



Socrates and Meno

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## THE *MENO*: DESIRING BAD THINGS AND GETTING THEM

Roslyn Weiss

PART 1 OF 2

Is there reason to believe that in his argument in *Meno* Socrates endorses the idea that no one does bad things, that is, things that one regards as harmful to oneself, willingly? Does Socrates hold here that those who do things that are in fact bad (harmful to themselves) do so believing those things to be good, that had they but recognized the harmfulness to themselves of these bad things they would have neither desired nor pursued them?

If this is Socrates' view, how odd it is, then, that this very passage characterizes as wretched those who *desire bad things believing them to be bad*. Whereas, to be sure, the *Meno* firmly maintains that no one wants to be wretched and that, therefore, all people want good—and not bad—things, it asserts, too, that there are those who desire the very things they regard as bad. It seems, then,

that what the *Meno* offers is the innovative idea that people can desire things they do not want. Although the *Meno* does not contain in so many words the paradox “no one does bad things willingly” (and certainly not the paradox “no one does *wrong* willingly”), it does preserve something of the paradox’s spirit: it contends that those who desire and successfully pursue things they recognize as harmful to themselves do not do what they want.

### What Is Virtue? Meno vs. Socrates

Meno is a young man, around twenty years old, from Thessaly, a place that, according to the *Crito*, is known for corruption. He is of aristocratic birth, a man of means, and quite handsome. The *Meno* takes note of his association with Aristippus, whom the dialogue identifies as his lover; with Gorgias, whose views he is depicted as adopting seemingly uncritically; and with Anytus, notorious for his participation—along with Meletus and Lycon—in prosecuting Socrates and seeking his execution.

The *Meno* opens abruptly, with Meno soliciting Socrates’ answer to a practical and pressing question: how does a person come to possess virtue? Socrates counters Meno’s practical question with a theoretical one: what is virtue? For Socrates, the question of what virtue is logically precedes the question of how one comes to have it.

Meno and Socrates disagree utterly and fundamentally on what virtue is. At the heart of their disagreement is not simply that Meno enumerates different virtues for men, women, slaves, children, and old men, but the implication of this enumeration—namely, that virtue is a function of *what* is done and not of the manner in which it is done. Whereas Meno specifies the roles that different types of people play, what Socrates wants to know is whether these various types play their respective roles justly and temperately.

The virtue of a man, Meno (or Meno quoting his teacher Gorgias) says, consists in taking part in the affairs of the city, helping friends and harming enemies, and protecting oneself; the virtue of a woman consists in managing the household well, looking after its contents, and being subject to one’s husband. But, Socrates wants to know, what is the virtue that is common to all its instances? What is the form that the various virtues share?

In trying to help Meno find, even among the disparate virtues he lists, some common ground, Socrates proposes that he consider the possibility that “managing well,” might be something that all those

who are virtuous share: the virtuous woman manages a household well, the virtuous man, a city. Interestingly, however, the aspect of “managing well” that Socrates regards as essential to virtue is not the “managing” but the “well,” not the activity performed but that it is performed temperately and justly. Indeed, by the “managing” element has completely dropped out of Socrates’ account of what the virtuous man and woman have in common, and Socrates speaks only of what both a man and a woman need “if they are going to be good.” Moreover, since children and old men who do no managing at all also need to be good, how could managing constitute virtue? As Socrates argues, children and old men need the very same qualities as men and women do if they are to be good: “all human beings are thus good in the same way”.

When Meno makes another attempt to identify what it is that is common to all instances of virtue, he is drawn, despite Socrates’ efforts, not to the “well” but to the “managing” in “managing well.” Thus, when he casts about for a single common virtue, what he looks for is a single form of managing. Disappointingly, however, he comes up not with a form of managing *more* inclusive than the previous one, but with one less so: the form of managing on which he settles is one that excludes not only children, slaves, and old men, as the previous one did, but women, too; he so narrows his definition of virtue that it applies to no one but men in their prime. Virtue is, Meno says, ruling others.

Is Meno’s failing in this early part of the dialogue intellectual or moral? Is it that he does not know how to formulate an adequate definition or that he is unable to appreciate the “moral” dimension of virtue, its being tied to such things as justice and temperance? There can be no doubt that Meno is no whiz at definition. Instead of a single virtue common to all kinds of virtue, he cites the various kinds; he cannot see as Socrates can that his “ruling others” definition is technically inferior to the earlier definition of “managing well”; and he fails to articulate why health and strength are the same for everyone but virtue is not. Nevertheless, his more disturbing and more serious defect is a moral one: he fails to appreciate the relevance of justice, temperance, and the other virtues or parts of virtue to virtue. Indeed, no matter how many times Socrates points out that virtue requires justice and temperance, Meno’s definitions of virtue continue to omit them.

