



Socrates and Meno

THE *MENO*: DESIRING BAD THINGS AND GETTING THEM

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PART 2 OF 2

What Is Virtue? Trying Again

Now that Socrates has given Meno a definition of which he approves, it is Meno's turn, in accordance with his and Socrates' agreement, to venture once more to define virtue.

It is only now that Socrates introduces his paradox into the discussion. In the early part of the dialogue, Socrates' aim was to deflect Meno's attention away from the activity or the role that to him in itself embodies virtue—ultimately, that of a man who rules other men—and to help him focus instead on the indispensability to virtue of *how* an activity or role is executed: an activity or role will not count as virtue unless it is executed “well,” that is, justly and temperately. Having provided a model on which a suitable defini-

tion of virtue might be constructed, Socrates has reason to hope that Meno will define virtue in terms of the justice and temperance that he has agreed are its constant companions. Since Meno's final definition makes no mention of justice and temperance but instead posits a connection between virtue and something like social class, Socrates must not only once again insist on the indispensability of justice, temperance, and, now, also piety to virtue, but he must work, too, to reduce Meno to the size of every man.

Meno's new definition exhibits, not surprisingly, the very arrogance that just emerged in his reaction to Socrates' first definition of shape. Interestingly, however, it also reflects in certain respects the perhaps unwitting progress Meno has made in defining—for this latest definition neither breaks virtue into pieces nor uses unknown or technical terms; moreover, it picks out virtue uniquely. Nevertheless, this final definition is as morally bankrupt as all the others. Meno draws his new definition of virtue from an unnamed poet, for whom virtue is “to rejoice in fine things and to have power.” In Meno's paraphrase, the poet's definition becomes: “Virtue is to desire fine things (*kala*) and to have the power to acquire them”.

According to Meno's definition, there are then two marks that distinguish the man of virtue, two criteria by which one man may be judged superior to his fellow: (1) a penchant for the fine, and (2) power. Socrates considers each of these in turn—first discounting the former, and then proceeding to discount the latter. Let us begin by considering Socrates' response to Meno's first proposed indicator of virtue, “desiring fine things.”

Socrates is occupied with this first part of Meno's new definition. It is his aim in this stretch of text to level all people ‘with respect to what they want—note his concluding words: “and in this respect [in respect of what people want], no one is better than another” thereby discrediting the foolish and groundless elitism manifest in the first component of Meno's latest definition.

In order to accomplish his goal of having all people turn out to be the same with respect to their wants, Socrates employs two strategic moves: first, he reduces fine things (*kala*) to good things (*agatha*) and, second, he replaces desiring (*epithumein*) with wanting (*boulesthai*). In order to understand Socrates' strategy, it is best first to try to determine how he understands Meno's definition: what does Meno mean by proposing that those with virtue desire fine things? Meno's intention is to elevate those with refined tastes above those whose pedestrian tastes mark them as hopelessly ordi-

nary. Socrates' immediate substitution of *agatha* for *kala*—"Do you say that the one who desires fine things desires good things?"—is the first step toward eliminating such specious class distinctions: "good things" lacks the highbrow air of "fine things." Meno, unaware of the implications of this substitution, readily assents to it; he now finds himself committed to the proposition that some people, those who lack virtue, desire bad things (*kaka*).

