

The *Meno* in Secondary School Philosophy

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I. Plato's *Meno* as Form and as Content of Secondary School Courses in Philosophy

ROBERT S. BRUMBAUGH

Yale University

Perhaps, when Booth Tarkington wrote *Seventeen*, it would have been inappropriate to burden high school students with philosophy. His seventeen-year-old hero, Willie Baxter, had less grip on reality, and fewer ideas about civil disobedience or government responsibility, than my daughter Joanna had attained by the age of ten. But the current cultural scene no longer permits the cushioned extended infancy of Tarkington's day. Our high school students are faced by philosophical questions; and the issue is, therefore, not "whether they will philosophize," but "how well."

One such question, urgently asked, is: "Is there justification for the education our high schools are offering?" Is the enterprise intended to increase the earning power of its products? To offer tools for effective citizenship? To contribute, somehow, to the happiness and excellence of its students? And is it realizing its intention? For example, should "values" be taught? If so, *whose* values? Is the school system actually doing a good educational job? What criteria would be useful in judging this?

At some point relatively early in a secondary school encounter with philosophy, it seems to me that—given certain conditions—raising these very questions can inject a sense of reality into the discussion. The "certain conditions" are those that make philosophy possible as shared inquiry. It may be that, at a later stage, philosophy as an ordered discipline can engage our student's attention and admiration. But it can't do this until there is some motivation to admire it, some sense of wonder, and some sense of concrete relevance.

Recently, when I was fielding questions after a lecture on ancient Greek philosophy to a group of high school students, it occurred to me that an excellent piece of reading for secondary school philosophers would be Plato's *Meno*, provided the dialogue were rescued from philosophers and given what

I take to be its intended moral and interpretation. “The” moral in fact is multiple. In the first place, the argument seems to show that “values” (or “virtues”) cannot be taught either by instruction or example. (In fact, it suggests, correctly, that *nothing* can be taught unless the student wants to learn it.) But in the second place, the dialogue shows that virtue can be taught by the shared inquiry of the Socratic method, if that sharing is real. For, as I will show, Meno becomes better through his talk with Socrates. The fact that (as we, and Plato’s earlier readers, know from history) Meno goes on to cowardice, treachery, and to his execution is *not* the result of an incorrigibly wicked nature, but rather the result of a bad education.

In connection with this second moral, it is worth pointing out that today, we tend to reject theories of hereditary vice—though there are some defenders of the view that ignorance is hereditary—and find ourselves left with the awkward question of how we can account for the difference between “good” people and “bad.” I would myself prefer to open this discussion with the *Meno* as case study, since an inexperienced group will wander off into a fog of vagueness if we ask them to attack in their full generality the questions involved in the issue of education for human betterment.

With this in mind, I want to turn to the notion of the Platonic dialogue as a model for doing introductory philosophy, a model which manages to combine discipline with engagement through its interaction of argument with dramatic form. This is a prologue to a new analysis of the *Meno* as Platonic dialogue. For unless I establish my own optimistic way of seeing this imagined encounter between Meno and Socrates, I will be starting my students out confronting a proof that education and human excellence are totally irrelevant. And from that, it would follow that the schools are perpetrating a fraud in claiming to make anyone “better.” (In a recent legal case where a graduate sued an Eastern university because it had not carried out its promise to make him “a liberally educated man,” my sympathies are obviously with the plaintiff, though he was laughed out of court.)

When I spoke of “rescuing the dialogue from scholars,” this may have seemed to advocate a kidnapping rather than a true rescue. What I had in mind was reading this dialogue as a philosophic drama, in which the reader can identify himself or herself with Meno—and perhaps with Gorgias, Anytus, and Socrates as well. What I do not have in mind is reading this as though it were merely a didactic lecture, a scholarly curiosity, or, at the other extreme, an item of mindless literary entertainment. Every detail of the text, every nuance in the exchange of compliments or criticisms, is important. And these require the best efforts of the scholar. The ideal situation would be to have a new edition of the *Meno* annotated by scholars and specifically designed for secondary school teachers and their students.

First, I will try to define philosophy written in the Platonic dialogue form, with an analysis of the *Meno* as type specimen. After that I will turn to the implications of the analysis for pedagogical theory, and the suitability of this dialogue as reading matter for relatively new students of philosophy. Some of you will recognize some definitions and analyses as material I have

defended on other occasions. I do not intend this partial repetition to imply that I endorse Lewis Carroll's Bellman Definition of Truth, that "What I tell you three times is true . . ." I would, though, assert the converse, that "Some of what is true is what I tell you three times."