Were Meno’s problem primarily intellectual or logical rather than moral, he would surely have had just as much trouble recognizing that health and strength are the same in men and women as he does in recognizing that virtue is. The reason he has considerably more

trouble in the latter case is, no doubt, because what he really believes is that only men have real virtue, and that real virtue, manly virtue, the virtue he craves, has little or nothing in common with what women and children and slaves and old men have that goes by the same name. When Socrates insists, then, that virtue, like health and strength, *is* the same for everyone, Socrates makes more than just a logical point. In effect, he democratizes *arete*. If virtue is something that can mark the excellence of an old man, a child, a slave, and a woman, no less than a man in his prime, then virtue cannot be tied to one's position in the world. On the contrary, since virtue is the same for everyone, since it has to do only with how "well" one does whatever it is one does, then virtue belongs to anyone who comports himself justly and temperately.

That Socrates singles out justice and temperance is no accident. These are the undistinguished virtues that the aristocratic Meno would never on his own associate with the virtue to which he aspires. Meno repeatedly pulls virtue in the direction of managing and ruling, and Socrates stubbornly pulls it back in the direction of justice and temperance. So, even when Meno obtusely proposes "ruling men" as that virtue which is common to all, Socrates continues to drive his moral point home: "Shall we not add to that justly and not unjustly?". Meno concurs, asserting that "justice is virtue". Justice, however, as Meno will soon agree, is but one virtue among many.

### What Is a Good Definition?

Since Meno is having difficulty producing an adequate definition of virtue, Socrates provides him with a definition of shape (*sche-ma*) to use as a model. Meno, it is clear, prides himself on his proficiency in geometry. Since Empedocles, who is himself a student of Pythagoras's, is Meno's teacher, it is likely that Meno has learned from Empedocles not only physics but Pythagorean geometry as well.

The definition of shape that Socrates offers is as follows. Shape is the only thing, among the things that are, that always accompanies color. Note that Socrates proposes this definition not as the unique or even as an especially good definition of shape, but rather as one that suffices for his present purposes: he introduces it with the words "Let shape *be for us*". All Socrates needs is a definition on which Meno can pattern his definition of virtue: "For," says Socrates, "I would certainly be satisfied if you spoke similarly to me about virtue". Thus, unless Meno finds fault with the definition, it will stand.

Alas, Meno does find fault with the definition. His immediate response to Socrates' definition of shape is to call it, simple or simpleminded. What does that mean? When asked by Socrates to say what it means, Meno responds—probably reproducing an eristic quibble he had encountered somewhere, perhaps through his association with Gorgias—that the definition is useless to “someone” who does not know color. But who, after all, is unfamiliar with color? Socrates had tried to offer a straightforward, nontechnical definition that could serve as a model for defining virtue. Why does Meno reject Socrates' definition out of hand?

Note that Meno's complaint that the definition Socrates proposes will fail for someone who does not know color is but his second thought on the matter, uttered in an attempt to assign content and substance to his first, more visceral, objection. The very first thing that Meno says is that Socrates' definition is, simple or simpleminded. Unlike the gloss of it that follows, which implies that for Meno the problem with Socrates' definition is that it might prove too difficult or too obscure for “someone,” Meno's immediate objection, implies, on the contrary, that the fault of the definition lies in its containing nothing esoteric or technical or sophisticated—indeed, nothing that the man in the street would not understand, nothing, that is, to distinguish the educated and cultured man from the boor. We may assume that Meno's first response to Socrates' definition—and not his subsequent commentary on it—betrays his true feelings: what he really finds repugnant is just how plain, how unpretentious, the definition is; what is distasteful to him is not that the definition *does* use terms that someone might not understand, but that it does not.