From Socrates' perspective, the claim that people desire bad things is a most problematic one. He presses Meno further: do those who desire bad things think those things are good or do they desire bad things recognizing them as bad? Meno insists that some people, probably those he disdains as crude or vulgar, desire bad things recognizing them as bad. Meno is no doubt thinking not of *kaka*, bad things, but of *aischra*, base or crass things, things that are the opposites not of *agatha*, good things, but of his original *kala*, fine things. Thus, what Meno must mean is that even though the masses recognize their tastes as lowbrow, they persist in desiring what they desire: crab cakes, not caviar. But Socrates goes on: do such people desire to possess these things? And if they do, can they be thinking that bad things benefit their possessors or do they recognize that bad things harm their possessors? Meno, no doubt still thinking of *aischra* rather than of *kaka*, declares that some people (presumably, those without "class") desire to possess bad things (by which he means vulgar or crass or base things), thinking they are beneficial: what harm is there in crab cakes? As long as Meno has not yet, in his own mind, made the transition from the pair fine/crass to the pair good/bad, he sees no absurdity in the claim that some people desire to possess bad things thinking they are beneficial. But Socrates forces the point: if someone thinks bad things are beneficial, must he not fail to recognize that they are bad? In other words, whereas it is possible to say about *aischra* that they are beneficial, it is not possible to say that about *kaka*: no one who understands what "bad things" means can think that bad things are beneficial. Once Socrates gets Meno to see that if a thing is thought bad, it cannot, then, be thought beneficial, Meno must concede that those who desire to possess bad things thinking they are beneficial do not think the things they desire are bad: insofar as they think these things beneficial they think them good, and whereas they may desire things that are in fact bad, they desire them—since they are ignorant of these things' badness—as good. Hence, those who desire bad things thinking they are beneficial actually desire (to possess) good things.

Thus far Socrates has considered but the first of two sets of people identified by Meno as desiring bad things: those who believe that

the bad things they desire are beneficial. And what he has shown with respect to this set is that they do not desire bad things after all: although the things they desire may be in fact bad, they desire (to possess) good things. The second set of people who desire bad things consists, according to Meno, of those who desire bad things recognizing them as harmful. Socrates contends—and Meno agrees—that there is no one who wants (*bouletai*) to be harmed because there is no one who wants (*bouletai*) to be wretched and unfortunate. Since bad things harm their possessor, there can be no one who wants (*bouletai*) bad things. Socrates concludes, therefore, that those who desire bad things thinking them harmful actually do not want (since no one wants) bad things.

If we attend carefully (as Meno does not) to this Socratic argument, we note that, although Socrates denies that anyone can *want* (*boulestbai*) bad things, he does not deny that someone can desire (*epithumein*) them. One *can*, then, as far as Socrates is concerned, desire bad things, even recognizing them as bad; what one cannot do is *want* them. Desire, brute appetitive craving (*epithumein*), for bad things is able to persist even in the face of one's recognition that the objects of one's desire can cause one harm; desire can remain unaffected by judgment. It is only wanting, *boulestbai*, whose objects are restricted to things one judges to be good or beneficial. Since Socrates allows in the *Meno* that an agent might *desire* (and pursue) bad things even while judging them harmful, he ought not be charged, as he so often is, with over-intellectualizing human choice, of making it always a function of one's rational determination of one's own good.

There is considerable scholarly disagreement concerning how careful Socrates is to preserve fine distinctions between terms close in meaning—in this case, between *epithumein* and *boulesthai*. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates derides Prodicus for being obsessively fond of fine distinctions, making reference at *Prot.* 34038—bi specifically to his distinction between *epithumein* and *boulesthai*. And in the *Lysis*, Socrates unmistakably uses *boulesis* indistinguishably from *epithumia*. He says of Lysis's parents, who love their son, that they surely would want (*boulount*) or desire (*epithumoi*) that he be happy, and therefore would presumably allow him to do whatever he wants (*ha boulei*) or whatever he desires (*hon an epithumeis*). Yet in the *Charmides*, Socrates appears to distinguish sharply between the two terms, saying fairly explicitly that the objects of *epithumein* are pleasures but the objects of *boulesthai*, goods. The truth of the matter, though perhaps it is an unsettling truth, is that Socrates is at times careless and at times fastidious about such distinctions. It depends on what the situation calls for.

