



# *Teaching Virtue with Elenchus and Aporia*

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Class: Plato

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In the *Meno* Socrates claims that he leads a slave-boy to knowledge without teaching him. This essay will be concerned with discovering whether Socrates was in fact teaching and, whether this method, be it teaching or not, is meant to be used for attaining virtue. In addition to answering this questions I will attempt to draw a distinction between Socrates and Plato. With this distinction I hope to reveal a chasm between the behaviour of the historical Socrates and that of Plato's character Socrates. My view of Socrates will be based on what Socrates character admits to in the *Apology* as well as on my understanding of presocratic philosophers. I will start, though, by delving into various conceptions of teaching. Next I will evaluate how the various concepts of teaching apply to the slave-boy exchange. Lastly I will explore how these forms of teaching are related to the learning of virtue.

## **Section 1 - On Teaching**

In order to come to any conclusion concerning whether Socrates is teaching in the slave-boy exchange, I must begin by exploring the concept of 'teaching' itself. Socrates claims not to be teaching the slave, as the slave is not gaining knowledge which he did not have prior to the exchange. "He will know it without having been taught ... and find the knowledge within himself." Similarly, the crucial part of our modern conception of teaching is an imparting of knowledge; teaching is "to instruct; to educate; ... to impart knowledge of." Plato too had a similar conception of teaching. To him teaching involved the student needing to memorize huge gobs of Homer, Hesiod, or other influential writers. Learning involved memorization of books, not the interpretation of the text. The question with which I am faced in this essay is what the activity of teaching actually consists of.

Having briefly explored two conceptions of 'teaching', I will now briefly review the slave-boy scene in the *Meno* so that I may uncover whether Socrates is correct in saying that he is not teaching.

The entire dialogue can best be understood through following the series of *elenchoi* which Socrates leads both Meno and the slave-boy through. In *elenchus* Socrates cross

examines each man in turn on something they claim to have knowledge of: Meno concerning virtue, the slave-boy concerning basic geometry. Socrates then refutes the men by showing them that the knowledge they thought they had is inconsistent with other opinions which they hold. The slave-boy scene arises when Socrates has brought Meno to *aporia* (state of perplexity) concerning the teachability of virtue and Meno admits that "both [his] mind and [his] tongue are numb." This *aporia* is the intended purpose of *elenchus* and assists, as we find out in the *Republic*, in the process of turning the soul around toward the truth.

Having demonstrated that Meno does not know what virtue is, and having claimed that he himself does not know either, Socrates wishes to "seek together with [Meno] what [virtue] may be." However, Meno objects to this on the basis of a common sophistic idea that you cannot "search for something which you do not know at all." It is in reaction to this statement that Socrates speaks of our immortal souls which have seen and learnt all things prior to being born. We do not seek what we do not know but instead seek to remind ourselves of knowledge which we have forgotten. Gaining new knowledge would be impossible because knowledge, to Plato, is knowing the Forms (of which we already have full dormant knowledge). If we teach (in the common sense) all we gain is a true belief. Socratic Teaching (I capitalize this so as to distinguish Socrates' *elenchus* from our modern imparting of information), it seems, concerns itself not with imparting new information, rather with reminding us of what we have forgotten.

Meno is none too convinced by Socrates' quick introduction of otherworldly knowledge and asks Socrates to show him that things are as Socrates says. It is here that Socrates asks for a slave, someone who would not have had any instruction in geometry. Socrates wishes to demonstrate that the slave has knowledge of geometry even though he has never been instructed in that science. If he is able to demonstrate that the slave is able to answer questions about which he has not received instruction, Socrates feels he has demonstrated that the slave already possessed knowledge of geometry, and by implication that all knowledge is known, if only lying dormant.