In general, scholars dealing with Platonic dialogues show a remarkable talent for saying one thing and doing another. Everyone says that Plato intends to bring together in a new unity a dramatic form and a pattern of philosophical investigation. But having said that, almost everyone sets aside the "literary ornament" in order to concentrate on something called the "philosophical argument." This amounts to imposing a radically non-Platonic conception of philosophy on Plato, and of mis-reading even the "argument" dimension, since the action offers relevant premises as well. There are exceptions to this schizoid approach, but not enough.

Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, gives a brief account of the experiments of tragic poets looking for the "proper form" of tragedy, until it finally was stabilized with Sophocles. The same sort of history of a search for the right literary form can be written for Greek philosophy. The philosophers before Plato were experimenting with forms of communication which they hoped would be suitable to express new ideas. The list of forms they tried runs from diagram through epigram, epic and lyric, dry almanac and live conversation. The experimenters include Heraclitus, with a cryptic Oracular style; Parmenides, with a logical proof set in the frame of a philosophic journey; Empedocles, with his cosmological poetry and sharp detailed imagery; Hippias the Sophist, claiming the reference work as his invention; finally, Socrates, with engaged shared inquiry as his chosen tool. It would require a great deal of time and of aesthetic sensitivity, to do justice to the directions and limits which each of these choices of form set to the development of philosophical ideas. For my present purpose, however, I can jump to the end of the story, to the stabilization of the literary form of philosophy into two families, Platonic and Aristotelian.

The Platonic form of philosophic writing derives from the tradition of Greek drama and epic, conversation and debate. It is, in its initial form, an attempt to bring the reader into a shared inquiry by including him in a Socratic conversation which is carefully left incomplete. In the background here is the Socratic idea of philosophy as engaged adventure, with debate, search, interaction of characters, change of fortune.

The Aristotelian form of philosophic writing (and philosophic lecturing) derives rather from the tradition of science, medicine, and mathematics than from the epic and dramatic literary tradition. It expresses itself in long, coherent treatises by an impersonal omniscient author; it aims at order, scope, and objectivity. The idiosyncracies of the character of the lecturer, the behavior of his particular audiences, the excitement of risk in shared inquiry, are not relevant in this form, and are eliminated so far as possible.

The second form can be conveniently labelled the "treatise" as distinguished from the "dialogue." Now, the treatise has certain merits that the dramatic dialogue does not. It permits *literal* statements, *universal* in the

sense that they hold for any audience or individual. It permits a special sort of objective precision in testing the validity and coherence of philosophic propositions. But it does these things by assuming that it is humanly possible and philosophically desirable to ascend to those heights of pure mind, disengaged from the eccentricities, individualities, and adventures of the concrete world we live in. A sign of this may be that the *ad hominem* form of argument seems a fallacy to the typical Aristotelian, while for the Platonist, it is one of his most effective dialectical tools.

I must confess that I am a Platonist, who sees no virtue in pretending that philosophic arguments can exist in a vacuum. Not even mathematics can quite do that, as Whitehead, one of the great modern mathematicians, indicated when he ended his lecture on "Immortality" by saying of mathematics that "The exactness is a fake." I will, if I must choose, take relevance and vividness at the price of thin exactness.

Since my sympathies lie with the dialogue as proper philosophic form, but since it is a form often misunderstood, I will offer two case studies to show the interaction of drama and discussion that typify this form. I will look at one early Socratic dialogue, the *Lysis*; then at the *Meno*.

The *Lysis* is a dialogue whose cast consists of Socrates, two young boys (about eleven years old), and two older boys (about eighteen). The theme is friendship; what are friends?, and how are friends made? Two parts of the author's purpose are easily seen: Plato is defending Socrates against the charge of being a bad influence on the young, and he is trying to carry on the Socratic "mission of inquiry". Of the four boys in the cast, each pair of the same age contrasts in temperament between one who is aggressive (Ctesippus, Menexenus) and one who is gentle (Hippothales, Lysis). Hippothales would very much like to be loved by Lysis, but Lysis dislikes him. Socrates, offering a demonstration of the way to talk to people in order to make them friendly, directs the talk to this very topic: the cause and definition of friendship. Several common sense notions are tried out: among them, the Sophist idea that friendship is only a kind of utilitarian pursuit of advantage. Readers of Dale Carnegie's modern directions for winning friends and influencing people will recognize this idea in a modern incarnation. But young men are not satisfied with this notion. Socrates suggests that perhaps love and hate are cosmic forces, and that we like and dislike other persons by a kind of law of nature. That notion had already been suggested by some cosmologists: It is tempting, because if it were true, we might build a science of *philology* geared to love of persons rather than of language. Recent popular science experimenting with blind dating arranged by computer is a vague echo of this idea. And if our likes and dislikes are "by nature" and "lawlike" we can see the explanation of behavior leading off to social science more generally. This view is—rather too quickly—set aside, and it is not clear how far the rejection is a result of idealism, how far of existentialism. But the whole group of characters have by now become such close friends that the boys' tutors have to break up the party by force.

