Bitter Knowledge: Socrates and Teaching by Disillusionment Appendix B - the Meno

Thomas D. Eisele
University of Cincinnati College of Law, thomas.eisele@uc.edu

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It was been suggested (and here I am thinking in particular of comments made by Professor William Prior) that my book, *Bitter Knowledge*, would benefit from a more comprehensive attention to the argumentative details of the dialogues studied there. Professor Prior specifically suggests that, if we were to be given more of their argumentation, we might better appreciate the motivation or the disposition of the speakers in the dialogues under study.

The book as designed, as submitted in typescript, and as accepted for publication, included three appendices. These appendices comprised detailed outlines of the speakers and events portrayed in, respectively, the *Protagoras*, the *Meno*, and the *Theaetetus*. They were intended to add depth and context to the analyses and discussions in the book’s three chapters devoted to those dialogues. Unfortunately, during the production process, the editorial decision was made to cut the appendices, despite my objection.

My book does not explore these three dialogues along the traditional lines of eliciting and analyzing the doctrinal features embedded within the discussions portrayed, which doctrines (about virtue, or justice, or the Forms, etc.) may be ascribed to Plato. I knew that my approach was untraditional in this regard, and that I risked losing some readers due to my lack of attention to those doctrinal features. I did not run this risk lightly, nor did I think the resultant loss inconsequential. I did believe, however, that certain other features in the Platonic corpus had been under-attended and under-appreciated, and it was toward those features – largely pedagogical dimensions of teaching and learning – that I mostly gave my attention in the core of the book.

The appendices, in their collection of the complex weave of speakers and themes and events and arguments within each individual dialogue, were meant to illustrate how educative lessons were interwoven with doctrinal concerns by the master-craftsman, Plato, in his depictions of Socrates talking and interacting with others. It seemed to me that, as much as Socrates denied or refused the mantle of teacher, most famously in the *Apology*, his actions belied his denials. In this respect, I was following the lead of Seth Benardete, whose book entitled, *The Argument of the Action*, nicely teaches us the lesson that the action of a text has an argument of its own, if we can but elucidate it. Putting my own particular spin on Benardete’s insight, one might say that *Bitter Knowledge* focuses our attention throughout on the action (or activity) of the argument, rather than on the doctrinal aspects of the argument.

I regret that these appendices, as further illustrations of my characterization of the various participants in these conversational inquiries, were dropped from the book as published. So, I make them available, for whatever assistance they may be to readers of *Bitter Knowledge* at this late date.

T.D.E.

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Appendix B – the *Meno*

**Conversational Groupings:**

A. Socrates and Meno [70a-82b].

B. Socrates and the Slave [82b-84a].

C. Interlude: Socrates and Meno [84a-d].

D. Socrates and the Slave [84d-85b].

E. Socrates and Meno [85b-89c].

F. Socrates and Anytus [89d-95a].

G. Socrates and Meno [95a-100b].

An Outline of the Speakers, Events, and Topics in the *Meno*

1. **The ethos of asking and answering [70a-76e].**
   
a. The initiating question: “Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue is acquired by teaching or by practice?” [70a].
   
b. Socrates’ initial response (he speaks for all Athenians): “For I literally do not know what virtue is, and much less whether it is acquired by teaching or not” [71a].
   
c. Socrates reverses the question: “Meno, be generous and tell me what you say that virtue is” [71d].
   
i. Meno: “There will be no difficulty, Socrates, in answering your question” [71e].
ii. Meno offers a swarm of virtues: What do all virtues have in common? [71e-74b].

d. Seeking one definition of virtue, Socrates takes over the search [74b-76e].

e. Socrates: “[I]f he were a philosopher of the eristic and antagonistic sort, I should say to him: You have my answer, and if I am wrong, your business is to take up the argument and refute me. But if we were friends, and were talking as you and I are now, I should reply in a milder strain and more in the dialectician's vein; ... I should not only speak the truth, but I should make use of premises which the person interrogated would be willing to admit. And this is the way in which I shall endeavor to approach you” [75c-d].

f. Socrates asks Meno to stay (“if you would only stay and be initiated ...”), and Meno accepts the invitation: “But I will stay, Socrates, if you will give me many such answers” [76e].