Socrates uses *elenchus* with the slave-boy as well and brings him to *aporia* at 84b. When Meno agrees that the state of *aporia* is superior to false knowledge Socrates makes it clear why this is so. When convinced by false knowledge we don't seek the truth about which we are mistaken. So the slave-boy, and by implication Meno, has benefited from having been brought into *aporia* as he now longs to know the truth. It is this longing which Socrates has brought upon Meno and the slave-boy which is the start of the erotic desire which drives philosophy. It is a desire *to need* to know brought into being through the realization that we do not know. Once this erotic desire to know has been stimulated the subject is vulnerable to being turned around, away from the shadows on the wall (in the sense of Plato's Cave analogy). The pain of looking into the light which is coming into the cave is dulled because the desire to know has been awakened. Socrates' role is not that of a teacher but of a mental tour guide; leading people with the use of questions from the cave into the world of light.

Socrates poses a series of questions to the slave-boy which are meant to stimulate the boy's recollection. The questions lead him beyond his perplexity and to true opinion. "But if [the slave boy] were repeatedly asked these same questions in various ways, you know that in the end his knowledge about these things would be as accurate as anyone's." It seems that the questioning does actually work. Without outright telling (i.e., teaching) the slave the answer, the slave comes to the required conclusion. We are lead to believe that he had recalled the answer. With this Socrates believes he has demonstrated that we can seek out what we do not consciously know because "the truth about reality is always in our soul." The sophism that Meno introduced in 80d ("that one cannot find out what one does not know") is hereby shown to be false. With this Meno is convinced of the otherworldly knowledge to which Socrates had but moments before introduced him.

## Section 2 - Critical Evaluation of Platonic Teaching

Socrates claims not to be imparting any new information to the slave-boy (nor to Meno) but instead to be using *elenchus* to awaken a desire to know. This desire will enable the slave to remember true opinions (and eventually knowledge) from before birth.

We may object to Socrates' questioning on the basis that he leads the slave-boy through the steps to the conclusion. We may say that leading questions are a form of imparting new information; i.e., a form of teaching. But I don't think this is the case. Leading questions still require the slave to arrive at an answer by himself. If we assume the slave to be answering truthfully (i.e., not to be a 'yes-man'), it wouldn't matter how leading the questions were; the slave would still need to understand what is being asked of him and the answers he'd provide would come from his own mind. What we may object is that it is not recollection which enables the slave-boy to respond in the expected manner but his reasoning skills.

It seems that to Plato Teaching involves recollection brought on by *elenchus* and *aporia*. Yet we are not necessarily condemned to believing in reincarnation if we accept the Platonic 'Teaching by questioning'. We do not need to accept recollection if we believe *elenchus* and *aporia* to be Teaching. Indeed, to assume that the slave must have had knowledge in some subconscious way is unnecessary, though Plato does his utmost to jump from true opinions to inherent knowledge. The slave may have simply been extrapolating from the knowledge of geometry he already had. I doubt that the slave would be able to give an answer to Socrates if he had not at least basic knowledge of geometry. If it was a matter of simple recalling of information, wouldn't Socrates be able to lead the slave-boy through complex physics as well? It is more likely that the slave extrapolated from the small amount he did understand about geometry. The slave figured the answers out for himself as he followed the logic laid out by Socrates' leading questions.

Although it seems correct that Socrates is not imparting new information, it now also seems that the slave example does not demonstrate an other-worldly source of knowledge. What we may grant Plato is that the truth of the new opinion is dependent on the quality of the questions being posed. *Elenchus* is key in pointing out our ignorance, and *aporia* is key to opening our minds to other possibilities. In our perplexity, we use as our foundation those things that we think are consistent with each other; those things which have been made clear through *elenchus*.

Then what of Meno's sophism? In rejecting knowledge from before birth do we not also admit that we cannot search for something we do not know? This is at the heart of Socratic Teaching and may be the key difference between Platonic and Socratic philosophy. Whereas teaching aims at imparting unequivocal knowledge, Socrates does not attempt to impart any knowledge. Socrates seemed to be on a quest to bring everyone to *aporia* through *elenchus*. In doing so he demonstrated the inconsistencies in the beliefs his audience had and, in stoking their desire to need to know, he encouraged them to find a philosophy which is internally consistent. Socrates describes himself in the *Apology* as a gadfly. He saw his function as not that of a teacher, but "to never cease to rouse each and every one of you, to persuade and reproach you all day long and everywhere I find myself in your company." He thought himself as having "never been anyone's teacher" but instead as someone who questions. "If anyone says that he has learned anything from me ... be assured that he is not telling the truth." It seemed from the *Apology* that Socrates Teaching is limited to *elenchus*.

