

Knowledge and True Opinion in Plato's *Meno*

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In Plato's dialogue, the *Meno*, Socrates inquires into how humans may become virtuous, and, corollary to that, whether humans have access to any form of objective truth or knowledge. In the course of the dialogue, it comes to light that the unaided faculty of human reason appears to be unable to pursue and to acquire objective knowledge without already possessing this knowledge. This is Meno's paradox. To this extent, it would seem that the search for and acquisition of objective knowledge is impossible for humans. Without the possibility of such knowledge, the only alternative is a complete sophistic relativism in which truth claims are assessed on the strength of their rhetorical persuasiveness without reference to any objective reality. Socrates demonstrates that the only possible resolution to Meno's paradox is the existence of "true opinions,"¹ which are forms of revelatory intellectual intuition granted by the gods. True opinions grant human beings a glimpse of the objective truth that is unattainable by reason alone.

One such true opinion is Socrates' proposed "theory of recollection," which he presents as having been revealed to him by the gods during his initiation into the divine mysteries.² The theory of recollection makes room for the possibility of objective human knowledge, insofar as it holds that the human soul has acquired knowledge of all things prior to birth, and thus learning is not the acquisition of unknown knowledge but rather the recollection of knowledge already known by the soul.³ If human beings are afforded access to objective knowledge, according to the precepts of the theory of recollection, this renders possible the evaluation of truth claims with reference to a stable, universal standard. It is a result of divine providence that humans receive true opinions and can thus transcend the sophistic relativism of Meno's paradox in order to pursue true, objective knowledge. It is for this reason that in this dialogue Socrates asserts that

1. Plato, "Meno," in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), 97e.

2. *ibid.*, 76a-e.

3. *ibid.*, 81c-d.

Meno would be able to discern the objective superiority of one argument over another, had he already been initiated into the divine mysteries.⁴ For lacking the true opinion of Socrates' theory of recollection, Meno is left to assume the impossibility of objective human knowledge and to embrace sophistic relativism.

It is important to note that Socrates' primary conversation partner, the eponymous Meno, is identified as a student of the sophist Gorgias. Near the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates asks Meno, "remind me of what he [Gorgias] said...for surely you share his views" and Meno responds in the affirmative.⁵ Plato's identification of the character Meno with the philosophical views of Gorgias becomes evident in the exposition of Meno's paradox. Here, Meno asks, with respect to knowledge, "how will you look for it, 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?"⁶ This is to say that if there is such a thing as objective knowledge, it cannot be that humans have access to it, since it is impossible to search for something of which you have no knowledge, for it would be impossible to recognize it if and when it were found. This paradox in Plato's *Meno* bares a striking resemblance to an argument attributed to Gorgias himself in his essay "On What Is Not or On Nature." In this essay, Gorgias argues that "nothing is [and, furthermore,] if something is, it is unknowable and inconceivable by humans."⁷ Gorgias is arguing that there is no such thing as objective reality and that, even if there were such a thing, it would be wholly unknowable by human reason. Socrates is likely invoking Gorgias when he calls Meno's paradox "a debater's argument."⁸ Meno is thus shown to be following Gorgias' own reasoning when he posits the impossibility of human knowledge in his dialogue with Socrates.

If an objective, stable form of knowledge is inaccessible to mortals, then the definition of virtue, which is the aim of this dialogue, cannot be established on the basis of a universal standard of truth

4. *ibid.*, 76e.

5. *ibid.*, 71c-d.

6. *ibid.*, 80d.

7. "Gorgias," in *A Presocratics Reader: Selected Fragments and Testemonia*, second edition, ed. Patricia Curd, trans. Richard D. McKirahan and Patricia Curd (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2011), 152.

8. "Meno," 80e.

but rather only on the basis of one's relative power to persuade and influence others. Meno appears to have such an idea in mind when he accuses Socrates of "bewitching and beguiling [him], simply putting [him] under a spell, so that [he is] quite perplexed."⁹ In saying this, Meno may once again be following Gorgias who, in his essay "Praise of Helen" states that "[i]nspired incantations bring on pleasure and bring away grief through words...For conversing with the soul's opinion the power of incantation charms, persuades and changes it by witchcraft."¹⁰ Like Meno, Gorgias asserts that rhetoric has a persuasive power akin to the power of witchcraft. When Meno accuses Socrates of "bewitching and beguiling" him he may be asserting, after the manner of Gorgias, that Socrates' argument is beguiling him into a state of confusion by the power of his rhetorical skill, rather than revealing something objectively true.

