

The Practice of Dialogue:
Socrates in the Meno

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Abstract

I begin with a general claim and two sets of orienting points. The claim: dialogue might be pursued under the aspect of sameness/self, under the aspect of difference/other, or both. I offer two points of reference: (1) specific pursuits of dialogue as life practice: (a) seeking truth and (b) moral endeavor and (2) two modes of pursuit: (a) listening and speaking and (b) acting against self-defense.

Through a careful reading of the *Meno*, I offer an analysis of dialogue in relation to the categories mentioned above. Meno asks, 'Can virtue be taught?', and Socrates offers through dialogue provisional answers, on the basis of which we might suggest the following: First, we do not know what virtue is and must therefore remain open in the face of the question. Second, we can only approach such a question not with absolutes but with earnest and continuing inquiry. Third, as with life in general, we bring to our aid a set of curious possibilities and odd metaphors, following the twisting and obscure course of discourse itself. Fourth (not finally, for inquiry has no end) we must not only speak our answers and listen to the questions they contain; we must note the way life answers and questions, speaks and listens, and tune our often tin ears to the music emanating from the process itself in all its harmonics and varieties and discordant melodies.

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As I attempt to address this issue I find myself already caught in a web of multiplicity so vast and dense that I despair of finding any path through it. Let me then begin with a general claim and two sets of points by which we might orient ourselves. The claim: dialogue might be pursued either under the aspect of sameness and self or under the aspect of difference and other. My interest in the topic of dialogue covers both of these approaches, and each is, I believe, worthy of pursuit. They are even, one might say, hard to distinguish at their further points, like straight lines that continue parallel to infinity but that appear to converge at the horizon of our view. I offer two categories of points of reference: (1) specific pursuits of dialogue as life practice: (a) seeking truth and (b) moral endeavor, and (2) two modes of pursuit: (a) listening and speaking and (b) acting without self-defense.

Let us listen first to words from a well-known twentieth-century thinker, Robert Frost, who tells us: ‘Something there is that doesn't love a wall’ (1915, line 1). The practice of dialogue begins with this fact; it always calls us to note that no building of walls, whether epistemological or social or of mind or heart, remains the final word in our engagement with life. Later in *Mending Wall* Frost's narrator says:

*‘Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.’* (1915, lines 32-36)

I think that Socrates would approve, with the added proviso that that which one risks offending would be truth.

Let us turn now to Socrates, and to a particular text. I do not claim to be either revealing or discussing the historical Socrates, a task too arduous and perhaps simply impossible to accomplish in these pages. I address instead the Socrates of one particular Platonic dialogue, the *Meno* (1924), recognizing that current scholarship generally places the *Meno* at a turning point in the Platonic corpus,¹ a beginning of the move away from the more Socratic early dialogues to the middle period in which it is believed that Plato describes his own mature views.

Much of interest occurs in the *Meno*; we will take up only two strands of that multiply-threaded tapestry: the discussion concerning whether virtue is desire of the ‘fine’ or beautiful and the brief suggestion that progress is being made when one discovers that one is perplexed. I want to address these pieces of the *Meno*

¹ See e.g., Ionescu (2007) pp. xi-xii and Scott (2006) pp. 6-7.

merely schematically, with the hope that further dialogue might flesh out the discussion from the perspective of other interlocutors.¹

Desire for the good

In the dialogue bearing his name, Meno has had considerable trouble answering the seemingly simple question of Socrates about the nature of virtue. Socrates insists first of all that neither he nor anyone he has heard knows the true definition of virtue, to which Meno expresses amazement. When, however, Meno attempts to give an answer to the question as to the nature of virtue, he finds it perplexingly difficult. We join the dialogue at the point at which Meno tries again, basing his new claim on a bit of literature. It seems that a poet has, conveniently, said that virtue is a desire for and the power to attain the beautiful (*kalon*). Meno quite approves of this definition and draws from it his current definition of virtue: virtue is a matter of the right desire and the right power. Socrates immediately takes up this claim, dividing it at its mid-point, so as to address for now only its first conjunct: virtue is desire for the beautiful.