In our *Meno* passage, it is clear that Socrates recognizes a distinction between *epithumein* and *boulesthai*: he shifts quite deliberately from *epithumein* to *boulesthai* in order to make the claim that no people want what they recognize as harmful, a claim that would hardly be plausible if it spoke instead of what people *desire*. And although it may seem paradoxical to say that one may desire but cannot want what one judges to be bad in the sense of harmful, it is actually a point well taken: despite one's recognition that certain things are harmful, one may still be drawn to those things; yet, insofar as no one wants to suffer and be wretched, there is one sense in which no one really "wants" the bad things that one finds oneself powerfully attracted to or craving. To be wretched, then, Socrates concludes (in a "playful inversion" of Meno's definition of virtue), is to desire, *epithumein*, bad things (which, as has been argued, remains possible), and to get them. The desire is itself an important source of wretchedness because it is desire that impels one to pursue even things that one recognizes as being bad for oneself.

Meno, of course, fails to notice the shift from *epithumein* to *boulesthai*. He thinks, therefore, that by agreeing that "no one wants bad things", he has in effect admitted defeat: "You probably speak truly, Socrates". Once it becomes clear that Meno has missed the distinction between "desire" and "want," Socrates can, without fear of detection, replace the "desire" in Meno's original definition with "want"—just as he earlier replaced "fine things" (*kala*) with "good things" (*agatha*)—so that Meno's definition now reads: "Virtue is to *want good things* and to have the power to get them". Since, however, it has been shown that everyone wants good things—those who desire bad things thinking them beneficial desire good things, for they do not know that bad things are bad if they think them beneficial; and those who *desire* bad things thinking them harmful nevertheless do not *want* them, since no one wishes to be harmed, wretched, and unfortunate—it follows that no person can be said to be superior to others with respect to his wants. Yet, since Socrates does not make the claim that all men *desire* good things, things they judge to be good or beneficial, the possibility remains open that men might be distinguished from one another in terms of their respective desires, that is, in terms of the kinds of things that attract them and in terms of how able they are to resist the harmful things that attract them. The *Meno* strongly suggests that a man's desires can mark him as more wretched than his fellow; for the wretched are identified as being not only those who get (things they regard as) bad things but also as those who desire them. Thus, even if with respect to their wants all men are equal, it need not be so with respect to their desires.

It is noteworthy that Socrates does not argue here, as one would perhaps expect him to, that what sets the virtuous apart is that they know what is worthy of pursuit and so pursue what is *in fact* good. Since Socrates' urgent concern here is to eliminate or at least greatly to reduce Meno's groundless sense of his own superiority, what is important is that he prevent Meno from seeing in what men want the distinguishing mark of virtue: with respect to what they want, he argues, all men are the same.

At the same time, however, that Socrates levels all people with respect to their wants, he implies something that is strikingly at odds with the view that is usually attributed to him, namely, the view that all people act on their wants, that is, on their assessment of what is best for them. Sharpies lodges the typical charge: "However, Socrates might justly be criticised, here as in the *Protagoras*, for simply assuming that human behaviour is too rational; it may be illogical to want something while knowing that it is bad for oneself, but that it is illogical does not mean it cannot happen." What is true of the *Protagoras*, however, is hardly true of the *Meno*. For whereas it is true that the *Protagoras* portrays men as rational calculators of pleasure and pain who will always choose the most pleasure and the least pain, in the *Meno* people are portrayed as desiring and choosing the bad things that they do not want, things that they fully expect will harm them. These wretched people display the classic symptoms of incontinent and irrational action: despite not wanting the things they judge to be bad (after all, no one does), they nevertheless do desire them and act, on that desire, to acquire them. The case of cigarette smoking, which is so frequently invoked to discredit the Socratic denial of incontinence, in fact fits perfectly the model of wretchedness as set forth in the *Meno*. It could certainly be said, on the *Meno's* model, that a person is wretched if he (1) recognizes smoking's harmful effects, (2) does not want to be harmed, (3) does not, therefore, want to smoke, but nevertheless (4) desires to smoke, and (j) consequently smokes. Of these five features of the wretched person, none but (3) sounds at all odd. And if (3) does sound a bit odd it is only because while *epithumein* is permitted to take as objects the vast array of things to which people are drawn, the objects of *boulesthai*, here taken in its restrictive technical sense, can only be things judged beneficial.

