

NOTAS Y COMENTARIOS

A STUDY OF THE CONCLUSION OF PLATO'S *MENO*

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Anyone who reads Plato's *Meno* may be disturbed if not aggravated by the dialogue's puzzling ending. This study will attempt to uncover the real ending of this dialogue, its meaning and significance.

Let us briefly review the dialogue. Meno asks Socrates how virtue is acquired. Is virtue acquired by teaching, by nature, by practice, by some other way? The dialogue is an attempt at answering this question and the more fundamental one, what is virtue?

The dialogue's ending concludes that virtue is not acquired by teaching or by nature. Socrates' hypothesis, "if virtue is knowledge, clearly it must be taught,"¹ fails. The failure of this hypothesis leads to the question of virtue being true opinion and the acquisition of such. How is this acquired? Socrates states that virtue is a gift of the gods, imparted by "divine dispensation without understanding in those who receive it" (99e7-100a1). To whom would such virtue be imparted? Socrates has already given some examples: the soothsayer and diviner who "utter many a true thing when inspired, but have no knowledge of anything they say" (99c405), the diviners who "having no understanding, yet succeed in many a great deed and word" (99c8-9), the prophets, soothsayers, and statesmen who, "being inspired and possessed of God when they succeed in speaking many great things, while knowing nought of what they say" (99d4-6).

Should the reader take such statements seriously? There are a number of reasons not to take these statements seriously, particularly the assertion that virtue is true opinion. First, when concluding his

¹ Plato *Meno* trans. W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 87^c5-6. All subsequent references are to the Lamb translation in the Loeb Series.

argument, Socrates asserts: “if through all this discussion our queries and statements have been *correct*”² (99e5-7). Second, let us recall something Socrates said to Anytus at 93c8. Socrates asks Anytus what he thinks of the sophists. After giving his opinion, Anytus is asked by Socrates how he knows what he says is true about the sophists; has he ever met a sophist? Anytus denies the slightest association with the sophists. Because of this, Socrates calls Anytus a *Mantis* or wizard, for how else could he know about the sophists? Like the *Mantis*, Anytus says things which may be true, but he has no personal knowledge of what he says. It is for this reason that Socrates uses the term *Mantis* to describe one such as Anytus. However, Socrates uses this same term to describe those to whom the gods impart virtue (99c4, 99d1). In light of Socrates’ description of Anytus as a *Mantis*, he who will later condemn Socrates at Socrates’ trial, how should the reader take Socrates’ use of the term *Mantis* with regard to the acquisition of virtue (99c4-100a1)?

There is another reason for questioning what may appear to be Socrates’ answer to the question of the acquisition of virtue at 99b5-100a1. In his discussion of the statues of Daedalus (97d7-98a10), Socrates states that these statues were kept from moving and were tied down by *aitias logismō*, the tie of reasoning, the causal tie, which he identifies with recollection. Like these statues, when opinions are fastened down by reasoning, they “turn into knowledge, and . . . are abiding (*monimoi*)” (98a6-8). This is precisely what is lacking in Anytus, the *Mantis*, and those *Theomanteis* (99c3-4), *Manteis* (99d1), and statesmen (99b5-c5; 99d2-6). If diviners, prophets, soothsayers, and statesmen lack understanding and knowledge, if they are like Anytus or the statesman Themistocles (99b7), who did not control his state by any “wisdom, nor because (he was) wise” and whose “qualities were not an effect of knowledge” (99b5-9); if such characters lacked what is of absolute importance to Socrates, the tie of reasoning, that by which opinion is overcome, what is to be said about Socrates’ strange conclusion at 99e7-100a1 concerning the acquisition of virtue? Is virtue acquired in mantic madness; is one such as Anytus given virtue because he acts like a *Mantis*; is virtue itself something as volatile as Daedalus’ shifting, fleeting statues? It may be doubtful; perhaps we should call into question the passage at 99b5-100a1, a passage which will be referred to as conclusion # 1 of the dialogue.

However, there appears to be a second conclusion to the *Meno*

² In other words, their findings may not be correct. Italics mine.

which is given at 100^a1-9. After stating that virtue is neither natural nor taught but is imparted by divine dispensation without those receiving it understanding, Socrates qualifies himself (as he did at 99^e5-7 when he questioned whether their “queries and statements have been correct”); he states: “unless there should be somebody among the statesmen capable of making a statesman of another” (100^a1-3).