Another conflation of truth and persuasiveness occurs in the dialogue when Meno recalls Gorgias' definition of virtue as the ability to "rule over people."¹¹ From the sophistic standpoint shared by Meno and Gorgias, virtue is not an end in itself, nor is the nature of virtue understood in relation to any external standard of truth or goodness. Instead, according to this view, virtue is a means, and the virtue of a man can only be assessed on the basis of his ability to procure his desired ends. A similar definition of virtue appears in Plato's *Republic*, in which the sophistic character Thrasymachus declares that "justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger."¹² This means that virtues such as justice are defined by those in power according to whatever best serves their ends. In this way, without recourse to truth as an objective standard, all philosophical definitions, including that of virtue, become relativized and determinable only on the basis of persuasion or coercion. This is perhaps also what is meant when Socrates asks Meno whether "these [s]ophists...are teachers of virtue?"¹³ To this Meno replies that Gorgias would never promise to teach virtue, for the aim of his teaching is only to "make people clever speakers."¹⁴ To propose to teach virtue is absurd from a sophistic standpoint.

9. *ibid.*, 80a.

10. "Gorgias," 149.

11. "Meno," 73c.

12. Plato, "Republic," in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), I.338c.

13. "Meno," 95b.

14. *ibid.*, 95c.

Instead, the "virtue" of the sophist is to speak persuasively so as to exert the greatest degree of influence over others.

In the course of the dialogue, Socrates offers two definitions, one of shape and the other of colour. He defines shape as "the limit of a solid" and colour, in the manner of Gorgias, as "an effluvium from shapes, which fits the sight and is perceived."¹⁵ Whereas the definition of shape is universal and self-evident, without reference to any observer, the definition of colour requires several presuppositions and is coherent only in relation to an observer. It is not surprising, however, given Meno's relativistic stance toward truth, that he would affirm the superiority of Socrates' definition of colour over his definition of shape. Indeed, Socrates suggests that Meno's selection was not based on the intrinsic soundness of each definition. Instead, Socrates asserts that Meno prefers his definition of colour merely because it "is a theatrical answer" to which Meno agrees.¹⁶ For certainly, without reference to any objective standard of truth, there is no means by which to judge the one definition as intrinsically superior to the other.

In contrast, Socrates insists that his definition of shape is superior to his definition of colour and that Meno would understand this if he had not left before the divine mysteries but had remained and been initiated.¹⁷ That is, reasoned argumentation alone cannot properly account for the inherent superiority of Socrates' definition of shape because this would presuppose the existence and accessibility of an objective standard of truth. In the absence of such a standard, Socrates instead has recourse to a transcendent spiritual authority. In the dialogue, Meno protests Socrates' assertion that his paradox is a mere rhetorical trick saying, "Does that argument not seem sound to you, Socrates?"¹⁸ To this, as in the case of the two definitions, Socrates does not respond with a logical rebuttal, but instead responds, "I have heard wise men and women talk about divine matters."¹⁹ It would seem, therefore, that the human faculty of reason alone is not sufficient to resolve the problems to which Meno's paradox gives rise. Instead, in order to resolve Meno's paradox it becomes necessary for

15. *ibid.*, 76a, d.

16. *ibid.*, 76e.

17. *ibid.*, 76e.

18. *ibid.*, 81a.

19. *ibid.*

Socrates to introduce the existence of an alternate human faculty, by which means it is possible to attain access to that objective truth unavailable to humans by the power of reasoning alone.

This alternate faculty, introduced by Socrates, is a form of divine revelation that enters the mind in the form of an intuition, or true opinion. To this end, Socrates asserts that true opinion “comes to those who possess it as a gift from the gods, which is not accompanied by understanding”²⁰ and that those who act in accordance with true opinion are thus “no different from soothsayers and prophets...[who also] say many true things when inspired but they have no knowledge of what they are saying.”²¹ Socrates maintains that, when displaying virtue, humans act in accordance with true opinion, and not according to knowledge. Yet, Socrates also maintains that just as virtuous men “give us true direction in our affairs,”²² the man who leads in accordance with true opinion “will not be a worse guide than the one who knows” the way.²³ It follows then that humans may attain access to objective truth by means of this divinely given true opinion such as would not be possible by means of reason alone.

