

Concept of Soul in the Meno

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Meno is regarded as the earlier dialogue of Plato. It is also known as the Socratic dialogue. It attempts to determine the definition of virtue. It tries to find out the meaning of virtue comprehensively, not partially. The first part of the *Meno* is written in the Socratic style. At the very beginning of this dialogue, Meno is reduced to confusion or aporia. In response to Meno's paradox, Socrates introduces positive ideas such as the immortality of the soul, 'knowledge as recollection' etc. Socrates presents the two concepts namely immortality of the soul and 'knowledge as recollection' by giving a mathematical query to a slave boy and he tried to prove that there is a necessary connection between immortality of the soul and recollective knowledge.

In Plato's *Meno* the two main speakers are Socrates and Meno. They discuss human virtue. What is the definition of virtue and whether it can be taught or not. The other members who participated in the conversations are one of Meno's slaves and Anytus who happened to be the Athenian politician.

In the *Meno*, it is seen that Meno is visiting Athens from Thessaly with a number of servants attending him. Meno who is young, good-looking and well-born is a student of Gorgias, a famous sophist whose views on virtue had great influences on Meno. At the beginning of the dialogue Meno claims that he has shared his views for several times on the topic of virtue in front of common people.

The most important feature of the dialogue is that Socrates applies his method of questioning to a slave boy to establish his idea of recollection. He wanted to justify that some knowledge are inborn and

those knowledge can be recollected by the soul. But for that, we need some proper investigations.

At the beginning of the dialogue, Meno requested Socrates to tell him about virtue. He wanted to know from Socrates whether virtue could be taught or not. Socrates is of the view that *he does not know what virtue is, and neither does anyone else he knows*¹ (Meno, 71b). Meno replied that, according to Gorgias, virtue is different for different people. For example, what is virtuous for a man is to conduct himself in the state and to help his friends. His duty is to injure his enemies, and also looks after all the while that he personally comes to no harm. Meno says that virtue is also different for female. Her duty is to engage in the household activities. She should have obedience towards her husband. He says that *children (male and female) have their own virtue, and old men whether free or slaves have their own virtue*² (Meno, 71e). Socrates' position is that there must be some virtue which are common to all human beings

Socrates is of the opinion that human virtue does not depend on the gender or age of a person. He tries to make Meno understand the fact that *virtues are common to all human beings; temperance and justice are two virtues which are present even in kids and old men*³ (Meno, 73b). Meno told Socrates that the capacity to rule (Meno, 73d) is a virtue common to men. Socrates then replied to Meno that *ruling in a proper way cannot be a virtue of a man who is a slave, because then he would no longer be a slave*⁴ (Meno, 73c-d).

Socrates points out a mistake that Meno is doing wrong by making a long list of virtue without trying to find out common mark or characteristic present in the virtues. Socrates remarks that *Meno makes many out of one, like somebody who breaks something*⁵. (Meno, 77a)

Meno is of the opinion that virtue is the craving for good things and it is the power to get those things. Socrates replied that this may raise a second problem. According to Socrates, *there are so many people who are unable to identify evil*⁶ (Meno, 77d-e). Then a very crucial

problem was discussed. The problem is that there are many people who are always in confusion regarding good and evil. They often seem to take good for the evil or evil for the good. Socrates asks Meno to think seriously *whether good things should be attained virtuously in order to become really good*⁷ (Meno, 78b). Then, Socrates leads to another question. The question is whether virtue is one thing or many in number.

It is seen that in the *Meno* a satisfactory definition of virtue cannot be found. Socrates very strongly and confidently believes that instead of a list of number of virtues, it is always better to try to find out a single definition of virtue. Socrates says that *it must contain all and only those terms which are genuine instances of virtue, and must not be circular*⁸.

It is clear that Meno is a follower of Sophist and therefore, his definition of virtue is subjective. But Socrates is a believer of universal or objective knowledge which will be common to all. For this reason, Socrates tries to find out a universal definition of virtue.