This allusion to the statesman is not inappropriate as statesmanship has been discussed since Anytus’ entrance into the dialogue at 90^c3. What is significant here is the specific issue of the statesman teaching his statesmanship to another; an issue which was discussed at 99^b5-d6 but with an opposite conclusion. At 99^b5-d6, Themistocles could not make a statesman of another because he lacked wisdom and his qualities were not an effect of knowledge. Here, at 100^a1-3, there is given the possibility of a statesman making a statesman of another.

How would this statesman “make” a statesman of another? Would he not have to teach the other, something which the first conclusion (99^b5-100^a1) rejected? Also, would not knowledge and understanding be involved in this process of “making” a statesman of another, something which the first conclusion rejected? One may surmise that this second statesman (100^a1-3) would possess that which the first statesman (99^b8-9) lacked: knowledge and wisdom. Finally, what would be imparted in this process of “making” a statesman of another? Would the other be made into a divine and enraptured *Mantis* (99^d2-4); would the other be taught *mania*? Most likely, he would not.

The “unless” statement at 100^a1-3 appears to offer an alternative to all that was said at 99^b5-100^a1. We might invert the passage at 99^e7-100^a3: *unless* a statesman can make a statesman of another, then we would find virtue to be neither natural nor taught, but imparted “by divine dispensation without understanding in those who receive it.” With the “unless” statement at 100^a1-3, Socrates implies that virtue may be taught; it may involve knowledge and understanding on the part of the statesman making another like himself and the one being made into a statesman. The acquisition of virtue may not be the work of divine dispensation alone; it may involve more than a mantic state of mind. How else would a statesman “make” another like himself if this did not involve some type of teaching, practice, and knowledge?

Socrates is not denying the role of teaching, knowledge, and understanding in the acquisition of virtue. The statesman “making” another like himself would necessarily involve more than *mania*; it

would involve teaching, practice, and the imparting of knowledge. Most likely, the one being made a statesman would have to have the proper nature; it would appear that the nature of an Anytus or a Meno would not be fitting. Most likely, the blessings of the gods would have some part. Thus, 100^a1-3 seems to answer Meno's question regarding the acquisition of virtue; and it answers it in a way which opposes all that had been said at 99^b5-100^a1. The statement which follows this second conclusion (100^a1-3) further attests to this interpretation.

At 100^a3-9, Socrates states that this statesman who would make a statesman of another would be to his contemporaries what Teiresias was among the dead. Socrates then quotes Homer; although Socrates does not quote the passage in full, we will:

You (Odysseus) must first complete another journey and come to the house of Hades and dread Persephone, to seek soothsaying of the spirit of Theban Teiresias, the blind seer, whose mind abides steadfast. To him even in death Persephone has granted reason, that he alone should have understanding; but the other flit about as shadows.³

This passage is of great significance. As 100^a1-3 offered a different type of statesman, 100^a3-9 offers a *Mantis* different from that presented in the first conclusion (99^b5-100^a1). Unlike these 'unknowing' prophets,⁴ Teiresias is what might be called a 'knowing *Mantis*.⁵ Teiresias is a soothsayer and blind seer. Unlike other seers and unlike all other souls in Hades, Teiresias has an abiding mind. Reason was imparted to him by Persephone and *pepnusthai*, sagacity, was given to him alone. These passages coincide for another reason. As in the previous passage at 99^b4-100^a1, the second conclusion at 100^a1-9 relates the *Mantis* and the statesman. Unlike the first type of *Mantis* and statesmen who "have nothing more to do with wisdom that soothsayers and diviners" (99^c4-5) (the very reason why the entire issue of the *Mantis* is discussed), Teiresias is called a *Mantis* because he possesses *pepnusthai*, the wisdom of the sage.

³ Homer *The Odyssey* trans. A.T. Murray (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), x.490-495. All subsequent references are to the Murray translation in the Loeb Series.

⁴ For some examples of what may be called 'unknowing' *Mantis* in Platonic literature, see: *Laches* 198^e5-199^a4, *Epinomis* 975^c6-8, 985^c3-d¹, *Laws* 719^c7-10, *Timaeus* 71^e3-72^a5, *Ion* 534^a-b.

⁵ For examples of what may be called a 'knowing' *Mantis* in Platonic literature, see: *Apology* 22^a-c, 33^c6-10, *Cratylus* 384^a6, 242^c, 238^c-d, 247^c-e, 263^d3, 241^e1-5. 249^e1-5.

There is another reason which may lead one to give the second conclusion (100^a1-9) serious consideration. When Socrates quotes Homer, he does not quote the entire passage as has been done here.⁶ Teiresias is called the blind seer whose mind abides steadfast (*empedoi*). This notion of abiding has been discussed before in the *Meno*. At 97^d10-98^a10, Socrates discusses the statues of Daedalus, which are of little value unless they are “fastened” (97^d10-11, 97^e4-5, 98^a6-7) so that they “stay” (97^e4, 8, 98^a2) in place. Right opinions are worthless and do not “turn into knowledge” (98^a7) “until one makes them fast with causal reasoning” (98^a4).

