Meno
Structure of the Dialogue

1. Prelude: Is Virtue Teachable? (70-71d)

2. Testing of Meno’s knowledge of Virtue (71e-79e)
   a. This part of the dialogue resembles the Euthyphro

3. The Methodological Discussion of Learning (80a-86c)
   A. Meno’s paradox (80a-e)
   B. The Theory of Recollection (81a-e)
   C. The Conversation with the Slave boy (82a-86a)
   D. Conclusion (86b-c)
Testing of Meno’s knowledge of Virtue (71e-79e)

1. First Definition of Virtue: ‘A man’s virtue, a woman’s virtue, a child’s virtue ...’ (71e-73c)

2. Second Definition: ‘To be able to rule over people’ (73d-74b)
   - Explanation of what a definition is (discussion of shape and color) (74b-77b)

3. Third Definition: ‘Desire for beautiful things and power to acquire them’ (77b-78b)
   - Third Definition (modified): ‘The power of securing good things (gold, honors of the city, etc.)’ (78cb3-79e)
First Definition of Virtue (71e-73c)

• The virtue of a person depends on their **social role**, so the virtue of a man is different than that of a woman, or an elderly person, or a child, or a slave.

• Refutation 1: Does strength differ for men and women? No, Socrates says.

• Refutation 2: To fulfill one’s distinct social roles one nonetheless needs the same virtues, justice, moderation etc.
Second Definition of Virtue (73d-74b)

Virtue = Ability to rule over people.

This is an equation: *all* instances of virtue will be rulings over people and all rulings over people will be virtuous.

Quick Refutation: Does this definition apply to all people? No, it does not apply to children or slaves. If we agree that all persons can have virtue, which Socrates established in the prior refutation, then this can’t be what defines virtue universally.
Changing the Definition

Socrates asks: Should we add justly to the definition. Meno answers: “I think so, Socrates, for justice is virtue” (73d10).

Why does Meno agree to this change?

Virtue = ability to rule over people *justly*

Now all examples of virtue will be rulings over people justly and all rulings over people justly will be virtuous. *There is nothing else that is virtuous.*
Is Justice Virtue or a Virtue?

• But ruling over people justly cannot equal virtue, because justice is one virtue amongst others (courage, piety, generosity, moderation, etc.).

• This definition of virtue is far too narrow. Virtue is much wider than justice (or ruling over people for that matter), virtue includes justice within it.

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<tr>
<th>Courage</th>
<th>Piety</th>
<th>Wisdom</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moderation</td>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>Generosity</td>
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Example of Shape

- Shape is not equal to roundness or circularity, but includes roundness.
- A definition of shape must get at what all different shapes have in common.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shape</th>
<th>Def. of Square</th>
<th>Def. of Rectangle</th>
<th>Def. of Circle</th>
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<tr>
<td>Square’s</td>
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<td>Triangle’s</td>
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Third Definition of Virtue and its Refutation (78b3-79e)

• Virtue = Securing or acquiring good things (gold and silver, honors of the city, etc.) (78c). To be a virtuous person is to be a successful person.

• At 78d3 Meno adds ‘justice’ to the definition, so the new definition is:

  Virtue = Acquiring good things justly.

Already this definition is problematic, for as we saw with the second refutation, you can’t define virtue in terms of justice at all, for this defines the whole of virtue in terms of a part of itself, justice (79b-e). But we will ignore this for the moment.
The Refutation

1. If virtue is acquiring good things justly is not “then failing to secure gold and silver, whenever it would not be just to do so...also virtue” (78e4)?
   - In other words, is it not also virtuous to not acquiring good things when acquisition would be unjust?
   - This follows because: (Virtue = acquiring good things justly) is equal to (virtue = not acquiring good things not justly).

2. “Then to provide (or secure) these goods would not be virtue any more than not to provide (or secure) them” (78c4)
   - In other words, virtue cannot be equal to acquiring good things justly because one can be virtuous even when one does not acquire.

3. Conclusion: Virtue = either acquiring good things justly or not acquiring good things unjustly.

4. But this is not the same as the original definition, Virtue = acquiring good things justly. So the original definition cannot be true.
Moral of the Story

• Virtue is exercised not only when we act with justice but also when we avoid acting unjustly. Justice is a state of our soul, a disposition to do just things and avoid unjust things, piety is a state of our soul, a disposition to do pious things and avoid impious things, etc.

• The definition of virtue does not depend on acquisitions at all but the ethical manner with which one acquires or does not acquire, or does anything else besides acquiring.
How is Learning Possible?

• Both Meno and Socrates end up ‘numb’ and ‘perplexed’ (80c6).

• Nevertheless Socrates “want[s] to to examine and seek together...what [virtue] may be” (80d).

• The question for the rest of the dialogue: How is searching and learning possible?
Meno’s paradox

A person cannot search either for what they know or for what they do not know.

1) One cannot search for what one knows, since if one knows it there is no need to search.