Let us turn now, as Socrates does, to the second element in Meno's definition, namely, the power to get what one wants. If virtue, as has been shown, cannot be found in men's wants, might it be found in their power to get what they want? (It is likely that Gorgias taught Meno or at least reinforced for him the importance of pow-

er. And, if so, what are the good things that men want? Socrates proposes as the likely candidates for “good things” such things as health and wealth. Meno says, however, that what he calls good things is the acquiring both of gold and silver and of political honors and offices; indeed, the good things are all and only such things as these. What is Socrates to think but that these things—gold, silver, political honors and offices—are the *kala*, the finer things, that Meno had in mind earlier when he defined virtue as desiring fine things? Indeed, what else is Socrates to think but that it is on account of his desire for such things that Meno thinks himself superior to the common run of men? We may note the derisive sarcasm in Socrates’ proclamation: “Well, so procuring gold and silver is virtue, as Meno, the hereditary guest friend of the great king of Persia, says”. Has it come to this?

The struggle between Meno and Socrates over the definition of virtue now resumes, with Meno and Socrates assuming once again the now familiar stances they had assumed at the dialogue’s beginning. Meno sees virtue as a type of activity; Socrates thinks virtue is a matter of how activities are done. Is it, Socrates asks, the acquisition itself of gold and silver that is virtue, or does it matter whether the acquisition is accomplished justly and piously? Meno, not one to spurn conventional virtue outright, concedes to Socrates that it does matter, that if the acquisition is accomplished unjustly, it ceases to be virtue and becomes badness. But Socrates goes further—much further. He secures Meno’s endorsement not only of the idea that if an act of acquisition is performed without justice, temperance, and piety it cannot be virtue, but of the far more radical notion that, on those occasions when acquisition cannot be accomplished without injustice, then nonacquisition (or poverty), *aporia*, is virtue. This concession on Meno’s part represents Socrates’ crowning achievement. He has moved Meno from associating virtue with political rule and wealth to the recognition that under certain circumstances it is the forgoing of wealth that will count as virtue. He has moved Meno from locating virtue in what one does to locating it in how one does *whatever* one does: “So, the acquisition of good things will no more be virtue than their nonacquisition, but, as it seems, *whatever* comes to be with justice is virtue and whatever comes to be without all such things is badness (*kakia*)”. And he has moved virtue itself closer to the particular virtues of justice, temperance, and piety that are its parts. Rather than see these virtues as potential obstacles to the attainment of virtue as political dominance and wealth, Meno now sees them as the *sine qua non* of *arete*: he says—even if he does not quite believe—that there can be no *arete* in the *absence* of the *aretai*. Socrates can only be delighted that Meno has now defined virtue in terms of its

parts. For once Meno acknowledges that it is specifically the cooperative virtues of justice, temperance, and piety that are the necessary conditions for virtue, he is constrained to regard virtue as something that is, in the final analysis, not the province of the elite but something accessible to all.


We may note that the *Meno* passage, with which we have just dealt, actually tends to undermine rather than to support the stock characterization of Socrates as either a psychological or an ethical egoist. (A psychological egoist affirms that it is psychologically impossible for one to act in opposition to what one determines to be in one's own self-interest; an ethical egoist affirms that one *ought* to pursue, that it is morally right to pursue, only what one determines to be in one's own self-interest.) For in this passage Meno is helped to see that the acquisition of good things, that is, of things one judges to be good for oneself, is not virtue—that, indeed, on those occasions when acquisition of good things requires that one act unjustly, intemperately, or impiously, then it is the nonacquisition of good things rather than their acquisition that is virtue. To generalize: according to this passage, if one judges *x* to be good for oneself, that is, to be beneficial and happiness-producing for oneself, but one recognizes that *x* cannot be attained without injustice, intemperance, or impiety, then, if one is virtuous, one will forgo *x*, choosing just, temperate, or pious conduct over the acquisition of *x*. This passage implies both that one *can*, psychologically speaking, make choices that oppose one's determination that *x* is good/best for one, and that, on occasion, one *ought*, morally speaking, to make such choices. There is, let us note, no trace or hint in our passage of the idea that justice, temperance, and piety are in one's best interest. On the contrary, this passage recognizes that virtuous people are prepared to relinquish the things they regard as profitable whenever there is no just way to attain them. They can do so; they ought to do so; and this is what they do in fact do.”

