

Meno

Phil 234

January 26, 2018

Overview

The dialog begins with (M)eno, a Thessalian, asking (S)ocrates whether virtue is teachable (70a1-4). M is politically ambitious, young, handsome, well-born, and visiting Athens with Anytus, one of S's prosecutors, as a host. M will embark on a controversial military and political career that ends with his young death by the Persian king.

'Virtue' translates 'arete', but translation of this Greek word is difficult. The difficulty is best introduced by analogy. There is a difference between the excellent and mediocre boxer, the excellent and mediocre ice-skater, the excellent and mediocre university student, etc. The Greeks believed that just as you could excel in some specific activity, you could excel at being human. They thought there was a difference between being an excellent human and being a mediocre human. 'Arete' is here used to describe the excellence of excellent human beings. 'Virtue' was its standard translation, but that was complicated when 'virtue' becomes restricted to set of moral qualities that included chastity, temperance, etc.

Virtue was important to the Greeks. They dedicated their time and resources to attain it, and they placed a very high value on its teachability. They cared not merely to live, but to become and be excellent humans. Famous poets, speakers, politicians, generals, etc., claimed they could teach virtue; students and their families paid hefty sums for the education. So to ask whether virtue is teachable, as M asks S, is a very controversial question. Answering 'no' is risky. Three options for the acquisition of virtue are discussed:

1. You are born with it.
2. You acquire it through practicing it.
3. You acquire it through education, i.e., one person teaching that knowledge to you.

Which one will Socrates ultimately argue for?

As well as answering that question, our primary interest is M's challenge that inquiry into the nature of things is impossible. S's response will teach us two things: 1) S's epistemology, most especially the difference between knowledge and belief (opinion), and 2) how S believes that he can inquire into, and help others inquire into, the nature of those things he does not yet know.