Meno, as Socrates quickly realizes, prefers the high-flown. The definition Meno favors is, therefore, the one that contains the more technical term “effluences”. We note that Meno expresses with respect to “effluences” no worry such as the one he expressed with respect to “color”; yet, is it not far more likely that someone might fail to know “effluences” than that someone might fail to know “color”? Moreover, Meno is surprisingly unperturbed by the fact that if, as in his preferred definition, color is defined as an effluence from shapes, the definition might be useless to someone who does not know shape. By offering a definition of color that commits the same offense as the initial definition of shape, Socrates is able to expose the disingenuousness and shallowness of Meno's objection to the definition of shape: whereas Meno peremptorily rejects the simpleminded definition of shape with its humble reference to color, he enthusiastically endorses the *tragike* definition of

color with its fancy, technical, effluences-talk. Meno, we see, is not really bothered by the use of unknown terms; what offends him is the use of known terms, that is, of terms known to everyone. Meno does not like Socrates' definition because Meno is a snob. Socrates, however, clearly does like the original definition of shape that he offered, for it has one merit that surely counts for much in his eyes: it is, as he says, true.

Meno's response to Socrates' proposed definition of shape represents a turning point in the dialogue, the point at which Socrates sours on his interlocutor. Once Meno objects to Socrates' definition of shape as the only thing that always accompanies color, Socrates sees Meno for "the clever and disputatious (*eristikos*) and contentious sort" that he—and not just an anonymous "someone"—is. From now on, Socrates can only *pretend* that he and Meno are friends: "But if people were willing to converse with one another as friends, like you and I now". Socrates clearly finds Meno's reaction to his unpretentious and easily understood definition both needlessly obstructive and deplorably arrogant."

We may note that Socrates' second definition of shape—"the limit of a solid"—is more acceptable to Meno than the first one was: its terms are at least technical, that is, they are not "simple" ones that everyone can understand. They do not, however, begin to approach in degree of ostentation a term like "effluences" and, for that reason, Meno's reception of the second definition of shape is tepid as compared with the enthusiastic reception he will soon accord to the definition of color: "But, I would stay, Socrates," Meno says with respect to the "effluences" definition alone, "if you were to give me many answers like this". Not only does the arcane terminology of the definition of color greatly please Meno, but he has yet another cause for being pleased. Socrates' very act of providing a definition of color represents his yielding to Meno's authority: "Yes, gratify me," Meno commands—and Socrates complies. Meno is, as Socrates says, the handsome, spoiled bully who dares to issue commands to an old man, exploiting his weakness for good looks. Socrates complies with Meno's order not only by formulating the desired definition but by doing so "in the style of Gorgias, in the way that you would most easily follow".

10. It might be thought that the notion that shape is the only thing that always accompanies color is not even true, let alone an adequate definition of shape. Yet Socrates' definition has merit, at least when confined to perceptible shape and color: if one sees something colored, one sees something shaped in some way.

Which definition is Socrates' favorite? There should be no doubt

that Socrates prefers the first one, his definition of shape as the only thing that always accompanies color: (1) if he prefers some other, one must explain why this is the one he proposes; indeed, he is prepared to have this definition stand unless Meno objects to it; (2) he says it is true; (3) it is intended to serve as the model for an acceptable definition of virtue; and (4) it follows a pattern Socrates had established earlier in seeking with Meno a definition of virtue, a pattern according to which what accompanies an activity determines its character: an activity is sure to be virtuous if done justly and temperately or, in other words, if accompanied by justice and temperance. When Socrates says, then, at “The other one was better,” he surely refers to the original definition.

The features of this definition that recommend it to Socrates—besides that it is true—are, first, that it uses familiar terms, terms that are not needlessly technical and grandiose; and second, that, unlike the definition of color that, as Socrates points out, works equally well for sound, smell, and many other things of that sort, Socrates’ first definition of shape identifies shape uniquely: shape is the *only* thing that always accompanies color. (Meno, ever careless of such things, misses, in his paraphrase of Socrates’ definition of shape, the uniqueness of shape’s role vis-a-vis color: he omits the word “only” [*monon*].) We shall see in the next section how these admirable features of the first definition of shape, when reproduced in the dialogue’s last definition of virtue, go quite a long way toward providing an adequate definition for virtue.

A long way, but certainly not the whole way—not even in the matter of shape. Socrates’ favored definition of shape, despite exhibiting the three strengths mentioned, fails to get to the essence, to the *ousia*, of what shape is; at most, it picks out a trait that shape alone always instantiates. It seeks to understand shape not as it is in itself but as it relates to something else: shape is, after all, on Socrates’ “definition,” no more than the only thing for which the presence of color is a sufficient condition.

Defining shape has been a simpler task by far for Socrates than has defining virtue. In no time at all Socrates produces two acceptable definitions of shape; he could, perhaps, produce others as well.

*We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.*

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