2. **We discover our own ignorance--and disillusion ensues [77a-80d].**

a. Socrates: “Now ... you are to fulfill your promise, and tell me what virtue is in the universal” [77a].

b. Meno offers a definition of virtue--unsuccessfully [77a-79c].

c. Socrates: “My dear Meno, I fear that I must begin again and repeat the same question: What is virtue?” [79c].

d. Meno: “I do not know how to answer you ... at this moment I cannot even say what virtue is” [80b].
c. Socrates: "I perplex others, not because I am clear, but because I am utterly perplexed myself" [80c].

3. How is inquiry into the unknown possible? We must "re-collect" our knowledge and use it as our guide [80d-86c].

a. Socrates: "I have no objection to join with you in the inquiry" [80d].

b. Meno's challenge ["Meno's Paradox"]: "And how will you inquire, Socrates, into that which you do not know?" [80d].

c. Socrates' response: "I know, Meno, what you mean" [80c].

d. Investigating the soundness of Meno's argument [81a-e].

i. "[T]he soul of man is immortal" [81b-c].

ii. "[A]ll inquiry and all learning is but recollection" [81d].

iii. "[W]e ought not listen to this sophistical argument about the impossibility of inquiry; for it will make us idle, and is sweet only to the sluggard" [81d].

e. Learning as recollection [81e-86c].

i. "[T]here is no teaching, but only recollection" [82a].

ii. They call in the slave ("He is Greek, and speaks Greek, does he not?") [82b].

iii. A geometrical demonstration (or interrogation) ensues ("I am not teaching the boy anything, but only asking him questions") [82b-84a].
iv. Socrates: "Do you see, Meno, what advances he has made in his powers of recollection? He did not know at first, and he does not know now, ... but then he thought that he knew, and answered confidently as if he knew, and had no difficulty; now he has a difficulty, and neither knows nor fancies that he knows" [84a-b].

v. Interlude: Socrates and Meno discuss the implications or meaning of this demonstrative interrogation [84a-d].

vi. Back to the demonstration with the slave [84d-85b].

vii. Socrates: "Without anyone teaching him he will recover his knowledge for himself, if he is only asked questions? ... And this spontaneous recovery of knowledge in him is recollection?" [85d].

viii. Socrates: "And if the truth of all things always existed in the soul, then the soul is immortal" [86b].

f. Socrates' first credo: "Some things I have said of which I am not altogether confident. But that we shall be better and braver and less helpless if we think that we ought to inquire than we should have been if we indulged in the idle fancy that there was no knowing and no use in seeking to know what we do not know--that is a theme upon which I am ready to fight, in word and deed, to the utmost of my power" [86b-c].

g. Meno: "Socrates, your words seem to me excellent" [86c].
4. A renewal of the search, a renewal of inquiry into whether virtue is teachable
(inquiring into the qualities of something the nature of which we do not yet know)
[86c-89c].

a. Socrates: "[W]e are agreed that a man should inquire about that which he does not
know" [86c].

b. Meno: "By all means, Socrates. And yet I would much rather return to my
original question" [86c-d].

c. Allowing the question ("Whether virtue is given by instruction, or in any other
way?") to be argued upon hypothesis [86e-89c].

[The hypothesis: "If virtue is knowledge, then it can be taught."]

