

The quest for virtue in plato's "meno"



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

A seemingly excited lad initiates Plato's Meno. Meno appears to have learned what virtue is and is eager to share this knowledge with the renowned Socrates. Thus, Meno tactically lays out calculated questions to Socrates: "... is virtue something that can be taught? Or does it come by practice? Or is it neither teaching nor practice that gives it to a man but natural aptitude or something else?"[1] Meno's enthusiasm to discuss virtue is immediately seen. Also, behind Meno's sincere, keen interest lies a somewhat arrogant desire to prove his knowledge to Socrates. But does Meno actually know that which he thinks he knows?

On the other hand, we see a skeptical Socrates. He is very wary of agreeing to certain opinions, regardless of how sensible they might appear to be. Socrates blames Gorgias for acclimating Meno to the habit of answering questions confidently, as is appropriate to the ones who know: " ὥσπερ εἰκοῦν τουῦ εἰδότας." [2] Socrates frequently uses various forms of the verb " οἶδα" in this part of the dialogue while referring to the knowledge of what virtue is. According to the Middle Liddell Lexicon, " εἰδόταῦν" is the perfect participle of " οἶδα"—translated in the present tense—meaning " the ones who know." Also, " οἶδα" is related to " oraw" which means " to see or look." [3] Hence, " οἶδα" tends to deal with that which is known by being seen, and not only by being thought. The process of " seeing" or " knowing" implied by using " oida" could be literal or metaphorical. In the figurative sense, the thing in question could be perceived by the mind's eye, reflected upon, and maybe eventually known. For this reason, " oida" could mean " to know by reflection or perception." In light of this figurative definition, perhaps, Socrates is referring to those " people who know"— τουῦ εἰδότας—as people who have

an insight into the being of something, in contrast to those who merely claim to know—even though they really do not know.

Socrates sarcastically tells Meno that Meno speaks as though he knows, thus distinguishing Meno from those who actually know. These people who merely claim to know a thing do not actually see the thing in its entirety. They only see the different parts of a thing and suppose that, by seeing the parts, they have seen the whole. This happens to be the case in Meno's analysis of virtue. Meno lists various examples of virtue but does not pinpoint what virtue is. Socrates, therefore, says to him: "...don't suppose that you can explain it[4] to anyone in terms of its parts, or by any similar type of explanation. Understand rather that the same question remains to be answered; you say this and that about virtue, but what is it?"[5] Meno is expected to stop evading the question of interest and to identify virtue wholly. Still, it looks as though Meno is struggling, and is doing the best he can.

It is important to note that Meno starts off this virtue inquiry in a very promising way. He does not appear thick-headed as is mostly thought of him. The atmosphere at the beginning of the dialogue is optimistic. The investigation of virtue did not seem difficult. Meno, with ease, makes his first attempt to tell what virtue is. In summary, according to Meno, a man of virtue must be capable of managing the affairs of the city and a woman of virtue must be a good housewife.[6] His second attempt is still just as enthusiastic: " it must be simply the capacity to govern men."[7] After Socrates refutes Meno's definition for the second time, Meno appears to lose some of his confidence. He begins to realize that he might not have

possessed the knowledge he thinks he has. Though Meno might not often be seen as a smart lad, he embodies the virtue of perseverance. This positive attitude of Meno towards understanding the 'being' of virtue is what keeps the dialogue going. It appears that Meno's difficulty in defining virtue is not due to stupidity but due to the natural tendency to jump to multiplicity while discussing virtue. It could also be that virtue is somewhat immaterial, such that it is not definable in the way a material thing may be.

