Spring, 2008
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Course web page: (not Blackboard) See: www.phil.vt.edu/JKlagge/Homepage.htm

Plato’s “Meno”

Socrates (470-399 B.C.)
The “Agora” in Athens

Plato (427-347 B.C.)
Can virtue be taught?
“Nature vs. Nurture”
But, what is “virtue”?
What is “virtue”?

71a: Socrates doesn’t know

71c: Gorgias knows

Sophists

“sophistical”

Gorgias  Protagoras  Prodicus

Modern Sophists

Modern Sophists

Political Consultants?

Karl Rove

James Carville

Modern Sophists

Subliminal Advertising

Modern Sophists

Advertising & Marketing Specialists?

Every woman should be this satisfied at least once a day
What is “virtue”?  
71a: Socrates doesn’t know  
71c: Gorgias knows  
71d: Meno must say for himself

Meno’s answer (71e)  
- Man’s virtue: successfully manage public affairs  
- Woman’s virtue: successfully manage household  
- Child’s virtue…  
- Old man’s virtue…  
- Slave’s virtue…  
- And so on…

Ellipses: 
-  
-  
-  

Requirements of a good definition:  
1) Not just a bunch of examples.

Socrates’ response (72c):  
- “Tell me, what is this very thing…in which they are all the same and do not differ from one another?”  
- “Even if they are many and various, all of them have one and the same form which makes them virtues.”

Ellipse: a closed plane figure all of whose points are such that the sum of the distances from that point to each focus is equal.
Requirements of a good definition:
1) Not just a bunch of examples.
2) Essence: What it is about the examples in virtue of which they are examples of the concept being defined.

Meno’s attempts (78b-79e):
- Virtue is the power to acquire good things.

Counter-examples
- Fish: An animal that lives in the ocean.
- Counter-example?
- Something included in the definition but which is not an example of the concept. (The definition is too broad.)

Counter-examples
- Mammal: An animal that has hair and gives live birth to its young.
- Counter-example?
- An example of the concept which is not included in the definition. (The definition is too narrow.)

Requirements of a good definition:
1) Not just a bunch of examples.
2) Essence: What it is about the examples in virtue of which they are examples of the concept being defined.
   A) Neither too broad
   B) Nor too narrow.
**Ellipse:**
a closed plane figure created by the intersection of a plane and a conic section.

**Requirements of a good definition:**
1) Not just a bunch of examples.
2) Essence: What it is about the examples in virtue of which they are examples of the concept being defined.
   - A) Neither too broad
   - B) Nor too narrow.
3) The definition should contain concepts that are **clearer** than the concept being defined.

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**Guileless?**

“Guileless” means having no guile.

**Circular Definition?**

- IRS definition of “a child living at home”:
  - A child who lives at home.

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**Meno’s attempts (78b-79e):**
- Virtue is the power to acquire good things.
- Virtue is the power to acquire good things *justly or virtuously.*

**Requirements of a good definition:**
1) Not just a bunch of examples.
2) Essence: What it is about the examples in virtue of which they are examples of the concept being defined.
   - A) Neither too broad
   - B) Nor too narrow.
3) The definition should contain concepts that are **clearer** than the concept being defined.
   - E.g., no circular definitions.
Meno’s attempts (78b-79e):
• Virtue is the power to acquire good things.
• Virtue is the power to acquire good things *justly* or *virtuously*.
• When Meno’s second try doesn’t work out, how does he react?

Meno’s Ready to Give Up (80 a-c)
• Dogmatism: Unwillingness to examine one’s own views carefully.

Psychological studies on (in)competence
• Most incompetent people don’t know that they are incompetent.
• People who do things badly are usually quite confident—more confident than people who do things well.
• Some college students who do badly on a test will spend hours in the professor’s office explaining why the professor’s answers are wrong.

Thomas Jefferson:
“He who knows best knows how little he knows.”
Remaining questions:
• Will Meno admit his ignorance?
• Does Socrates know what virtue is, and whether it can be taught?

Assignment for next class:
Read the rest of the Meno: pp. 70-92 in Plato’s Five Dialogues.