Socrates’ theory of recollection offers a possible solution to Meno’s paradox insofar as it holds that every human possess an intuitive knowledge of all things. Thus, whenever humans seek to learn something, they are never wholly without knowledge of their object. That the theory of recollection is itself a true opinion is evidenced by the fact that Socrates claims to have arrived at his awareness of it, not by reasoning, but instead through “priests and priestesses...and many others of the divine among our poets.”²⁴ Thus, the content of Socrates’ theory of recollection is just such a revelatory insight as those uttered by the prophets and soothsayers and relayed to mortals in the form of true opinion. Furthermore, the theory of recollection should be understood as a true opinion insofar as Socrates says of it,

I do not insist that my argument is right in all other respects, but I would contend at all costs...that we will

20. *ibid.*, 99e-100a.

21. *ibid.*, 99b-c.

22. *ibid.*, 96e-97a.

23. *ibid.*, 97b.

24. *ibid.*, 81a-b.

be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for things one does not know, rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it.²⁵

While Socrates may not "know" the truth of this insight with certainty, he insists that, by accepting this theory, or opinion, about the possibility of learning, its adherents will receive the same benefits as would be afforded by knowledge concerning this question. For just as in the case of virtue, one who is guided by true opinion will offer the same directions as one who knows the way, one who holds the opinion that objective knowledge is attainable by human beings will be able to pursue objective knowledge, despite lacking understanding of this opinion he holds.

Although, as Socrates asserts, "true opinion is in no way a worse guide for correct action than knowledge,"²⁶ true opinions do not provide their recipients with understanding and, as such, "they are not worth much until one ties them down by [giving] an account of the reason why."²⁷ It is for this reason that Socrates asserts that "knowledge is prized higher than correct opinion" when knowledge is opinion accompanied by understanding.²⁸ For, while a man who acts in accordance with true opinion will be equally beneficent as the man who acts in accordance with true knowledge, this will be the case only "as long as his opinion is right."²⁹ Socrates insists that the man who understands the reasons for the opinions he holds possesses assurance of the truth of the opinions he holds. In this way, knowledge is fixed and stable whereas true opinions unaccompanied by understanding "are not willing to remain long, and they escape from a man's mind," insofar as they are vulnerable to doubt as to the veracity of their claims.³⁰ Thus, although true opinion is the necessary precondition of all knowledge, true opinions must nevertheless become knowledge through understanding in order to attain fixity within the mind. It is perhaps for this reason that, after having presented the theory of recollection as a divinely given

25. *ibid.*, 86b-c.

26. *ibid.*, 97b.

27. *ibid.*, 97e-98a.

28. *ibid.*, 98a.

29. *ibid.*, 97c.

30. *ibid.*, 97e-98a.

true opinion, Socrates goes on to offer a demonstration of its truth through his questioning of Meno's slave concerning the principles of geometry.³¹ Socrates begins this demonstration in response to Meno's petition concerning the theory of recollection: "If you can somehow show me that things are as you say, please do so."³² From this it is clear that Meno is not simply content to accept this true opinion from Socrates but desires to understand the truth of this opinion, and thus to acquire knowledge of the theory of recollection.

Socrates suggests that it is possible for true opinion to be transformed into stable knowledge by the process of learning – that is the process of "recollection."³³ (98a). In this way, Socrates' interrogation of Meno's slave constitutes a double movement in the dialogue, through which the slave comes to recollect the true principles of geometry and, simultaneously, Meno comes to recollect the truth of the theory of recollection. By demonstrating the truth of his opined theory of recollection, Socrates not only affirms the possibility of true human knowledge, but also reveals the means of attaining it. For this reason Socrates says to Meno, "we must, therefore, not believe that debater's argument, for it would make us idle."³⁴ This is to say that Meno's paradox leads only to negation of the possibility of true human knowledge and inevitably results in a state of sophistic relativism. Socrates appears unhelpful regarding the possibility of objective knowledge at the beginning of the dialogue when he says, "I do not have any knowledge of what virtue itself is...[and] am as poor as my fellow citizens in this matter."³⁵ Indeed, Socrates' own formulation is not dissimilar to that of Meno when he states: "If I do 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?"³⁶ However, Socrates does not succumb to sophistic relativism. Instead he maintains that he "blame[s] [him]self for [his] complete ignorance about virtue."³⁷ For he knows, according to the precepts of the theory of recollection, that "if he is brave and does not tire of the search" true human knowledge is attainable.³⁸ Gluttons Eat Only Good Food:

31. *ibid.*, 81c-85d.

32. *ibid.*, 82a.

33. *ibid.*, 98a.

34. *ibid.*, 81d.

35. *ibid.*, 71a-b.

36. *ibid.*, 71b.

37. *ibid.*, 71b.

38. *ibid.*, 81d.