We might briefly summarize Socrates' argument as follows: To desire the beautiful is to desire the good. Some then, Meno insists, desire the good and some the bad (or ugly!). Some desire the bad thinking it is good; others desire it recognizing that it is bad. Of those who desire the bad knowing it to be such, some think it will bring them benefit; those of course, Socrates points out, desire the bad as though it were good, at which point he briefly offers a definition of the good as that which benefits and of the bad as that which harms. If there remain some who desire the bad knowing it is bad and recognizing that the bad harms, they must recognize also that to desire something is to possess it. These people then desire to possess that which harms (them); in other words, they desire that which will make them miserable and unhappy. But this latter group seems to have no members, for, Socrates says and Meno agrees, no one wants to be miserable and unhappy. This line of argument then brings the discussion to a conclusion – the conclusion that no one desires the bad knowing what they are doing. The interlocutors offer at this point a major amendment of the original claim: it cannot be that what distinguishes the virtuous from others is desire for the good; everyone desires the good.

We might note in passing that the text makes a subtle but possibly important move from speaking of 'desire' (*epithumein*) to speaking of 'want' (*boulesthai*); in the end we are told that no one 'wants' evil, not that no one desires it.² Whether this distinction makes a difference to the argument is difficult to discern. Perhaps the difference is this: People do in fact *desire* things that are evil, even believing that these things bring harm, misery, and unhappiness; but no one *wants* evil in

¹ For helpful recent discussions about the *Meno*, see, e.g., Ionescu, 2007; Scott, 2006; and Weiss, 2001.

² See e.g. Ionescu, 2007, pp. 25-27, for further discussion of this distinction.

the sense of wanting the harm, misery, and unhappiness itself. This claim could be restated as: even though *S* does not want *y* (misery, let's say), *S* can still desire *x* (the thing that produces misery); this seeming paradox relies on the quite obvious difference between implication in fact (*x implies y*) and recognition of that implication in one's desires. I can, in other words, desire something without at the same time desiring its obvious consequences. The status of 'wants' might be, as Aristotle suggests, such that 'without qualification and in reality, what is wished [wanted, *boulesthai*] is the good, but for each person what is wished is the apparent good' (III, 4, 1113a, 24, 2000, p. 37). Want/wish then is a term for the aim at the good that orients all one's deliberations and choices (Aristotle again); desire is a term for pure appetite. Whatever we wish to make of these distinctions, Socrates has clearly steered Meno away from his initial apparently elitist belief that he (Meno) and his friends are the only ones who are virtuous due to their desire for fine or beautiful things to a more egalitarian recognition that everyone desires or at least wants the good (and therefore, of course, the beautiful).

The value of perplexity

In this brief bit of dialogue, Socrates takes a conclusion Meno proposes (Meno having failed in two previous attempts to define virtue) and shows that on its own terms it is unsuccessful. Having dismissed the one conjunct, Socrates then takes on the other conjunct concerning the power to acquire good things. This discussion shows, primarily, once again the shallowness of Meno's understanding. He deems the good to be wealth, political power, and political honors. Socrates leads him to see the faultiness of his aims. We will not follow that argument further here but will instead move past this discussion to the attack Meno levels at Socrates. In its simplest terms it reveals the frustration with philosophy as a project, a frustration that most of us experience at times and that students, especially beginning students, appear to feel regularly. If questions are the essence of philosophy (as many of us would maintain¹), then what about answers? Must we dismiss answers entirely as irrelevant? Meno's approach is more specific of course; he complains that he has moved from a comfortable state of being able to give speeches on virtue to a distinctly uncomfortable state of being speechless about the very same topic. The perplexity to which he has been reduced, he suspects, arises from tricks by which Socrates has enchanted him. The complaint then is not only that Meno dislikes the feelings he now has; it is that these feelings result from some sort of illegitimate trickery on the part of the philosopher.

The simplest answer to Meno's complaint is to say that he is an arrogant, and not very smart, apprentice railing against the wise master of the trade (of philosophy) who has merely shown him up for the fool he is. We might say that

¹ In this regard one can hardly do better than look at the delightful last chapter of Russell (1997) in which he describes questioning as the essence of philosophy's contribution to human life.

his perplexity heralds the possibility of wisdom. ‘It is,’ we might tell Meno, ‘darkest before the dawn.’ Just stick around, my friend, and you will learn; your perplexity will vanish in the light of truth; and so on. Unfortunately, although Socrates does argue that perplexity proves to be a step in the right direction, we do not in the end see questions answered and the longing for truth and wisdom fulfilled¹ (as if these are the things for which Meno longs). At the very end of the dialogue Socrates mentions a possible though still uncertain conclusion on the basis of their reasoning so far then says but for now we need to stop our inquiry only to return to these issues another day.