Paradox of Meno

Meno asks Socrates *how someone will try to find out a thing when he does not know what it is? Even if someone is about to get the thing, or close to it, how will he know that it is the thing he didn't know?*⁹ (Meno, 80d 1-4). According to Socrates, a man cannot search for what he knows or for what he does not know. Because *he cannot search for what he knows since he knows it and it is not necessary to search for what he does not know, since he does not know what he is to inquire about.*¹⁰ (Meno, 80e)

Socrates replied to the paradox of Meno with the help of an ancient story. According to that story, souls are immortal and have learned everything before entering into the human body. The souls have contact with real things prior to birth, man has only to recollect those things in the embodied state. This type of recollection needs the Socratic method of

questioning or dialectic method. According to Socrates, the questioning is not teaching. Socrates demonstrates his popular method of questioning by interrogating a slave boy who is devoid of the basic knowledge of the concepts of geometry.

Socrates then begins a very influential dialogue of western philosophy regarding the argument for innate knowledge. By drawing geometric figures (like square, triangle etc.) in the ground Socrates demonstrates that the slave is initially unaware of the length that a side must be in order to double the area of a square with two-foot sides. The slave boy guesses first that the original side must be doubled in length (four feet), and when this proves too much, that it must be three feet. This is still too much, and the slave is in a confusing state of mind.

Socrates claims that *before he got hold of him the slave (who has been picked at random from Meno's entourage) might have thought he could speak well and fluently on the subject of a square double the size of a given square*¹¹ (Meno,84c). Socrates comments that *this numbing he caused in the slave boy has not harmed him and has even benefited him*¹² (Meno,84c).

After that, Socrates draws a second square figure by using the diagonal of the original square. Each diagonal cuts each two foot square in half, yielding an area of two square feet. The square composed of four of the eight interior triangular areas is eight square feet, double that of the original area. Socrates gets the slave boy to agree that *this is twice the size of the original square and says that he has spontaneously recollected knowledge which he learned in his past life*¹³ (Meno,85d). Socrates is quite satisfied that new beliefs came into the slave boy's mind.

After witnessing the example, Meno tells Socrates that Socrates is correctly presenting his theory of recollection. Socrates replies that *he thinks that he is right, but he also says that this is just a myth. One thing he is ready to fight for as long as he can, in word and in action is that man shall become better, braver if men believe that it is right*

*thing to look for what one doesn't know...*¹⁴ (Meno, 86b)

The demonstration given by Socrates justifies the fact that the slave boy has the capacity to learn a geometrical truth, because *"he already has the knowledge in his soul."*¹⁵ In this way, Socrates made Meno understand that learning or education is possible by recollection. Socrates also proves Meno's paradox to be false. Meno wants to establish that learning is impossible, but the experiment which was made on the slave boy shows that learning is possible.

Then Meno asks Socrates to return to the original question. The question is that how virtue is acquired, or can virtue be taught? Socrates is of the view that virtue is knowledge, and it is agreed that, if this is true, virtue is teachable. Then they turn to the question whether virtue is really knowledge or not. Socrates is in some doubt regarding this question. because, if virtue were knowledge then there should be teachers and learners of it, but there are no teachers and learners of virtue.

When the conversation between Meno and Socrates was going on, Anytus¹⁶ reached that place. He was the son of Anthemion, who earned his fortune with intelligence and hard labour. Socrates says that Anytus is well-educated and he has the efficiency to participate in the conversation. Socrates told Anytus that the sophists are teachers of virtue. Anytus is horrified. He says that he neither knows any, nor cares to know any. Socrates then questions him why men do not always produce sons of the same virtue as themselves. Socrates gave examples of other remarkable male figures, such as *Themistocles*¹⁷, *Aristides*¹⁸, *Pericles*¹⁹ and *Thucydides*²⁰, and he doubts whether these men produced sons who are equally virtuous to themselves. Anytus was very offended and he accused Socrates of making false and damaging statements about the sophists. He warns Socrates to be careful enough at the time of expressing such opinions. Socrates told Anytus that he does not realize what is the meaning of making false and damaging statements about someone. By saying so, Socrates again started continuing his dialogue with Meno to search for the definition of virtue.