If Teaching (as per Socrates in the *Apology*) is to be understood as 'weeding out the inconsistencies', unequivocal knowledge cannot be attained. Nor do we have use for a theory of Forms nor for recollection of knowledge. This I take to be the division between Plato and Socrates. To Socrates, Teaching (ST) involves only *elenchus* while for Plato, Teaching (PT) involves unequivocal knowledge. The purpose of PT is to 'turn the soul around', to allow the soul to see the beauty, the perfection of the Forms. In Teaching the slave-boy in the *Meno*, Plato had his Socrates character do just that, brought the slave to *aporia* and then lead him out of the cave to see the truth. Socratic Teaching may still be thought of as 'turning the soul around' as it is in Platonic Teaching, but to Socrates it means to face your inconsistencies; to try to come to an understanding of events. Both men would understand traditional teaching to be a method of trying to cram the student full of unexamined propositions.

### Section 3 - On Teaching Virtue

The *Meno* starts with the question which is to be the central theme of the dialogue; whether virtue can be taught. My question concerns whether the slave boy exchange is meant to indicate a method of teaching virtue. As Plato was a brilliant writer I will start with the assumption that he would not include a large section in the middle of the dialogue which had nothing to do with the central theme. So then the question is

no longer *if* the slave-boy exchange suggests a method of teaching virtue, but *how* the two are related.

Previously in this essay I have redefined 'teaching' so that I now have three different types. There is imparting information (teaching), pure *elenchus* (ST), and *elenchus* leading to the recollection of knowledge (PT). As we have already explored both teaching as well as the slave-boy exchange I will now address Plato's understanding of virtue and then return to the question of how teaching is related to virtue.

## **Background of virtue**

The question of what virtue is arose from the democratization of the Athenian political system. Previously virtue had been thought of as the birthright of the aristocracy much like nobility in our own society. With the collapse of the aristocratic class its legitimacy was also lost and virtue was no longer thought of as a birthright. What exactly virtue is is what Plato wished to bring to light.

Sophists arose from the new democracies. They were men who offered to teach excellence, to teach virtue. Protagoras, whom Plato portrays in the dialogue named after him, was among the most celebrated of the sophists. Protagoras believed virtue to be knowledge of the good and so offered to teach virtue to young men in order to prepare them for their political life.

In the *Protagoras* Socrates' surface struggle is to find out whether virtue can be taught. More essential is Socrates' struggle with the question concerning the nature of virtue; whether virtue is knowledge. "I have no other reason for asking these things than my desire to answer these questions about virtue, especially what virtue is in itself." So Socrates is left with determining whether the virtues, which in the *Protagoras* he reduced to the single virtue of wisdom, can be further reduced to something teachable. He undertakes this task in the *Meno*. Socrates wonders whether virtue is a *techné*, for if virtue is a *techné* it is teachable, and if it is not teachable it may also not be knowledge.

## **The question of teachability**

If virtue is a type of (teachable) knowledge it would be roughly like a *techné*. If we want to be a good physician we learn from a physician, says Socrates in the *Meno*. If virtue is a *techné* then he who wants to be virtuous needs to learn from a virtuous person. But Themistocles was a virtuous man yet his son Cleophantus was not virtuous. Surely if Themistocles could have taught his son virtue he would have. From this, and two other similar examples, Socrates wants to conclude that virtue must not be teachable (and by implication virtue is not knowledge). Protagoras on the other hand argues that virtue is teachable and the fact that sons are not as virtuous as their fathers goes to show that teaching is a skill (*techné*) which he has and the fathers do

not. "I consider myself to be ... uniquely qualified to assist others in becoming noble and good."

