

A discussion on
socrates and the
menos paradox
philosophy essay



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Meno is a Socratic dialogue written by Plato. It is a dialogue between Socrates and Meno. It starts with Meno questioning Socrates about virtue, about how virtue can be taught. But Socrates humbly answered that he did not know what virtue means, or how virtue can be taught. Then, Socrates asked Meno to define virtue for him for he does not know anyone who knew what it meant. Meno attempted to define virtue at three different points: one, virtue varies from one's action and one's age. Socrates argued that there is one thing that makes virtue, a virtue. This leads to the second definition, Meno said that virtue is ruling over people justly. But Socrates illustrated the answer he wants to hear from Meno. This leads to Meno's last attempt to define virtue as the desire to acquire beautiful things. Meno acknowledges that justice and moderation are parts of virtue. But Socrates said that he does not want parts of what virtue is, he wants to know what virtue is as a whole. They came across a confusing argument that ended up becoming what is now called Meno's Paradox or "The Paradox of Inquiry".

In this discussion, the following questions will be addressed:

What is Meno's Paradox?

Was Socrates able to solve the Meno's Paradox?

How did he solve the Meno's Paradox?

Was the response to his solution good?

What is Meno's Paradox?

Meno's Paradox or Paradox of Inquiry states that " a man cannot inquire either about what he knows or about what he does not know – for he cannot inquire about what he knows, because he knows it, and in that case is in no need of inquiry; nor again can he inquire about what he does not know, since he does not know about what he is to inquire." This is stated by Socrates in their dialogue. This implies that: first, if you know what you are looking for, there is no need for inquiry, thus inquiry is unnecessary. Second, if you do not know what you are looking for, you cannot inquire, thus inquiry is impossible. Third and last, coming from the first and second statements, inquiry is either unnecessary or impossible.

To further explore the arguments of the paradox, evaluation of the arguments are necessary. The implicit statement will be: " Either you know what you're looking for or you don't know what you're looking for." From this premise arises a conflict on " you know what you are looking for" part. It can either mean:

You know the question that you want to answer, or

You know the answer to the question that you inquired about

Exploring the statements given: if (a) is true, then (b) is false. On the other hand, if (a) is false, then (b) is true. But there is no point where (a) and (b) are both true at the same time. This is because equivocation is present in the statements. Looking at things at a different perspective, ask yourself the question: " Is it possible for you to know what you do not know?". At one point, the answer can be no. The reason is that you cannot know and not

know something at the same time. On the other hand, the answer can also
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be yes. The reason for that is you can know the questions but do not know the answers to the question.

From these points, inquiry can be possible. For instance, you know the question that you want to answer, but you do not know the answer. You use different methods and techniques to probe into answering the question, thus, at some point; you may arrive to an answer (you previously don't know about) to the question. Therefore, from the statements that were delivered, the Meno's Paradox commits the fallacy of equivocation.

Was Socrates able to solve the Meno's Paradox?

Yes, I believe he was able to at least clarify the issue on Meno's Paradox. He proposed a method called Theory of Recollection.

How did he solve the Meno's Paradox?

The Theory of Recollection was proposed to clarify things about the Meno's Paradox. Socrates said that the soul is immortal. This is a fundamental belief from which the basis of theory rests. When we inquire or learn something, this mere belief of learning something new is only a process of recollecting something. Our souls have experiences them in the past lifetimes, thus, it is only recollecting the things. Socrates stated that, " Inquiry and learning are wholly recollection". He made an example about the conversation about the boy and the geometric inquiry. He argued that, given a question such as that of a square, the boy knew from recollection the things that he would answer. At first, the boy answered incorrectly. Socrates argued that, from his

recollection of the past experiences, he will learn, and then will be able to answer correctly. Given that, the boy previously did not know the answer.

Furthermore, Socrates believes that we have the answers from within our souls. Finding the answers from within our souls is a matter of recollecting them. We acknowledge that they are correct and we confront them.

From these points, Plato confronts the recollection process. It was assumed that there is a question, name it Q:

The boy did not know about Q at time t_0

The boy knows about Q at time t_1

The boy did not acquire any knowledge about Q at the time interval from t_0 to t_1

Plato believes that (b) and (c) are both correct because Socrates did not do any teachings to the boy. Socrates only asked questions. But, confusion arises, that when (b) and (c) are both correct, this implies that (a) is incorrect. This implies that the boy did know about Q at time t_0 because there was no knowledge that was acquired at time interval t_0 to t_1 .

This reasoning leads to the implications that recollection really exists. Plato thinks that there is something that is really innate. There is something within the soul that enabled recollection of information.

Was the response to his solution good?

I believe that Socrates' solution is good. It overcame the Meno's Paradox. It proved that Meno's Paradox can be conquered. However, the belief that the souls can be passed from one body to the next, from one lifetime to the next, seems hard to believe. It is impossible to prove that such immortal souls exist. And that, The Theory of Recollection exists also in the first place.