

INTRODUCTION: Is virtue teachable? What's at stake?¹

SOCRATES' CHALLENGE: He does not know whether it can be taught because he does not know what it is.²

1. In order for S to know what qualities x possesses, S must know what x is.
2. In order for S to know whether Meno is good-looking, rich, or well-born, S must know who Meno is.
 - (a) If S does not know at all who Meno is, then S cannot know what qualities belong to Meno.
3. In order for S to know whether virtue is teachable, S must know what virtue is.

THE CHALLENGE ASSUMES:

1. A distinction between essential and non-essential features, e.g. humans are essentially rational, but they are not essentially capable of laughter.
2. It may also assume that essential features are explanatory of non-essential features:
 - (a) The essence of virtue explains what non-essential features virtue possesses.
 - (b) If virtue is teachable, then the essence of virtue explains why virtue is teachable.

MENO'S CHALLENGE:²

P1 If you know x already, you cannot genuinely inquire into x.

(Read 'inquire into x' as 'inquire into the essence of x'.)

P2 If you do not know x, you cannot inquire into x because you do not even know what you are inquiring into.

P3 Either you know x or you do not. (Implicit Premise)

C Therefore you cannot inquire into x.

ARGUMENT FOR P2:

1. If you do not know *at all* what x is, then you cannot start to inquire into x.
2. If you do not know what x is, and if you stumble upon x, you will not know that what you stumbled upon is x.

¹ Can you tell me, Socrates, can virtue be taught? Or is it not teachable but the result of practice, or is it neither of these, but men possess it by nature or in some other way? (70a1-4)

² I myself, Meno, am as poor as my fellow citizens in this matter, and I blame myself for my complete ignorance about virtue. If I do not know what something is, how could I know what qualities it possesses? Or do you think that someone who does not know at all who Meno is could know whether he is good-looking or rich or well-born, or the opposite of these? (71b1-8)

² Meno: How will you look for it [e.g. the essence of virtue], Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?

Socrates: Do you realize what a debater's argument you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know? He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for (80d5–80e5).

IMPASSE: Socrates claims that we cannot find out whether virtue is teachable until we know what virtue is, i.e. know the essence of virtue. But Meno argues that we cannot inquire into the essence of virtue if we know nothing at all about it. This is a serious impasse—it seems impossible to find out whether virtue is teachable.

THE THEORY OF RECOLLECTION says that what we call learning is recollecting things we already know.³

THE SLAVE BOY EXAMPLE is meant to support the Theory of Recollection. The Slave Boy must find out how long the sides are of a 8 sq ft square. By being questioned by Socrates, the Slave Boy *recollects* the correct answer.⁴

- A S recovers the knowledge from within himself.
- B Recovering knowledge for oneself that is in oneself is recollection. (Assumed)
- C If S recollects what he knew, he either acquired that knowledge in the past or else always possessed it.

SOCRATES' CROSS-EXAMINATION of the slave boy is meant to prove A. This assumes:

1. Since the Slave gives the correct answers to certain questions, he already knew those answers.
2. The Slave cannot be learning these answers by Socrates questioning him.

SOCRATES treats C briefly. Upon being asked, Meno tells Socrates that the slave was never educated in geometry. So Socrates concludes that the Slave boy must have possessed this knowledge when he was not a human being. Socrates then infers that he must have possessed it for all time.

HOW DOES THE THEORY OF RECOLLECTION MEET MENO'S CHALLENGE? Some think that Socrates distinguishes between *latent* and *explicit* knowledge. On this reading, Socrates responds to the Challenge with both a concession and an objection. He thinks:

1. We cannot inquire into what we explicitly know, but *we can* inquire into what we only latently know.
2. We cannot inquire into what we do not even latently know, but *we can* inquire into what we do not explicitly know.

³ They say that the human soul is immortal; at times it comes to an end, which they call dying, at times it is reborn, but it is never destroyed...As the soul is immortal, has been born often and has seen all things here and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both about virtue and other things (81b3–c9).

⁴ Socrates: And he will know it without having been taught but only questioned, and find the knowledge within himself?—Yes.

Socrates: And is not finding knowledge within oneself recollection?—Certainly.

Socrates: Must he not either have at some time acquired the knowledge he now possesses, or else have always possessed it? (85d2–10)