Plato’s “Meno”

Socrates (470-399 B.C.)

The “Agora” in Athens

Plato (427-347 B.C.)

What is “virtue”?

71a: Socrates doesn’t know
71c: Gorgias knows

Sophists
“sophistical”
Gorgias  Protagoras  Prodicus
Modern Sophists
Political Consultants?
Karl Rove

Modern Sophists
Political Consultants?
James Carville

Modern Sophists
Advertising & Marketing Specialists?

Modern Sophists

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.)

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

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.

Guileless?
“Guileless” means having no guile.

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

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.*