This means that there is here both some good news and some bad. The good news is that those of us who consider ourselves philosophers, even in the most limited ways, will not soon be out of a job – philosophy continues because questions continue, apparently without end. The not-so-good news is that the answers we may have wished for in engaging in this form of inquiry just keep receding further and further away. One might begin the study of philosophy (as I did) with the aim of eventually getting it right (and I, personally, didn’t think it would take that long). Experience in the field, however, leads one to conclude that a lifetime might, under the best of circumstances, only get one started properly understanding the questions.

Turning back to the *Meno*, the analogy of the slave boy learning something new in geometry offers an important point – when he is perplexed he is better off than when he falsely thought he knew. At the same time it can offer false hope about the kind of issue Meno and Socrates are discussing. Although mathematics is by no means as simple and straightforward as it might have seemed to the Greeks and to those of us with only an elementary understanding of it, it does offer, if one keeps to certain principles and draws very clear boundaries, some interesting and obvious answers to questions. Philosophy, on the other hand, suffers from the great advantage of being a ‘community of the question’ (Derrida, 1978) for whom every answer only tells us what question to ask next. This is not to say that we cannot, by keeping to certain principles and drawing very clear boundaries, proclaim ourselves to possess some answers. It is only to say that once out of our philosophical infancy we recognize that the principles and boundaries are not a solution but another part of the problem; they are themselves always up for question.

Teaching virtue

Let us turn then from Meno’s perspective, that of the confused and angry recipient of too many questions, to that of Socrates. What is he doing? The initial question of the *Meno* is ‘Can virtue be taught ...?’ to which Socrates answers with more than a touch of irony, what an amazing question – here I am not even knowing what virtue is and you have leaped beyond this level of ignorance to

¹ Yet is not wisdom the result of beginning to know what one does not know?

another arena of thought entirely by asking whether it can be taught. Socrates does not allow the question to stand of course but moves the discussion immediately into an attempt to address the definition of virtue. It turns out then that Meno does not know what he claims to know; he does not know what virtue is. After the interlude during which Socrates questions the slave boy about geometry, they return to the question of whether virtue can be taught and Socrates reluctantly agrees to face this question directly. In the end, however, the question receives only a provisional answer, for how can it be answered until one knows what virtue is?

Some would claim,¹ and I am among them, that Socrates is answering the question all along the way. Meno begins with a high level of un-virtuous, perhaps even vicious, arrogance. Socrates, in clearing the ground of apparent knowledge plants seeds of virtue in Meno's soul. Even if wisdom is not the heart of virtue (a topic addressed with uncertain results in the *Meno*), one can hardly be virtuous without it. And the heart of wisdom, it would seem even to those of us without much claim to wisdom itself, is a recognition that we know far less than we believe we do. The logic of question and answer² is also a morality. One cannot truly ask without humility. One cannot stand face to face with a genuine interlocutor without allowing for at least reciprocity between oneself and the other and perhaps allowing for something more than reciprocity.³ One cannot face the Other – whether in the form of an idea, a question, or a person – without opening oneself to the profound realization of one's own lack and the world's mystery and, in some form or other, the possibility of transcendence.

So Socrates here questions and in questioning answers, though not in the only way, the question he faces. Can virtue be taught? First, we do not know what virtue is and therefore must remain open in the face of the question and all its progeny. Second, we can only approach such a question not with a set of absolutes but with an earnest and continuing inquiry. Third, as with life in general, we can bring to our aid a set of curious possibilities and odd metaphors, following the twisting and obscure course of discourse itself, tracing the river of thought to its source, which is never exactly a source, since the river is not only impossible to enter once (or twice⁴ – even if we translate 'river' into the metaphor of river stages following Quine, 1961), it has a source which could be called both

¹ See e.g., Scott (2006), esp. chapter 16, 'Meno's progress.'

² Gadamer (1991) pp. 370-372 aligns his discussion of the logic of question and answer with R. G. Collingwood (1978) and (2002).

³ Levinas (1998) follows Buber (1996) in pushing the importance of dialogue past 'experience' to 'encounter' and then on to show that genuine dialogue takes us past any sense of control over the other or even reciprocity with the other to a sense of debt to the other. Levinas marks out the ethics of our encounter with the other as 'first philosophy' in other texts, e.g., 1969.

