Meno: What Is Virtue?

Aditya Venkataraman

ID - 9071385075

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'*Can you tell me, Socrates, can virtue be taught*?', begins Meno, a beautiful and wealthy general, accustomed to giving grand answers to every question [76b]. Yet, within a few exchanges, he is reduced to a state of numbness and perplexity [80b]. The polarity of this transformation suggests the gravity of the matter being discussed. In this paper, I will analyze these early exchanges to understand Meno's three attempts at defining virtue and Socrates's arguments against them.

1. Meno's three definitions:

In reply to Meno, Socrates raises a more fundamental question - '*What is virtue*?' - as without knowing the nature of an object, one cannot judge its qualities [71b]. Meno provides three definitions for virtue during the course of the dialogue:

(1) He lists instances of virtuous conduct for men, women, children and so on. For example, the virtue of a man is to manage his public affairs. Meno adds that there exists a virtue for every action, age and occasion [71e-72].

(2) The ability to rule over people is the virtue common to all [73d].

(3) Virtue is to desire beautiful things and have the power to acquire them [77b].

2. Socrates's objections:

Socrates is interested in knowing the ultimate essence (*ousia*) of virtue i.e. the underlying form that makes all virtuous deeds, virtuous [72d]. Instead, in his first definition, Meno lists instances of virtue. Using the metaphor of the swarm of bees, Socrates points out that while each bee is different in superficial aspects (size, color etc.), they are all the same in *being bees*.

Meno's second definition seems to reveal his exalted position in society and how this warps his view of virtue. The ability to rule over people might be an apt virtue for an aristocratic

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[1] Excluding References

general, but it hardly seems appropriate for a child or a slave. Socrates further objects that this definition is incomplete, as without justice the ability to rule over people could disintegrate into tyranny [73d].

Meno's third definition has two parts - (1) the desire for beautiful things and (2) having the power to acquire them. Socrates uncovers a logical inconsistency to convince Meno that the desire for good things is universal to all humans; this argument is analyzed in section 6. The second part is incomplete as exercising this power ought to be tempered with justice, which is itself recognized as a virtue [78e]. This lends an unacceptable recursive twist to this definition where virtue is defined as an action performed with a virtue.

3. The Socratic Definition

As a running example, consider the ideal 'Socratic' definition of virtue to be of the form:

Virtue = XYZ

The Meno contains several insights into the attributes of this definition:

(1) X, Y, Z are not mere instances or examples of virtue [72d]. Even if all instances of virtue could be enumerated (a contentious hypothesis), it would not be immediately apparent what connects each instance to each other or to the central idea of virtue [74d-e].

(2) Virtue should cover all XYZ and it should cover only XYZ. The definition cannot be too narrow or too broad in covering its instances [73d-e].

(3) XYZ is the very *essence* of virtue. This establishes a strictly causal behavior, as compared to a possibly correlational one in (2). Virtue *can* be virtue solely because of XYZ [72b].

(4) The definition should not depend on terms that are ambiguous or under contention [75c].

4. Definition of shape vs color

Socrates defines shape as the limit of a solid [76]. Beforehand, he clarifies the meanings for 'limit' and 'solid' using simple terms that are understood by Meno [75d]. Socrates chooses to define color, in the way of the Sophists, as an effluvium from a shape that fits the sight and is perceived [76d]. Even though Meno prefers the latter, one can note that the first definition is very direct and succinct, using commonly understood terms. The latter, on the other hand, is built around the idea of an effluvium from the works of Empedocles. It also supposes an

understanding of shape and sight, which are complex ideas. Lastly, this definition is more theatrical and tries to encompass the meaning of all sensory perceptions within it. Considering that Socrates defines color to exemplify a Socratic definition and yet prefers his definition of shape[76e], it raises the question of whether there can be multiple acceptable Socratic definitions to a single entity and among them, a premier one?

5. Comparison with Heraclitean views

One can note similarities between Socrates's quest and methods and certain Heraclitean fragments on the logos and knowledge.

For this reason it is necessary to follow what is common. But although the logos is common, most people live as if they had their own private understanding. [B2]

Heraclitus alludes to the presence of a universal law-like entity called the logos that regulates everything and is common to all.

Men who are lovers of wisdom must be inquirers into many things indeed. [B35]

It belongs to all people to know themselves and to think rightly. [B116]

Heraclitus urges people to recognize this common logos through critical thinking. This is paralleled in Socrates's search for the common form of virtue by critically evaluating & discarding unsatisfactory definitions. [B35] is strikingly similar to Socrates's call to examine one's ways of life and beliefs in [Apology 38a].

Much learning does not teach insight. [B40]

Heraclitus has a healthy disregard for the mere accumulation of facts without knowing their essence. The same attitude is seen when Socrates rejects Meno's first attempt at defining virtue.

Listening not to me, but to the logos, it is wise to agree that all things are one. [B50]

Instead of blindly accepting his views, Heraclitus encourages independent thought. This can be seen in the elenchus, where Socrates facilitates his listener to arrive at the right conclusions instead of resorting to didacticism.

6. Socrates's arguments

Meno's first definition lists various instances of virtue, to which Socrates's response is to look for an overarching, universal essence of all types of virtues [72d]. This argument rests on two implicit assumptions: (1) that such a universal definition exists for virtue, which can be intellectually perceived and (2) a proper response to a question about virtue must reach this

universal definition. The same issue is revisited during the discussion about 'shape vs a shape' [74]. While any instance of shape, such as roundness, can be touched and seen, its fundamental form i.e. shape can only be intellectually perceived.

A proposed Socratic definition is acceptable only if it is not subject to a counterexample, the existence of which suggests that the definition is either too narrow or too broad. Socrates's argument against Meno's second attempt rests on two counterexamples [73d]. Firstly, 'the ability to rule over all' does not include children and slaves, hence it is too narrow. Secondly, the proposed definition needs justice, otherwise it is too broad and could include instances of non-virtue. I believe that these counterexamples are valid considering the attributes of the ideal Socratic definition discussed in section 3.

Socrates uncovers a logical inconsistency in Meno's third definition as follows:

A. [Claim] Virtue is to desire beautiful things, which are certainly good things. [77b]

B. [Premise] If a human has virtue as defined in (A), then he is better than a human who does not have virtue.

C. [General Principle] People who desire bad things are not seeking bad things if they mistake the things to be good or believe they will bring good things [77e].

D. [Claim] There exists people who seek bad things despite knowing that they are bad and will harm the possessor.

E. [General Principle] The possession of bad things makes the possessor miserable & unhappy.

F. [General Principle] People don't wish to be miserable and unhappy.

G. From (E) and (F), we see that (D) cannot be true. One can then generalize (C) to include all people who seek bad things. This would imply that (A) and (B) are false.

While this argument is quite sound, I am skeptical about the universality of (F). Such a view seems to assume psychological hedonism and it may not hold true against true altruism, sacrifice or masochism.

7. Socrates's quest

Based on the exchanges in 70-80c, I don't expect Socrates to find a satisfactory definition of virtue solely from his dialogues with Meno. He is seeped in ways of the Sophists and repeatedly makes the same mistake of recognizes the features of virtue to be its essence. However, the early

exchanges have provided a framework within which the true definition can be sought. As hinted in [71b], the dialogue is heading towards a larger question of the Meno's Paradox - how one can search for something that one doesn't know at all?

Initially Meno claims to know the meaning of virtue, but he repeatedly fails to define it properly. In some sense, Socrates is teaching Meno to re-discover his knowledge about virtue. From his apparent failure, one could perversely conclude that even if virtue is innately known it cannot be realized through external teaching.

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