Indeed Protagoras earned much money for 40 years for his skill at teaching. Socrates reasons that if Protagoras didn't teach anything of value he would not have made a very good living. But we may not conclude from this that he taught virtue. From what we do know of Protagoras it seems he taught economics, debate, and other such things, not virtue. Debate and management of the house are indeed like shoemaking and medicine; they are *techné* and therefor teachable. This does not address virtue.

What exactly virtue is seems elusive in these discussions but I believe this elusiveness to be intentional. Socrates Taught with *aporia*; he had no intention of giving answers. Socrates' intention was to be a gadfly. To Socrates virtue was not any type of knowledge but instead the consistency between ideas. The virtuous man was he who was consistent enough to withstand Socrates' *elenchus*. To be virtuous is to exhibit excellence through selfconsistency.

For Plato, on the other hand, virtue is closely tied to knowledge of the Forms. To Plato too, be virtuous is to exhibit excellence, but this excellence takes a different form. In the *Meno* Plato introduces us to the concept of recollection of knowledge. Knowledge of geometry seems to be recollected by the slave-boy rather than taught by Socrates. Knowledge is virtue, as opposed to true opinion, which is what we get when we learn information such as *techné*. If Socrates had simply taught the information to the slave-boy the slave would have had a true opinion of geometry, information which could be useful if he were to work as an engineer. But from Plato's perspective, the slave-boy would not have learnt knowledge of geometry. Knowledge is not 'learnable', it may only be recalled.

As for virtue, which Plato understands to be 'excellence', this too is not learnable. Excellence is measured in adherence to the Forms. Though we may teach a child to behave properly, the child will only ever learn a true opinion of proper behaviour and will never become virtuous. In the *Republic* Plato explains that the child would need to be forced to turn away from the shadows on the wall and to see the light coming in through the cave entrance. Another image Plato is fond of using is the process in which the eye of the soul is gently lifted from a "barbaric bog."

What is key to understanding the answer to our question is the difference between education and instruction. Whereas instruction (teaching) aims at filling the mind with gobs of Hesiod and Homer, education (Teaching) strives to develop passion for wisdom. "Education isn't what some people declare it to be, namely, putting knowledge into souls that lack it." Instead Teaching is concerned with turning the soul around, away from the shadows on the wall and towards the light. To Plato Teaching is concerned with assisting people in recalling knowledge which they acquired before birth, while teaching, he might say, is instrumental for those unwilling or unable to be Taught.

## Conclusion

To our question of whether Socrates is teaching I have answered a resounding 'no and yes'. 'No' in so far as we understand teaching to be the imparting of information; 'yes' in so far as Teaching is *elenchus* and leads to either self consistency or recollection of the Forms. Socrates (the person) believed that teaching was the emparting of information and it is for this reason that he is offended in the *Apology* when he is accused of teaching. On the other hand Plato defines teaching as 'turning the soul around'. Plato believed that there is a Form, some identifiable excellence, which we must stive to become. This is what Teaching was to Plato: lead the student to see the forms. In this way, Socrates (Plato's protagonist) was indeed teaching. But, I see no reason to believe that Socrates (the person) felt the same way. Socrates was a gadfly; trying to coax people into becoming excellent through resolving internal inconsistencies. Once a person was fully consistent he (for his audience were always males) then would then have knowledge and he'd presumably be virtuous.

In whether we interpret the slave-boy exchange to be a suggested method of Teaching virtue I think we really have no choice. First of all, Plato was not in the habit of including (excess) tripe in his dialogues. It must be meant as a method of Teaching virtue as this is what Meno and Socrates were discussing. Plato left it up to the reader to interpret the significance of the exchange. Secondly, the slave is led through a series of leading questions which showed him his ignorance and then challenged him to recollect (or to find) the expected answer. This is indeed how Plato believes virtue must be taught. Knowledge of excellence (virtue) can only be gotten from the Forms and the way we recover this forgotten knowledge is through Socrates' *elenchus*. For Plato teaching may lead to true beliefs but Teaching leads to virtue and insight.

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