Clearly, in the *Lysis*, Socrates has been a good educational influence.

Equally clearly, he has left his readers with a puzzle: as far as the argument of this inquiry goes, there is no way in which we can win friends, since, in fact, we don't even know what it is we are trying to win. Yet, so far as the development of the *drama* goes, we have seen Socrates using shared inquiry as a technique for making participants friends. Very well, but the reader with a logical mind remains annoyed that the scientific, "cosmological" accounts of friendship as natural affinity are not explored. (They are transmuted into ethical affinities instead.) But this reader should notice that in the cast, we have characters who are like and unlike in respect to age, temperament, and wisdom; that in the beginning, the pattern of their attitudes rules out the possibility that any simple "like to like" or "opposites attract" natural law governs friendship; yet that, at the end, old and young, quiet and aggressive, have all become friends through the catalytic effect of Socrates.

We see the relevance of cast and character to argument even more clearly in the *Meno*. Meno, rushing up to Socrates, presumably with his stylus and tablet at the ready, opens the conversation with his demand: "Let me have the word, Socrates. Can virtue be taught by precept, or by example, or is it a natural gift?" Socrates does not know but is willing to inquire. We learn immediately after his opening question that Meno has been a student of the Sophist, Gorgias, a master of "teaching by precept"; if indeed "Sophistication" can make men better, Meno should be an ideal example to offer in proof.

Later in the dialogue, we will encounter Anytus, the Athenian statesman who was later to engineer the execution of Socrates; he appears as spokesman for the view that virtue is taught "by example."

After Socrates has refused to offer a didactic answer to Meno's question, it takes constant persuasion by Socrates to get Meno to go on with the investigation. Meno, presently, explains that he thinks Socrates is the worst teacher he has ever seen! When Socrates has led a Slave Boy to see a geometrical proof by way of asking him questions, Meno readily agrees that Socrates has "taught him nothing." But even if Socrates *had* been a teacher of geometry, this would not help decide the case for the teachability of virtue. When Socrates, Meno, and Anytus cannot find any teachers of virtue, they conclude, reluctantly, that virtue cannot be knowledge, since if it were, it could be taught. And if anyone *could* teach it, he, being virtuous, *would* teach it. Meno becomes a better and better respondent, more interested in the argument, throughout the second part of the dialogue; but ends up puzzled by its negative conclusion. So does the reader; particularly the reader who has picked up Plato's plot, since Meno himself becomes more virtuous as the dialogue goes on. There is, then, at least one person who *can* teach virtue, Socrates; his teaching, however, is neither by didactic precept nor by example, but by shared inquiry. Since this falls outside the disjunctive notion Meno holds about possible kinds of "teaching," it remains true for *his* sense of the term that virtue can't be "taught." The correct reading of the dialogue gives a result that is much more constructive, optimistic, and a better defense of Socrates than commentators have usually seen. But the result depends on

taking argument and action together, and noticing how Meno changes. Even the best commentators—Klein, Sternfeld and Zyskind, Bluck—miss the full impact of this dramatic development. Unfortunately for us all, one encounter with Socrates' teaching is not enough, by itself, to effect a *permanent* improvement in character; and Meno, for all his talent and his Socratic dialogue, leaves Athens continuing a star-crossed career. (One reason why Plato may have chosen him is that this career has been described so bitterly by Xenophon in the *Anabasis*. If indeed Vice were a matter of "nature," so that some men were incorrigible, Meno would have been Xenophon's prize candidate as an example!)