When once they are fastened, in the first place they turn into knowledge, and in the second, are abiding. (98^a8-10)

Socrates emphasizes the seriousness of this issue, stating that the difference between right opinion and knowledge is for him one of the few things which cannot be conjectured: “something I would particularly assert that I knew: there are not many things of which I would say that.”

In light of this passage at 97^d10-98^a10, something more may be said regarding the second conclusion at 100^a1-9. If the difference between right opinion and knowledge is based on the issue of ‘abiding’ (*monimoi*, from *menō*: to stay, abide, be steadfast, remain, await, continue),⁷ and if Teiresias is that *Mantis* whose mind “abides steadfast” (*empedoi*: steadfast, unshaken, lasting, of a surety, truly, certainly),⁸ may not the essential difference between the first type

⁶ It should be recognized that this is not the only passage in the *Meno* where Persephone grants something. In the famous passage at 81^b9-c4 which introduces Socrates’ discussion of recollection, Socrates discusses a myth from Pindar in which Persephone restores certain souls “to the upper sun again.” From these souls arise “glorious kings and men of splendid might and surpassing wisdom” who are “called holy heroes amongst mankind.” There is a striking similarity between this passage and the other passage where Persephone is mentioned (100^a3-9). In both, Persephone imparts a gift to man (perhaps this is what Socrates is hinting at with *theia moira*, divine dispensation). In both, man is found dwelling in the underworld. In both, the god grants, to the one surpassing wisdom, and, to the other, understanding and sagacity. Both men are given such accolades as ‘holy hero amongst mankind’ and “a real substance among shadows”. In both, there is mentioned the statesman or glorious king. In both, these men are distinguished from others. Finally, both passages have some reference to Socrates’ notion of recollection: 81^b9-c4 introduces the issue of recollection; 100^a3-9 speaks of “abiding” which is an important element in the act of recollection (98^a8).

⁷ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *Abridged Greek-English Lexicon*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 435, 451, 525.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

of *Mantis*-statesman (99b5-100a1) and the second type (100a1-9) be this issue of abiding as well as knowledge, wisdom, and sagacity?

The first type of statesman cannot make another like himself because he rules by *eudoxia*, a more glorified form of right opinion.⁹ For this reason, he cannot make another like himself. Like the statues of Daedalus, like opinion itself, such statesmen are not "fastened" by the ties of reason and an abiding mind. Teiresias, that special seer whose mind abides steadfast and who has understanding and sagacity would be like that statesman (100a1-3) who could make another like himself, possessing that which the first *Mantis*-statesman lacks: wisdom, knowledge, and an abiding mind.

It is for these reasons that one should give serious attention to the "unless" at 100a1. Perhaps, if one recollects, i.e., if one's mind abides steadfast in the inquiry into the nature of virtue, the second conclusion (100a1-9) might prove true. The acquisition of virtue might require more than a mantic disposition void of understanding and reflective deliberation; it would require more than the blessings of the gods. If the gods were to bless one with the necessary condition for the acquisition of virtue, it would not be the soul of the *Mantis*, Anytus, but the soul of Teiresias, a soul which possessed understanding and sagacity (perhaps this is what Socrates implies at 100b3). Most importantly, it would require that which Teiresias possesses and the one who recollects would possess: an abiding mind.

Although we should take Socrates' advice and *inquire* into the nature of virtue before asking how it is acquired, he may have answered Meno's question regarding the acquisition of virtue. How is virtue acquired? The answer lies in that which Meno's very name represents but which he does not emulate: an abiding mind, a mind which recollects (*paramenai* 97e4, *paramenōsi* 97e8, *paramenein* 98a2, *monimoi* 98a8: all of these derive from *menō*).

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Before concluding, a topic related to this issue of "abiding" should be discussed. Throughout the *Meno*, Socrates emphasizes the importance of *zēteō* (to seek, search, inquire, investigate, examine)¹⁰

⁹ Socrates is saying, ironically, that it is really the opinions others have of the statesmen that allow them to rule. Cf. Jacob Klein, *A Commentary on Plato's Meno*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), pp. 247-248.