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE DIALOGUE :

In the *Meno*, it is seen that Plato's arguments not only suggest the existence of a soul, but also need the soul to be in close contact with the body, on the one hand, and able to acquire knowledge of the Forms, on the other. The recollection argument in the *Meno* shows that the senses play an essential role in the slave-boy's recollection. Although Plato does not yet attribute sense- experience to the soul, it is evident that even if one's beliefs about ethical or mathematical notions are innate, in this life they are not realized until one uses perception. In other words, although Plato states that it is the soul that is in contact with the beliefs when disembodied, he also needs the soul, when embodied, to start from the senses and reach knowledge. Hence, although the soul is something distinct from the body; capable of existing in an independent way, it is still operating along with the body; the body is the recipient of any sensory stimulus, which the soul categorises through recollection. Thus, the importance of the uses of the senses within the recollection argument lies in the fact that the senses show that a particular relation is required between the soul and body.

If the hypothesis that recollection as a process necessarily starts from a sensory stimulus is correct, then, the gap between the body, through which the senses are realized, and the soul, that recollects, cannot be a wide one. Plato through the recollection argument argues for a soul that is in contact with the both with this sensory world and with a world before/ after death. This is not achievable if we are talking about a completely immaterial soul that happens to be placed in a body. The question then of how the soul relates to the body, that is found in the *Meno* discussed as well as in the *Phaedo*, Plato is set to solve in the *Republic* and the *Timaeus*.

Notes and References

1. Reeve, C.D.C, A Plato Reader, P-60-61
2. Ibid, P-61
3. Ibid, P-63
4. Ibid,P-63

5. Ibid,P-67
6. Ibid,P-68
7. Ibid,P-69
8. Jane Mary Day, Plato's *Meno* in Focus, Routledge,1994,P-19
9. Reeve, C.D.C , A Plato Reader, P-71-72
10. Ibid, P-72
11. Ibid, P-77
12. Ibid, P-77
13. Ibid, P-79
14. Ibid, P-80
15. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meno>, accessed on 25.06.2015 at 10.00 p.m.
16. Anytus, son of Anthemion, was an ancient Athenian politician. He served as a general in the Peloponnesian War,
17. Themistocles was an Athenian politician and general
18. Aristides (520s – c. 467 BCE) was an Athenian statesman and military commander who gained the honorific title 'the Just' through his consistent selfless behaviour in public office
19. Pericles (495–429 BCE, whose name means "surrounded by glory") was a prominent statesman, famous orator, and general (in Greek 'Strategos') of Athens during the Golden Age of Athens.
20. Thucydides (c. 460/455 - 399/398 BCE) was an Athenian general who wrote the contemporary History of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta

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1. Gail Fine, "*Inquiry in the Meno*", in Richard Kraut, The Cambridge Companion to Plato, Cambridge University Press, 1992, ISBN 0-521-43610-9
- 2..Charles Kahn, "*Plato on Recollection*", in Hugh H. Benson, A Companion to Plato, Volume 37, Wiley-Blackwell, 2006, ISBN 1-4051-1521-1.
- 3.Gail Fine, "*Knowledge and True Belief in the Meno*", in David

Sedley, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy: Volume XXVII: Winter 2004*, Oxford University Press, 2004, ISBN 0-19-927712-5

4. Robin Waterfield in Plato, *Oxford World Classics: Meno and Other Dialogues*, Oxford University Press, 2005, pxliv. ISBN 0-19-280425-1

5. Dominic Scott, *Plato's Meno*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, ISBN 0-521-64033-4