The dialogue form, as we go from the *Lysis* to the *Meno*, becomes more extended; not only are questions posed, but alternatives are marked out and explored in greater length. Thus, the dialogues of this second group, still "inconclusive," are more nearly "complete"; they end just after, rather than just before, what would be the "middle" of an Aristotelian structured argument. Myth and mathematics play important auxiliary roles; probably because Plato has been to Italy and Sicily. The author's intention also seems to change: we are being shown, now, that Socrates was not "just another Sophist," as Aristophanes and the Athenian public had thought. In a confrontation of life-styles, each with an incarnation in its spokesman, Plato plots collisions of Socrates and the relativistic teachers of success: Gorgias (and later the latter's student, Meno); Protagoras; Prodicus; Hippias; the "strong man" Callicles. There is also a confrontation of models of "knowledge": Socrates defends "insight into form" against a "storage and retrieval of information" idea. Plato's world of forms includes objective value forms, and so is in exact opposition to the Sophistic reduction of values to arbitrary artifacts, established by convention. Yet, as we have seen, the questions raised in these Socratic dialogues still go unanswered in the abstract argument, however clearly the drama itself offers a commentary and suggests a resolution.

I would like to analyze the changes in Meno's character in more detail. The reason is that the idea that there is a development of character other than a simple realization of ignorance has not been generally accepted. Even where it is tangentially recognized, the recognition is not accompanied by the further insight that such a development exactly reverses the ostensibly pessimistic conclusion of the dialogue. So I will trace the asides and attitudes that Plato introduces to underscore the changes in character as his plot proceeds.

Meno's initial attitude is one of impetuosity (70A), and unwillingness to share an inquiry (at 75B, he tells Socrates to answer his question for himself). There is also a criticism of Meno for his laziness and lack of temperance (75C; compare 76A, where Meno is shameless, lazy and tyrannical, though beautiful). When, by 78D, Meno manages to define virtue in terms of wealth (this is an error in wisdom, temperance, and justice all at once), Socrates addresses him as "hereditary friend of the Great King." The reader who knows his Xenophon will surely appreciate that reminder. At 80A, Meno finally explodes; Socrates is like an electric eel; and he is the worst teacher

Meno has met. In the same irascible and unreasonable mood, Meno comes up at 80D with his “trick argument,” to trap Socrates and justify ending their discussion. (“How can we inquire into something neither of us knows about?”). The Myth of reminiscence and the experiment with the Slave Boy mark the beginning of a change. For at 81E-82A, Meno does set a verbal trap when he asks Socrates to “teach me that teaching is impossible.” But challenged, he says: “I didn’t mean to set a trap; if *in any way* you can explain, please do.” (This reminds us that at 82E and 85D, Meno agrees that Socrates is “not teaching,” an argument crucial to my analysis of the *logic* of the dialogue though it is not important in tracing the dramatic character development.) At 86B, both in matters of immortality and the value of inquiry, Meno is at last persuaded; “Somehow, I like what you are saying.” At 86C, we find that Meno has not changed entirely; he insists (intemperately, as Socrates points out) in going back to *his* question (can virtue be taught) rather than Socrates’ prior question of what virtue is. This lapse does not show that Meno is indocile, incorrigible, or unimproved; the context still establishes the contrary. The hypothetical dialectic of 87A-90B finds Meno a perfect respondent, polite, intelligent, eager to follow out the reasoning. And after the interlude with Anytus—Meno is friend of his family—at 99E Meno sides with Socrates against Anytus. At 100B, we have Meno’s final speech: “That is finely put, Socrates.” This is almost word-for-word the final remark of the talented Young Socrates after he has followed the technical dialectic of the Eleatic Stranger in Plato’s *Statesman*.

If wisdom comes in part from removing a false conceit that one knows; if courage reveals itself in willingness to share the rigors of inquiry or hunt; and if justice shows itself in a fair sharing of chances to ask, criticize, bring in examples; then Meno improves greatly in all three. The improvement is, as we know, temporary; but nevertheless, it is there, woven firmly into the texture of the dialogue. It has to be there, for without it two crucial points would be lost. The first point is the way in which Socrates, unlike either Gorgias or Anytus, leads young men to virtue even though he doesn’t “teach” it. The second point is that the temporary change is needed to prove that Plato sees Meno’s star-crossed career as a genuine tragedy, not merely the consequence of an *inborn vicious nature* (which rather seems to be Xenophon’s interpretation; and compare Klein’s notion of Meno as an archetype of incorrigible *amathia*.)