¹⁰ Cf. Klein, pp. 91, 92, 96, Klein also emphasizes the importance of *peiro* (to attempt, undertake, try, examine, or question) on pp. 54, 58, 59, 71, 92, 100. See *Meno*: 73c9, 74e13, 75a8, b9, d9, 77a1,6, 82d15. Cf. Liddell and Scott, p. 298, 541.

with regard to the acquisition of virtue. At 80^d5, Socrates tells Meno he is willing to join him in seeking virtue “and inquiring (*zētēsai*) into its nature.” At 80^e2, Socrates refuses to accept Meno’s argument concerning the impossibility of searching for that which one does not know:

A man cannot inquire (*zētein*) about what he knows or about what he does not know. For he cannot inquire (*zētoi*) about what he knows, because he knows it, and in that case is in no need of inquiry (*zētēseōs*); nor again can he inquire about what he does not know, since he does not know about what he is to inquire (*zētēsei*).

This is why Socrates brings up the question of recollection and the Persephone quote of Pindar at 81^b9-c4. We may inquire into that which we do not know through recollection. The very act of recollecting is considered identical with the act of inquiring.

For as all nature is akin, and the soul has learned all things, there is no reason why we should not, by remembering but one single thing—an act which men call learning—discover everything else. if we have courage and faint not in the search (*zētōn*); since, it would seem, research (*zētein*) and learning are wholly recollection. (81^d1-6)

Socrates criticizes Meno for believing such a capricious argument; for “it would make us idle and is pleasing to the indolent ear, whereas the other makes us energetic and inquiring” (*zētētikous*) (81^d8-e1). Socrates then calls upon Meno to continue the search for the nature and acquisition of virtue. “Putting my trust in its truth, I am ready to inquire (*zētein*) into the nature of virtue”. (81^e1-2)

This desire to search is what is lacking in Meno. However, it is what is present in the slave boy. Socrates’ torpid questions instil in the slave boy a desire to search for answers.

And we have certainly given him some assistance . . .towards finding out the truth: for now he will push on in the search gladly (*zētēseien*), as lacking knowledge . . .Now do you imagine he would have attempted to inquire (*zētein*) or learn what he thought he knew, when he did not know it . . .(84^b9-c4-6).

Unlike Meno, Socrates has “often inquired (*zētōn*) whether there were any” (89^e7) teachers of virtue and found there were none. “Many have shared the search (*zētō*) with me, and particularly those persons whom I regard as best qualified for the task” (89^e9-10). For Socrates, our “first duty” is to “look to ourselves and try to find

(*zetētēon*) somebody who will have some means or other of making us better” (96^d8-10). Socrates ends the dialogue with the same declaration: we will not know the certainty of our findings unless we “set about inquiring (*zētein*) what virtue is” (100^b7) before asking how virtue is acquired.

Socrates’ emphasis on inquiring, which he identifies with his notion of recollection (81^d5-7), is intimately related to the issue of “abiding”. The process of recollecting is both the act of inquiring and the act of fastening (*paramenō*) with causal reasoning. Once opinions are fastened, they turn into knowledge and “are abiding” (98^a8). As Socrates says: “whatever you do not happen to know at present . . . what you do not remember—you must endeavor to search out (*zētein*) and recollect” (86^b2-4). Thus, this act of inquiring and abiding (*menō*: to abide, continue, linger, hold good)¹¹ are a part of the same activity, the Socratic endeavor, the process of recollection.

. . . that the belief in the duty of inquiring (*zētein*) after what we do not know will make us better . . . than notion that there is not even a possibility of discovering what we do not know, nor any duty of inquiring (*zētein*) after it—this is a point for which I am determined to do battle . . . both in word and deed . . . since we are of one mind as to the duty of inquiring (*zetētēon*) into what one does not know, do you agree to our attempting a joint inquiry (*zētein*) into the nature of virtue. (86^b9-c7)

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What does this dialogue say to us; what may we learn from it? Although we may not know the nature of virtue nor how it is acquired, this does not deny us the opportunity to be like the slave boy: to inquire, search, persevere, and make the attempt at finding answers to these and other questions. It does not deny us the opportunity to “look to ourselves” (96^d9); “to search out (*zētein*) and recollect” (86^b3). Perhaps we may recognize that it is in this Socratic desire to inquire, the desire which possessed the soul of the slave boy by Socrates’ torpid questions, that virtue itself is both known and acquired.

In the end, each one of us is a slave boy, a slave to *doxa* and ignorance, with Socrates and his torpid questions as our teacher and inspiration. Perhaps, with such a teacher, with diligent perseverance and an abiding mind, with practice, a fitting nature (unlike that of

¹¹ Liddell and Scott, p. 435.

Anytus or Meno) and the blessings of the gods, we will succeed in answering the questions of the Meno: what is virtue and how is it acquired?

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