Overview

The dialog begins with (M)eno, a Thessalian, asking (S)crates 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 it's an imperfect translation. There is a difference between the excellent and mediocre boxer, the excellent and mediocre ice-skater, the excellent and mediocre university student, etc. 'Arete' is used to describe whatever is needed to excel at something. The arete of a knife is being sharp, since that's what a knife needs to excell at being a knife. The arete of a boxer is different, and so too is the arete of an ice-skater. But calling sharpness the virtue of a knife is admittedly forced. We usually use 'virtue' to describe moral qualities like chastity, temperance, etc.

For our purposes, we need only note that S and M share the widely held Greek belief that there is a difference between excellent and medicores humans. They believe that just as you can excel in some specific activity, so too you can excel at being human, and thus they believe there is also the arete of excellent human beings. This arete is what allows excellent human beings excell. The Greeks wanted to become and be excellent humans. They dedicated their time and resources to attain virtue, and they placed a very high value on its teachability. Famous poets, speakers, politicians, generals, etc., claimed they could teach it; students and their families paid hefty sums in the hope those teachers made good on those promises. So to ask whether virtue is teachable, as M asks S, is a very controversial question. Answering 'no' is risky; if it is not teacheable, then you cannot teach someone to be an excellent human.

Unsurprisingly, S claims he doesn't know the answer to M's question because he, S, does not know what virtue is (71b1–8). 'What X is' is a complicated phrase. S is interested in the *ti esti* of virtue. This phrase is translated as 'essence' and 'nature' in English. The English word is itself derived from the Latin 'essentia', which was an artificial word formed by the Latin 'esse' introduced especially to comment on our Greek phrase. So, S claims we must first answer the question 'what is the essence of virtue?' before we can determine whether virtue is teachable. An answer to such a question is called a Socratic Definition. S, therefore, is here assuming the following principle:

The priority of definition: In order to know what qualities X possesses, you must know the essence of X, i.e., you must know the Socratic definition of X.

Since S does not know the essence of virtue, he does not know its qualities, including whether it is teachable. The dialog proceeds by discussing various candidate definitions of virtue. During this initial discussion, S again illustrates the requirements for a Socratic definition. He does so in two ways. First, he asks M to define virtue and illustrates the requirements by failure. Second, he gives a few successful definitions of color. This tells M how he should define virtue. We again learn that an adequate definition must be a) general, b) univocal, and c) explanatory.

The dialog takes a tangent, which is our focus. M argues that inquiry into the nature of things is impossible. S's response will teach us about S's epistemology, about how he believes that he can inquire into, and help others inquire into, the nature of those things that he does not yet know.

The paradox of inquiry

Let us assume that the priority of definition is true. If you do not know the essence of X, it follow that you do not know any of X's qualities. Thus, if you do not know the essence of X, you are in a complete blank regarding X. M grows frustrated with S's demands for a definition and argues that we cannot inquire into the essence of X if we are in a complete blank regarding X (80d5-80e5).

P1. If you know [the essence of] X already, you cannot inquire into [the essence of] X.

- When people begin searching for something, they do not yet possess what they are searching for. So if they did already possess something, it makes no sense to search for it.

P2. If you do not know [the essence of] X, you cannot inquire into [the essence of] X.

(a) If you do not know *at all* what X is, then you cannot start to inquire into the essence of X...you will not know how to start even looking.

(b) If you do not know *at all* what X is, and if you stumble upon X, you will not know that what you stumbled upon is X, e.g., if you do not know who M is, but stumble upon him, then you will not know that the person you stumbled upon is M.

P3. Either you know [the essence of] X or you do not know [the essence of] X...(implicit premise)

C. You cannot inquire into [the essence of] X.

Impasse! S claimed that we cannot find out whether virtue is teachable until we know the essence of virtue. But M argues that we cannot inquire into the essence of virtue if we know nothing at all about it. It seems we must know at least something about virtue before we can investigate its essence. But it also seems that we cannot know anything about virtue without already knowing its essence.

The Theory of Recollection (TR)

To solve the dilemma, S must feasibly reject at least one of the premises. We will see that he rejects P2; he will argue that we can inquire into X even when we do not know the essence of X. His core claim is that "what we call learning is recollecting things we already know (81b3–c9)." This is called *The Theory of Recollection (TR)* because it claims that learning is merely recollecting what one used to know but subsequently forgot.