Now, finally, we return to our contemporary secondary school. I hope we have returned realizing that Plato grasped something of infinite importance to educational theory. This is that neither precept nor example will really teach *anything* to a student who regards the whole show as a spectator sport, though the one tactic may *inform* and the other may *condition* him. I know of no later educational theorist who doesn’t concede the point, but I know of very few who don’t forget it as soon as they have made the concession. (B.F. Skinner, for example, *assumes* that his human learners are “motivated,” though he cannot guarantee this by water deprivation as he would if they were scholar pigeons.) There is no harm in discussing this

Platonic insight with our secondary school class, starting the discussion with what happens in the *Meno*. Is Socrates just kidding when he says he can't teach? Doesn't he teach the Slave Boy? Does anything in this story show why Anytus thought Socrates was a "bad influence" on young Athenians? How much did Meno learn from his past association with the famous Gorgias? What do you think about the claim that virtue can't be taught, even though perhaps geometry can?

This last question suggests that an entire second round of discussion could center on the modern phrasing of the *Meno* thesis: that "values can't be taught." If they could be, surely there would be eager teachers of them; but can we find any institution or person with a skill at making people better, and better able to evaluate things, in the way we can find teachers of geometry or automobile repair? How far, in fact, do admonition, punishment, memorization, or admirable example work as moral educational techniques? Here we might ask a question that Socrates raises but doesn't follow far: is there some mistake in the "model" or "thought picture" that many of us have when we talk about "teaching values?" If, for example, we think of values as jewels in a case; or conditioned responses; or commands given by authorities; how do these models relate to the search for someone who can "teach virtue?" If we can't learn values in school, mightn't we give up that whole attempt, and concentrate on learning facts and skills? (This seems exactly what Gorgias would have recommended to a School Board).

One advantage of using the *Meno* to focus discussion of these topics is that it makes it easier to retain distance, generality, and objectivity in the discussion than it would be if we began with modern examples. A third moment would, ideally, be introduced by the student's discovery that Meno actually does learn something. He becomes more polite; wiser (insofar as he is now aware of his own ignorance, and modest about it); more temperate; more willing to go ahead with the argument; willing to side with Socrates against Anytus; and so on. So perhaps the conclusion that seemed to follow from the argument isn't the whole story. For example, how does that conclusion change if we add the premise that "There exists at least one teacher of virtue" to the argument? What implications does this have for our study of philosophy?

However it is done, we must move on toward the discussion of a great Socratic discovery: that some values are intrinsic, others instrumental, and most people make their classifications of which in *exactly the wrong way*. And we can add Plato's footnote: this may not be so true of the way people *say* they value things, but watch what they *do*.

My present discussion, since I couldn't imitate Stephen Leacock's hero who "jumped on his horse and rode off in all directions at the same time," has had to omit many dimensions, and important ones, that I would have liked to explore. For example, a great deal can be said about the legitimacy and precision of the classical scholarship involved in the reading of Platonic texts. But perhaps an equal importance attaches to the contexts—the metaphysical and religious superstructure which the *Meno* presupposes. We might invoke

the “theory of forms” to justify the use of geometry as a “paradigm case” (even in a strong contemporary sense of “paradigm”) of learning. Or we could look more closely at the myth, Socrates’ account of the “stories told by wise and holy men and also women,” to see how much of a role the religious background plays. Another thing I haven’t had time to explore is the actual student reaction to this assignment—the digressions, the problem of getting my students to see themselves in the roles of Meno, or the more docile Slave, or other pupils offstage in Plato’s drama. Nor have I projected the probable stimulated reaction of some parents when their children tell them they have learned why “values can’t be taught” by lectures or punishments! My hope, in this case, would be cold martinis rather than chilled hemlock for a reward, and with luck, further Socratic conversation.

II. Comments on Brumbaugh’s *Meno* for Secondary Schools

MALCOLM BROWN

Brooklyn College

I agree strongly with Brumbaugh’s point that the *Meno* and other dialogues need “rescuing” from the one-sided scholarship that goes after the message as if it were entirely isolable from the dramatic setting, which Plato so deliberately constructs for it. Yet I think there is such a thing as going to extremes in the opposite way. Coming down too hard on the “eccentricities” of Plato’s dramatic figures, we may do an injury to what we all want, including Plato, namely the kind of universality of message that encourages the reader to “identify himself or herself with Meno—and perhaps with Gorgias, or Anytus”. Even so central an eccentricity as Meno’s being a boy, not a girl, ought not be stressed if it gets in the way of such identifications. Jacob Klein, whom Brumbaugh commends, seems to me to go to excess in the direction of overemphasizing the dramatic aspect of the dialogue. W.K.C. Guthrie (e.g., *History of Greek Philosophy III*, Ch. 10) does this kind of necessary rescuing with admirable restraint.