5. When a student does not wish to inquire: The example of Anytus [89d-95a].

a. The difficulty: "I fear that I have some reason in doubting whether virtue is
knowledge" [89d].

b. Who are the teachers of virtue? To whom should Meno be sent in order to be
taught virtue? [89e-90c].

c. Anytus enters the discussion ("Please, Anytus, to help me and your friend Meno in
answering our question, Who are the teachers [of virtue]?") [90b-c].

d. Socrates and Anytus converse, but do not reach agreement [90c-95a].

i. Anytus admits that he has no experience (knowledge) of the sophists [92b-c].
ii. Socrates: "Then, my dear friend, how can you know whether a thing is good or bad of which you are wholly ignorant? ... You must be a diviner, Anytus, for I really cannot make out, judging from your own words, how, if you are not acquainted with them, you know about them" [92c].

iii. Socrates: "But the question is ... not whether there are, or have been, good men in this part of the world, but whether virtue can be taught ..." [93a-b].

iv. Socrates: "Once more, I suspect, friend Anytus, that virtue is not a thing which can be taught" [94e].

c. Anytus leaves abruptly ("O Meno, I think that Anytus is in a rage") [95a].

6. **Back to the initial question: Can virtue be taught? [95a-100b].**

a. Can virtue be taught? Who are the teachers?

i. Do ordinary gentlemen teach virtue? (No.) [95b].

ii. Do the sophists teach virtue? (We doubt it.) [95b-c].

iii. Do the politicians or the poets know whether virtue is teachable? (No.) [95c-96b].

iv. Socrates: "But if neither the Sophists nor the gentlemen are teachers, clearly there can be no other teachers [of virtue]? ... And if there are no teachers, neither are there disciples [or students]?" [96b-c].

v. Socrates: "Then virtue cannot be taught?" [96c].

b. "I am afraid, Meno, that you and I are not good for much, and that Gorgias has been as poor an educator of you as Prodicus has been of me" [96d].
c. We forgot that knowledge is not the only successful or effective guide of human actions (this is why we have found that recognizing how good men become good is so elusive) [96e].
   i. Investigating whether knowledge is the only guide for good or right actions [97a-b].
   ii. The conversation suggests that right opinion or true belief can be a good guide to human action [97a-b].
   iii. Socrates: "Then true opinion is as good a guide to correct action as knowledge" [97b].

d. Why should knowledge be preferred to right opinion? [97d].
   i. True opinions are beautiful and useful while they abide with us, but they do not remain long. They need to be tied down or fastened, "and this fastening of them, friend Meno, is recollection" [98a].
   ii. True beliefs, when they are bound or fastened, have the nature of knowledge; and then they are abide with us [98a].
   iii. "And this is why knowledge is more honorable and excellent than true opinion, because fastened by a chain" [98a].
   iv. Socrates' second credo: "I, too, speak rather in ignorance; I only conjecture. And yet that knowledge differs from true opinion is no matter of conjecture with me. There are not many things which I profess to know, but this is most certainly one of them" [98b].
v. "Then right opinion is not one whit inferior to knowledge, or less useful in action; nor is the man who has right opinion inferior to him who has knowledge?" [98c].

e. "Neither knowledge nor right opinion is given to men by nature or acquired by him"—at least, it is not acquired by teaching [98d].

f. Virtue is not taught, and it is not knowledge [98e-99a].

g. If virtuous action is not given by nature, and if it is not taught or a kind of knowledge, then the only alternative is that virtuous action is a result of sound opinion or true belief [99b-c].

h. The good actions of politicians and statesmen seem to be guided only by true beliefs or sound opinions that are in some sense inspired [99c-e].

i. Socrates: "To sum up our inquiry—the result seems to be, if we are at all right in our view, that virtue is neither natural nor acquired, but an instinct given by God to the virtuous. Nor is the instinct accompanied by reason, unless there may be supposed to be among statesmen someone who is capable of educating statesmen" [99e-100a].

7. **Ostensible conclusion [100b-c].**

   a. "Then, Meno, the conclusion is that virtue comes to the virtuous by divine dispensation" [100b].

   b. "But we shall never know the certain truth until, before asking how virtue is given, we inquire into the actual nature of virtue. I fear that I must go away, but
do you, now that you are persuaded yourself, persuade our friend Anytus. And do not let him be so exasperated; if you can conciliate him, you will have done good service to the Athenian people" [100b-c].