

Distinguishing whether virtue is knowledge



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Plato presents Socrates' views on the question whether virtue is knowledge and whether it can be taught in several dialogues, most notably in *Meno*. In this dialogue, Socrates makes many different arguments on the subject of virtue. These arguments include how virtue is defined and whether or not people can acquire it. He examines the ways that virtue can be attained; whether or not one is born being virtuous, whether virtue can be taught or it is another factor for virtues people have. In this essay I will focus on the question of whether virtue can be taught. Plato's answer is that virtue cannot be taught. In this essay I will suggest that Plato could have framed the questions a bit differently, which would have probably given him a different answer. In particular I will argue that Plato might have done better to ask whether virtue could be learned instead of asking whether virtue can be taught.

The *Meno* begins with Meno asking Socrates whether virtue can be taught. The argument then is drifted then to another question, what is knowledge. Then Meno proposed an interesting paradox: one can never find out anything new: either one knows it already, in which case there is no need to find it out, or else one does not, and in that case there is no means of recognizing it when found (Plato 1997, 80d-e.). In other words if one does not already know what *arête* (virtue) is, he can't even search for it, because if he does not know what it is already, then even h he searches, he won't be able to know when one has found it. Socrates suggests a way to solve this dilemma which is based on the Pythagorean view of the immortal soul. According to that notion, the soul, after the physical body dies, is reincarnated and thus never destroyed. If one can never acquire any new knowledge and at the same

time it is obvious we are always learning new things, then it is be concluded that learning must be a matter of recollection of past life experiences and knowledge. In other words there is no such thing as teaching, but only remembering.

In the Meno he demonstrated with a young slave boy who apparently didn't have any knowledge of geometry. By asking the young boy questions he managed to show that the boy had knowledge of certain mathematical theorems.

Meno asks again his original question, that is whether one can be taught virtue, or one gets virtue by nature or in some other way. Socrates consents to proceed but argues that they need a common ground due to the fact that neither of them can say at this point what virtue is. Then Meno is made agree that if virtue is not knowledge then it cannot be taught, and if a knowledge then it can be taught. He points out that one can teach something only if one knows what it is that he is teaching. Someone who does not know himself how to drive a car seems unlikely to be able to teach someone else how to. Socrates and Meno much agree that there is no one that truly knows what is meant by " virtue" and because of this reason cannot be taught.

According to Socrates, If virtue could be taught, we should be able to know not only those who teach it but also those who learn from them, which in truth we cannot easily do (Plato 1997, HYPERLINK " [http://www. perseus. tufts. edu/cgi-bin/ptext? lookup= plat.+meno+96c](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=plat.+meno+96c)" 96c). Socrates claims that teachers for horsemanship, medicine, etc. exist and everybody

recognizes these as genuine teachers, whereas people don't agree about whether the Sophists really do teach virtue. Socrates goes one to speak of Thucydides, who had two sons, neither of which was considered to be virtuous. However, it is said that Thucydides educated his children in many different disciplines, but it seems that he could not find a teacher of virtue even though he found teachers for other aspects of life he found valuable. He could not teach it himself either, even though he himself was known to be virtuous. Therefore it seems virtue cannot be a form of knowledge. In order for something to be knowledge, someone must be able to teach it to others. Socrates concludes that virtue cannot be taught and that there is no means or method by which virtue can be acquired. Virtue is simply "shown as coming to us, whenever it comes, by divine dispensation" (reference?)

In my view, if Plato had framed the questions somewhat differently, he might have gotten a different answer. That is Plato could have better asked whether virtue could be learned instead of asking whether virtue can be taught. What I mean to say is that asking whether one can be taught something entails that the relationship of a student and a teacher, whereas asking whether something can be learned implies only that there is a student (whose life experiences might be said to be a "teacher.") For example, to ask whether I was taught geometry is to ask whether a teacher taught me geometry. Whereas to ask whether I learned geometry is simply to ask whether I learned it, whether or not I was taught it by a geometry teacher or learned geometry myself either from (let's say) a book or by some other means.

Learning can come in various forms. In order to learn something, one does not require a teacher in the strict sense. For instance, learning can be achieved from studying people who have virtue and yet the latter may not be aware that they are studied. So a man may be learning virtue, and his “teachers” may be virtuous, even though the teachers might not even be alive. Another form of learning is experience. Virtue may be learned through personal experience. In this example, the “teacher” would be both life experiences and the reflective nature of the learner. There is still another form of learning. A man can learn, even if he cannot offer an explanation of how he learned or of what he exactly knows. For instance, after someone has been through a particular problem in his life, he can then detect that a relative of his is going through the same problem. And although he can know it, he cannot give an explanation of how he recognized it. Another example is that of the musicians or painters who have learned their craft and are able to perform well, but find it almost impossible to give an explanation of what they have learned.

So the question whether virtue can be taught is a much different, and narrower, than whether virtue can be learned. Plato is right in suggesting that virtue cannot be taught. I believe that we all know or have heard of people who recite “rules” of virtue (such as ‘be compassionate’ or be ‘honest’,) but find it impossible to put them into practice. Certainly in this sense virtue cannot be taught. As mentioned above, having the ability to be virtuous is like having the ability to be musical, which is to some extent instinctual. So, for example, it could be argued that knowing when, for

example, to offer help to a friend when he needs it, is a matter of instinct or judgment.

All of this means that although virtue may not be taught, this is not to say that virtue can't be learned. Plato suggests the notion that virtue is inborn. Certainly this is to some degree true. There are some people with an exceptional capacity for virtues like compassion, etc. since they were born. Yet others look as if they are born with little to no moral conscience, which seems to be necessary for virtue to exist. However what this means is just that the foundation of virtue is inborn, not that it can't be learned.

In the same way that we comprehend the fact that one can be preached how to be virtuous but fail to be virtuous in practice, the converse is also possible: people can refine the ways they understand virtue, they may become more virtuous by reflective practice, and their views of how to act in a virtuous way changes significantly as they grow up. In my view, if Plato put his questions in a different way (that is if he had asked whether virtue can be learned, instead of whether virtue can be taught) he might have found a much more affirmative answer.