

# *Meno*

Phil 234

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## **Overview**

The dialog begins with Meno, a Thessalian, asking whether virtue is teachable (70a1-4). Meno is ambitious. He wants to become a tyrant, i.e., run things. Someone else around. That is why virtue means a lot to him. Virtue was seen roughly as the set of qualities whose possession is required to a) govern a city well, and b) govern yourself well, c) govern a household well. Meno is asking how this skill can be acquired. He offers three options. 1) You are born with it. 2) You acquire it through practicing it. 3) You acquire it by being taught it.

There are folks like Gorgias who think that they can teach you how to be virtuous. Athenian political society was premised on the idea that it was teachable. You would apprentice with folk. You would practice. If it cannot be taught, then this has serious repercussions for moral education.

Larger epistemological concerns. It asks whether we can search for Socratic definitions.

## **Socrates' Challenge**

Socrates claims that he does not know whether virtue can be taught because he does not know what it is (71b1-8). In making this claim, Socrates tells us that we must have an answer to the question 'what is virtue?' before we can determine whether virtue is teachable. Recall that an answer to such a question is called a Socratic Definition. Socrates, therefore, is here articulating what is called the *priority of definition*:

- In order to know what qualities x possesses, you must know what x is, i.e., the definition of x.

He offers the following example: in order for you to know whether Meno is good-looking, rich, or well-born, you must know who Meno is. That is, if you do not know at all who Meno is, then you cannot know what qualities belong to Meno. This seems implausible. Suppose you are in a room with a red-haired stranger. Can't I know that the person has red hair without knowing who they are? Socrates will respond by asking what we mean by saying we can know that the person has red hair. Assume that the person's name is John. If you do now know who John is, then Socrates will claim that you cannot know that John has red hair just by looking at him. You can know, perhaps,