2) One cannot search for what one does not know, for one does not know what to look for—and even if one found it one would not be able to recognize it. (80e)
Socratic not-Knowing and Learning

• Socratic not-knowing is meant to undermine (1), the idea that we do not search for what we know.

  – For if one knows that one does not know then one will have reason to search (for definitions, truth, goodness, etc.).

• What undermines (2), the idea that we cannot search for what we do not know?
Searching for the Unknown

The philosopher Donald Rumsfeld makes a distinction between:

1. **Known Unknowns**: To know that something is unknown requires *already* knowing a lot of things. We know that we don’t know all of the transition fossils between dinosaurs and birds. But we know that such fossils existed (and may still exist) because we already know the whole of evolutionary theory.

2. **Unknown unknowns**: Things that we cannot conceive of at present.

3. **Unknown knowns**: Things you know but don’t know you know.
Socrates Strategy

• Socrates tries to show that the definitions of virtue that we are searching for are not known unknowns, or unknown unknowns, but unknown knowns.

• In searching for definitions of virtue we are searching for something that we already have knowledge about, but knowledge that we don’t know that we have. It is implicit or ‘unconscious’.

• Socrates shows this through the myth about immortality.
The Myth of Immortality

• The soul is immortal, and has learned all things through time. But it forgets what it has learned each time it is born. To learn it must remember or recollect what it already knows.

• “As the whole of nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, nothing prevents a man, after recalling one thing only—a process man call learning—discovering everything else for himself, if he is brave and does not tire of the search, for searching and learning are...recollected.” (81d)
Myth as Allegory

• Does Socrates accept the literal truth of the myth of immortality? No. “I do not insist my argument is right in all...respects” (86b). Then why did he give the myth?

1. Meno’s paradox will make people ‘idle and fainthearted’ in their search for truth, whereas the myth makes them ‘energetic and keen on the search’ (81e).

2. The myth is an allegory for a philosophical position that Plato does endorse.
Innate Knowledge

It is an allegory for the idea that some ideas or concepts are **innate or a priori**, that certain concepts are not learned by examining the empirical world, but must already be possessed to learn about the world.


2. *A priori* knowledge: Conceptual knowledge that one has before experience. Example: ‘If A is more than B, and B is more than C, then A is more than C’. If one knows the meaning of ‘more than’ one knows, independently of the world, that A is more than C.
An Argument

Below there are two instances of one kind of triangle, and equilateral triangle. How does one learn this? By first seeing things that are the same and then calling them by one name?

But how does one recognize them as the same kind in the first place? Must not one already ‘know’ them to be the same to see them as the same?
Making the Implicit Explicit

• If one has innate knowledge of certain mathematic concepts, then the goal of searching and learning is to recollect: i.e., to bring to consciousness knowledge that one has but that one does not know one has.

• The goal of dialogue or philosophical dialectic is to make explicit the implicit knowledge that we already have.

• This is what the episode with the Slave-boy illustrates.
How do we create a square that has double the area of this square?
Slave-Boy Demonstration Continued

Double the length of each side?

But $2 \times 2 = 4$
and $4 \times 4 = 16$

Too big!
Slave-Boy Demonstration Continued

Increase each side by half?

But \(2 \times 2 = 4\)
and \(3 \times 3 = 9\)

Still too big!
Slave-Boy Demonstration Continued

Consider this line (85a).

“Clever men call this the diagonal.” (85b)
Solution

What if we build a square on the diagonal?

The diamond square is 8 units in area.
Moral of the Slave-boy Episode

• According to Socrates, the slave boy does not learn new things, rather through questioning Socrates stirs up ‘memories’ that allows the slave boy to make explicit to himself geometrical knowledge that he already has (85c).

• But for these memories to be stirred up, the slave boy most come to know he did not know, which he did by making mistakes (doubling the sides and increasing by half). He learns through his mistakes. (84a3).
Application to Virtue

• Socrates thinks that all persons already have an intuitive or implicit knowledge of what virtue is. After all, we all already *use* moral predicates in sentences, and if moral definitions were ‘unknown unknowns’ how could we do this?

• In learning about virtue through philosophical dialectic we do not learn new things or facts (as we do in many courses of study), rather we aim to get clear about the intuitive and implicit knowledge that we already have about virtue. We need to go from virtue being a ‘unknown known’ to being a ‘known known’.
Meno’s Paradox Redux

1) One cannot search for what one knows, since if one knows it there is no reason to search.
   • This horn of the paradox is defanged by coming to have Socratic not-knowing. If we know that we do not know, we have reason to search.

2) One cannot search for what one does not know, for one does not know what to look for—and even if one found it one would not be able to recognize it.
   • This horn of the paradox is defanged by the myth of immortality and the philosophical position that it represents, i.e., that we have innate knowledge.
     • We do know what to look for, because we already have a implicit, hazy, and vague grasp of what virtue is.
     • When we get a good definition of virtue we will recognize it as what we already know.