99c1). For, just as the soothsayers say many divine and inspired things, but know nothing of what they say, so too do the political men succeed at speaking about many great matters, while knowing nothing of what they are speaking of (99c1-99d6).

But after giving this final account of what virtue *is*, Socrates will also give an explicit answer to the question that Meno had presented him with at the very beginning of our dialogue. For virtue, Socrates now says, is a certain kind of correct opinion, unaccompanied by intellect or knowledge; which means, finally, that virtue comes to be present - in those in whom it *does* come to be present - by an act of divine dispensation (99e4-100a1). But, rather than simply present this final account of virtue to Meno and Anytus, Socrates will instead point, once again, to a very different conception of virtue. For in opposition to the divinely inspired statesmen, Socrates suggests that perhaps there might be a sort of political man who is able to make another skilled in politics as well (99e4-100a3). If such a man existed, Socrates suggests, he would almost be like a substance in comparison to shadows (100a3-100b1); for, he alone would be possessed of his senses - while the others would "fly and dart about," as mindless shades in the underworld.

It would seem, then, that Socrates is unwilling to seriously accept that those who are merely "inspired" are actually virtuous men. For Socrates here makes clear that, in his opinion, true virtues requires the presence of a kind of knowledge or understanding which most political men simply don't possess. For as we have already seen from his conversation with *one* such political man, the kind of education given by the gentlemen within the cities is hardly sufficient to confer a truly coherent or "wakeful" awareness of what virtue truly *is*. Our dialogue, then, must remain incomplete: for the explicit account of how virtue comes to be present which Socrates has here provided - as opposed to the *implicit* accounts of how we acquire knowledge which he has provided throughout the dialogue (74b3-77a5; 80d5-86c2) - is not a view which he seriously holds. Hence, without agreeing about what virtue is - as he and Meno clearly have not done - they can hardly agree about how virtue comes to be present, or about virtue's ultimate foundations (100b2-7).

But, at this point, Socrates realizes that it's now time for him to be off (100b8). As for Anytus, Socrates suggests that, if Meno can persuade him that virtue is true opinion, he will certainly be gentler. And finally, Socrates adds, if you *do* persuade him, and soothe his anger, there is a certain benefit that you will do the Athenians as well.

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