In order to defend TR, S engages with one of M's slaves. S attemps to show that the child can learn something he doesn't know by recollecting it, i.e., he learns/recollects the lengths of each side of a 8 sq ft square (85d2-10). He proceeds by asking the child various questions about geometry. The child claims to have knowledge, S cross-examines him, and the child then confesses *puzzlement*; thereafter the child gets it right. If he gets it

right, he must somehow know the answers. The question is where that knowledge came from. S claimes not to possess the knowledge that the child acquires, and, nobody has taught the child geometry before. From whence, therefore, did the child's knowledge come? S believes he must have somehow been born with it. We can present S's reasoning as follows:

1. If the child can give correct geometrical answers, he must possess knowledge of geometry.
2. If he someknow possesses knowledge of geometry, he must have somehow acquired that knowledge.
3. The child has not learned geometry before.
4. The child does not learn any geometry from S in their exchange–so the child didn't *learn* it then either.
    - Since S does not himself have the answers, he cannot be teaching them to the child.
    - S's questions merely elicit the child's *beliefs*.
5. Thus, the child was born *somehow* knowing geometry.
    - The child, through his discussion with S, will reliably *reject* false beliefs and *accept* true beliefs because the child (like everyone) once knew (in a disembodied state) but forgot, and hence can recognize the truth, and so reject the false.

Question about TR: What kinds of truths does S think we can recollect?

1. He clearly allows geometrical truths (and so mathematical truths generally?).
2. He should allow ethical truths (including truths about value) (otherwise the unity of the dialogue would be in jeopardy).
3. He also suggests nature "as a whole"?—What could that mean?
4. What about empirical truths?

True belief vs. knowledge

S allows that inquiry into X is possible by possessing true opinions about X. Thus, you can inquire into what you do not know as long as you have true opinions about the target of your inquiry. Accoding to TR, recollection provide us with true opinions. It is left open whether recollection is the only way to acquire such opinions. S believes that upon further questioning/reflection those beliefs will become knowledge. This solution thus introduces a distinction between *doxa* and *episteme*. The former is translated as both 'belief' and 'opinion'. The latter is translated as 'knowledge' and sometimes 'understanding'.

What's the difference? After the exchange, M insists that S address whether virtue is teachable, despite S's demand to determine what virtue is first. S again refuses to address that question directly, but instead notes that if virtue is knowledge, then virtue will be teachable (and if virtue is not knowledge, it will not be teachable). He then turns to the question whether virtue is knowledge, considering arguments for and against.

On the one hand, virtue is beneficial, and all actions guided by knowledge turn out well. This suggests that virtue must be knowledge, i.e., knowledge is the arete that humans require to always act excellently. However, while actions guided by knowledge always turn out correctly, it is not *only* actions guided by knowledge that turn out correctly—actions guided by true opinion/belief also turn out correctly. The example of the "Road to Larissa" (97a5-c2) is supposed to show that true beliefs are good enough; a true belief about how to get home is as good as knowledge about how to get home.

This leads M to ask "why knowledge (*epistêmê*) is prized far more highly than right opinion, and why they are different" (97d1-2). S answers that right opinion is "upgraded" into knowledge by a "giving an account of the reason why" (i.e. by working out the explanation of the relevant fact) which "ties" the opinion to the soul. Knowledge is more valuable because it remains in place. Those with knowledge succeed all the time. Those with true opinion succeed only some of the time. We can, then, summarize some Differences between belief and knowledge as follows:

1. If S believes P, it does not follow that P is true. There can be true and false beliefs.
2. If S knows P, P is true. There cannot be false knowledge.
3. If S believes P, it does not follow that S possesses the explanation for P (alternatively, it does not follow that S is justified in believing P). There are both rational and irrational beliefs.
4. If S knows P, then (i) S believes P, (ii) P is true, and (iii) S possess the explanation for P (alternatively, S is justified in believing P).
5. If S believes P and P is true, it does not follow that S knows P.

For example, just because the child has true beliefs about geometry, it does not follow that the child has knowledge about geometry. Just because a person has true beliefs about biology, it does not follow that the person has knowledge about biology. Just because a person believes truly that God exists (or God does not), it does not follow that that person know that God exists (or God does not). Finally, just because Socrates has true beliefs about virtue, it does not follow that Socrates has knowledge about virtue.