In the course of their dialogue, Socrates and Meno come across several analogies, such as the analogy of the swarm of bees, the analogy of shapes, etc. At first, these analogies appear to be helpful in the quest for virtue. However, despite the apparent usefulness of these analogies, Meno finds it difficult to map these analogies appropriately onto virtue itself. That is, relating these analogies to virtue without generality. He knows how to approach virtue while discussing the analogies, but again goes into plurality while referring to virtue. What, then, makes a precise characterization of virtue more difficult than an analogical description? In other words, is virtue too broad for definition? It appears that analogies do not guarantee comprehension. However, analogies attempt to bring the reader closer to the meaning of a thing, and maybe, facilitate the understanding of that thing. Plato seems to be accentuating the limitations of analogical thinking in philosophy.

A thought-provoking alteration in vocabulary is seen as Socrates introduces "gignwskw" alongside "oida." Socrates asks Meno if somebody who does not know Meno would be able to describe him: "...ὅστις Μένωνα μὴ γιγνώσκει το παράπαν ὅστις ἐστίν, τοῦτον εἰδέναι εἶτε καλοῦ...."[8] Just like "οἶδα", "

gignwskw" also means "know." It is, therefore, difficult to flesh out the connotative difference between these two words. The Liddell and Scott Lexicon defines "gignwskw" with different words including observe, understand, discern, distinguish, recognize, etc. Considering the subtle distinction Socrates tries to make, however, it appears that "gignwskw" has to do with discernment in observation, whereas "oida" has to do with reflection on observation. Socrates tries to show that one must be able to observe—gignwskw—Meno's personality in order to know or see—οἶδα—his attributes. Thus, if someone is not able to distinguish Meno from some other male, that person would also not be able to characterize Meno.

Another interesting use of "gignwskw"—but this time alongside "oiomai"—occurs in section 77 of the dialogue. Meno makes his third attempt to spell out what virtue is. In the words of a poet, Meno defines virtue as "desiring fine things and being able to acquire them." [9] Socrates, however, rejects this definition by pointing out that everyone, even the most unvirtuous, desires good things. Socrates illustrates that people only desire something that is bad when they mistake the bad for the good. No one, clearly seeing that something is bad, will proceed to want it. Before reaching this conclusion, Socrates asks: "οἰόμενοι τὰ κακὰ ἀγαθὰ εἶναι, λέγειν, ἢ καὶ γιγνώσκοντες ὅτι κακὰ ἐστὶν ὁμῶς ἐπιθυμοῦσιν αὐτῶν;" This is translated in English as: "And would you say that the others suppose evils to be good, or do they still desire them although they recognize them as evil? [10] Here, a contrast is made between blunt supposition—oiomai—and actual recognition—gignwskw. Socrates emphasizes that supposing something to be in a certain way is not enough to make one knowledgeable. Further, "oiomai,"

according to the Liddell and Scott Lexicon is mainly translated as: “ think, suppose and believe.” In contrast to “ gignwskw,” mere thinking is distinct from actual understanding. Meno initially mistakes ‘ thinking’ for ‘ knowing’ in his quest for virtue. But this problem might not only be applicable to Meno. Is it easy to tell when one knows a thing from when one only supposes that thing? Is there something unique about true knowledge that marks it off from assumption and fallacy? Moreover, is there really anything like true knowledge?

Though Socrates and Meno do not finally spell out what virtue is in its entirety, their quest is not futile. Necessary clarifications are made about certain misconceptions. For instance, Socrates shows that not all people who assume they know are knowledgeable, it is seen that analogies are not always effective, Meno learns to discern what he believes—oiomai—from what he knows—gignwskw, etc. Notwithstanding, the challenge of distinguishing when we are ‘ gignwskw-ing’ from when we are ‘ oiomai-ing’ still stands. ‘ Knowing,’ thus, appears to involve a two-way process. Inasmuch as we run the risk of mistaking mere assumption for knowledge, we also run the risk of disparaging true knowledge in thinking that we do not know.

[1] All citations to Meno are to the translation by W. K. C Guthrie in The Completed Dialogues of Plato (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961 by section 70a) [2] 70c2 [3] Liddell and Scott Lexicon [4] Referring to virtue [5] 79d6- 79de1 [6] 71e [7] 73d1 [8] 71b5 [9] 77b3 [10] 77c 3-4