Essay Question 1

## Why does Socrates in the Meno reject Meno's 1st attempted definition of virtue? Are his criticisms successful?

Socrates presents several arguments rejecting Meno’s first attempted definition of virtue. Ultimately his argumentation is sucessful, yet it would be wrong to consider it a combative victory over Meno as I argue that Meno’s first attempt was both; indispensable to, and embodied by, the conclusion of the dialouge.

Meno is surprised to hear at the opening of the dialouge that Socrates claims not know what virtue is, nor to have met anyone who does. How odd - perhaps this a rhetorical question to spark debate? I doubt it, Socrates seems sincere in his assertions. Seeing as Socrates has certainly met many a virtuous person who acts in intentional ways, I suspect that such an understanding of virtue is not sufficient to please him. So, what exactly is Socrates after?

Plato defines knowledge as a justified true belief, and it would seem to me that Socrates is targeting something closer to this standard of reasoning. A real, in depth understanding of the nature of virtue, with its constituent parts and explanatory causes, not just a surface level definition. For example, if you were to define fire in terms of its impression on the senses of heat and light, while you do have an understanding that allows you interact with this concept in the world, you have failed to grasp the true nature of such a phenomenon. This is what Socrates is saying; we can lack true knowledge of virtue and still have reliably good intuitions about it.

It is not clear that Meno appreciates this subtlety and engages Socrates with his first attempt in defining virute. He does so in a piecewise manner, offering a man’s virtue as “being able to manage public affairs and thereby help his friends and harm his enemies…”, then defines the virtue of a woman in term of domestic mastery, continuing that virute for a child or slave would be similarly different again.

Socrates objects, arguing by analogy to suggest that we cannot define a general concept in terms of kinds. He presents Meno with the idea of a swarm of bees, suggesting that each bee may differ in many respects, but all are equally beelike. So too for virtue; there must be a higher single nature connecting these constituent parts.

When Meno is unpersuaded by this, Socrates elaborates with similar analogies to a person’s health, size and strength, arguing that these qualities have the same form independent of who bears them. A child’s strength will be of the same nature as a mans and the size of any object can be measured using a single, unifying scale. This is the ‘unitarian assumption’, the idea that if we apply the same label to a collection of different things, there must be some unitary properties they all share that can be alluded to – in the way a trunk connects all branches of a tree.

Although he can’t quite put his finger on it, Meno is uncomfortable with this logic of analogy, maintaining; “somehow this case [of virtue] is a bit different to the others.” The analogy is certainly a most easily made in the case of bees where there are clear group membership boundaries. But take Socrates example of health, Is good health really the same for old and the young, for men and for woman, for office worker and manual labourer? Clearly men need not worry about their gynaecological health. Not to mention the complexities of internal contradiction, what is the health of an athlete who smokes? Like health, virute is complex and multifaceted – there is no one virtue. If the unitarian assumption is to hold for virtue its process of discovery cannot be as simple as for size, strength or bees.

This question strikes to the core of how we use concepts and categories to organise knowledge of the world. At the very beginning of the dialogue Socrates claims we cannot know anything about a subject unless we know a tight definition. Even if this is of the ‘justified true belief’ standard, it is not a helpful claim to make. Practically, we regularly start with examples and then generate a definition by testing examples against it. Children know trees are living creates without any formalised definition.

So, while I think Socrates unitarian criticisms are justified, I think a modern reading would highlight his neglect of the process by which we obtain such a definition. The very idea of virtue is in some sense an emergent property that was socially constructed out of an archetype of moral behaviour. We don’t experience it directly, you come across virtue in an aproximate embodied way. You meet a woman who acts with justice, moderation, or courage and ascribe the label of virtue to them. You tell of a great king who has many virtuous qualities. Socrates says this can’t be virture itself; and he’s not wrong, but I think it’s also fair to understand that the concept of virtue was built from the ground up as a narrative, then encapsulated in language to display in clarity. We can’t skip straight to a unitarian definition without first explicitly constructing behavioural archetypes as scaffolding.

Would it not be reasonable then, when defining health, to say; health for a labourer is to work skilfully without pain and injury, good health for a mother might be not to die in labour, etc. Only then can you begin to look for the subset of commonalities displayed across the stories we tell about agents constituting good health. Then futher refine these qualities until you have the highest possible resolution description – the explanatory unitarian definition of the type Socrates is after. I would argue that; not only is Meno’s first definition a good starting point, but also necessary; teasing out the subset of virtuos characteristics that can only be understood in context of character.

The dialouge continues in exactly this way. When Meno attempts to amalgamate virtue into a single quality; “to be able to rule over men”, Socrates criticises him using examples from Menos original definition, proclaiming that since a slave who rules over a master is no longer a slave, his definition is not universal. Socrates continues suggesting that the virute of all requires good management; specifically alluding to the qualities of justice and moderation. Socrates rhetorically questions whether justice is virtue or *a* virture – inquiring as to what combination of atributes would be sufficient to fully encapsulate virtue. In answer to this, Aristotle, a student of Plato, defined his classical theory of a concept as being “represented by a list of features which are both jointly nessasary and jointly sufficient". Following, that if the qualities listed are not sufficient in all cases the definition does not hold. So, the question becomes is it possible to construct a satisfactory feature-list for virtue. If possible, this becomes a strong argument for overhauling Menos piecewise definition, as if there can be found general terms which encapsulate virute. This would constitute a clearer, more generalisable definition.

Meno then challenges Socrates to define some terms himself. After settling on a definition for shape; Meno presses Socrates to define colour; Socrates thinks this challenge is being used as a diversion tactic from the issue at hand and calls out Meno for an overly competitive style of argument, suggesting he’s turning the discussion in to a contest. Socrates eloquently presents Meno with the more collaborative ideals of dialogue; “if we are among friends – as you and I are – and if we want to pursue the question, we must answer in a manner more conducive to agreeable, productive discussion.” Socrates says solutions to philosophical questions are reached by patient and co-operative dialouge. This resonates with Meno and they eventually agree upon a final definition of virute as being the “desire for good things and the ability to get them”. – completing the process of dialouge.

Why was such a long winded dialouge was necessary? Plato could have easily reached his conclusions with far less back and forth – perhaps none at all. But when you take seriously this idea of philosophy as an unfolding dialouge, things click into place. That is to say; you could not make the same claims at the beginning of the dialouge as at the end because the logic of the conclusions would be unfounded. I would go as far to say the process of dialouge itself fundamental to how humanity goes about discovering and defining such terms. In this sense, Meno’s first definition may be incomplete but by no means redundant.

Putting Meno’s first attempted definition in perspective; although Socrates criticism left his definition was somewhat superseded, to focus on this is to miss the point of dialouge. The important relationship is not one of domination, but of foundational necessity to the process. And although more generalisable, the final definition is far less actionable on the individual level. A person aspiring to be more virtuos might ask Socrates exactly how they should go about being so. A good answer might look rather a lot like where Meno started.