Socrates takes in the *Meno*, then, a position diametrically opposed to the one he appears to endorse in the *Protagoras*. For in the *Protagoras* it is agreed that there is nothing good, nothing noble, other than pleasure. Under this condition, how indeed could one choose what is right over what one thinks most advantageous or most pleasant; how, that is, could one be virtuous? The superior skill at calculation that passes for virtue in the *Protagoras* is replaced in the *Meno* by the only real virtue, the kind that reflects strength of character.

The *Meno* also opposes the *Protagoras*'s stance regarding those

who choose what is bad. From the point of view of the *Protagoras*, since everyone desires—and wants—what is most pleasant, the wretched are those who miscalculate. The *Meno* repudiates such foolishness. Through its distinction between *epithumein* and *boul-esthai* it keeps all men the same with respect to what they want without absurdly making them all the same with respect to their desires. In the *Meno*, the wretched are those who desire what they themselves recognize as harmful.

Socrates sees two ways in which a person might act in opposition to what he wants, that is, in opposition to his judgment of what is most advantageous to himself. A person might, on the one hand, yield to his desires for bad things even in the face of his recognition that they are bad for him (such a person is wretched: he desires bad things and gets them); or a person might, on the other hand, neglect the course that he regards as serving his interests for the sake of justice, temperance, and piety, that is, for the sake of the noble and right. At either end of the spectrum, then, whether to satisfy what is most base in oneself or what is most noble, one may act against what one determines is to one's advantage. In both cases, of course, one indeed chooses something that appeals to one—to one's appetites in the one case, to one's dignity in the other; otherwise, one would not choose it. But in neither case does one simply and automatically and necessarily choose what one judges to be in one's best interest: in the first case, one does instead what one "desires"; in the second, one chooses instead what is just, temperate, or pious. In the *Meno* Socrates makes the case that needs to be made against Meno. In order to undercut Meno's elitism Socrates elicits Meno's assent to the proposition that all people want the same things, that is, the things they think are beneficial. Socrates need not argue against Meno, as he does against Polus in the *Gorgias*, that unless people get what is truly in their interest they have not done what they want. Polus, whose deepest admiration is reserved for tyrants who ruthlessly pursue their own ends, has to be shown that no matter what they achieve, tyrants, insofar as they mistake their true advantage, do not do what they want. As for Meno, who is no champion of injustice despite his fondness for gold, silver, and power, and whose main flaw lies in his aristocratic sense of superiority, what he needs to be shown is only that all people want the same thing. But in neither the *Gorgias* nor the *Meno* is there any suggestion that all men of necessity pursue their advantage as they see it, so that those who do injustice in order to advance their interest could not have done otherwise. On the contrary, Socrates teaches Polus that *when* men pursue their advantage as they see it, but lack the intelligence to discern correctly wherein their true advantage lies, they fail to do what they want. And Soc-

rates teaches Meno that what makes some people different from, and superior to, others is not the wealth and power they amass, and certainly not their wish to acquire such things, but their ability to forgo wealth and power when these cannot be obtained without resorting to injustice and intemperance. Virtue, then, is not the province of powerful men. All people can be virtuous simply by being just and temperate. Whereas justice and temperance promise no other rewards—not money, fame, or power—they do absolutely guarantee virtue. As shape is the only thing that is always present where there is color, so virtue is the only thing that is always present wherever justice and temperance are found. 

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