⁴ There's some confusion as to what Heraclitus says about stepping into rivers, but one traditional claim is that he says that no one can step into the same river twice (as Plato has it in *Cratylus* 402a, but compare Heraclitus fragment DK22B12). *Cratylus*, then, is supposed to have said in response that one cannot even do so once (Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1010a13, where the Platonic claim about Heraclitus is repeated).

itself and not itself in the endless, unrepeatable cycle of water flowing to the seas and the seas returning to the sky and the sky returning to the rivers. Fourth, and not finally for in this endeavor there is no end, we must not only speak our answers and listen to the questions they contain; we must note the way life answers and questions, speaks and listens, and tune our tin ears to the music emanating from the process itself in all its harmonics and varieties and discordant melodies.

Dialogue as moral practice

I return now to say that the web of the multiplicity of questions and answers, and of answers and questions, lies just beneath the surface of our everyday dialogues as well as of our hearty philosophic ones. Socrates stands at our side whispering words of encouragement when we falter and of discouragement when we think we have succeeded. The thing one must love about philosophy (whether one will or not) is that it offers wonder in place of certainty, questions to every answer, and a long endeavor that shows us exactly why in thought as well as fact:

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.* (Frost, 1915, lines 1-4)

Let us return for a moment to issues with which we began: the aspects of sameness/self and difference/other and the undertaking of dialogue as seeking truth and as moral practice through modes of listening-speaking and of countering self-defense. Dialogue as practiced by Socrates might seem to remain within the aspect of sameness/self in that Meno has no voice once he has provided his series of faulty definitions or his attack on Socratic perplexity. The alleged dialogue of reason has been accused of being merely a hegemonic monologue, that is, a single voice listening only to itself and beating all foreignness into submission.¹ Yet if Socrates is, as he claims, perplexed himself and if he pursues the question of the nature of virtue in earnest, the process of question and answer becomes a movement guided not by self and not monotonically, but listening always to the other of 'reason'. This other might not be a simple sameness but might itself involve an encounter with a beyond that cannot be contained within any single, simple perspective. Reason itself might be less a choir without discord than a symphony full of contrasts, disharmonies, multiplicities, and difference (yet with guiding melodies of a rich complexity not ever to be wholly contained by human

¹ See e.g., Levinas (1969) and (1998).

thought). In that case, listening to reason and attempting to speak with or for it becomes an encounter rather than a monologue.¹

We see, then, in the Socratic practices described above a truth-seeking dialogue as moral practice as well as modes of listening and speaking. The place, finally, of countering self-defense must be addressed here briefly. Meno finds himself in this dialogue constantly defending himself, but against what we might ask. It seems that he defends himself against the truth, but how might such a defense benefit him?

Are we, one might ask, benefited by maintaining our version of the truth against all questions? Are we made better, our lives made richer, by turning aside from that which questions, from that which would say nay to our certainties? Or are we instead benefited by refusing, finally, to defend ourselves against truth and questions, benefited by allowing walls to tumble to the ground instead of maintaining them at all costs? Socrates, and here I hope we would follow him explicitly, says we are only benefited by examining our lives and thoughts, our ideas and ideals, until we welcome genuine perplexity and shun miserly certainty, making the logic of question and answer a moral stance that leads us to see that virtue can at least be taught to the extent of our recognizing learning and questioning themselves as virtues and the refusal to learn or question as a vice.

The problem of self-defense lies in identifying ourselves with our opinions. If I believe that my beliefs of the moment stand not merely as one set of ideas I hold at one time to be replaced in the course of things by others, I might so identify with them that I take a given set of beliefs to be me. When that is the case I may defend them with the same level of violence, at least on the verbal level, with which I would defend my life. Socrates calls his interlocutors to recognize their interests as lying on the side of truth rather than on the side of the maintenance of current beliefs. Thus the self-defense one might engage in to uphold or rebuild the walls of belief can turn instead to open acceptance of the potential to learn. Self-defense, in terms of unquestioning defense of one's beliefs, becomes the enemy of truth and Socratic dialogue the enemy of self-defense.

So in our philosophical wandering and wondering, we see that walls stand, sometimes, for the simple purpose of reminding us to ask and wonder and question and encounter that which we think we know but do not. And when we meet a wall that does not want to be met in return, we must join the earth in the disassembly of that wall or at least we must join one another in raising the question by which it is, perhaps, truly reinforced, until, that is, Socrates comes along and asks the question we have missed, producing a gateway through the crumbling barricade and an open passageway, where at least two may walk and talk, and where no path existed before.

¹ Gadamer (1991) addresses such a possibility in his discussion of the I-Thou relation, pp. 358-362.

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