

A Response to Meno's Question: "Can Virtue Be Taught?"

In Plato's *Meno*, the characters Socrates and Meno have a Socratic-dialogue discussing the definition of virtue ("Arete" in Greek) and whether it can be taught. Meno asks how virtue is acquired, and Socrates, in turn, instructs that the answer is unclear because what makes up virtue is difficult to define. Throughout, Socrates challenges Meno to stretch his mind and engage in critical thinking to understand the true meaning of virtue. By teaching Meno to divine the essential nature of virtue, perhaps Socrates answers the very question through his actions. Meaning, if Socrates can successfully instruct Meno about virtue -- then yes, maybe virtue can be taught. Today's contentious world might be helped by an actual, concrete answer to this important question or a best guess. My answer is that virtue can, and should, be taught. At least, we should attempt it.

Plato's purpose in *Meno* is to present a critical discussion to the reader about the meaning of virtue in man and in society, and how can we instill it. It is an important inquiry. It is difficult for Socrates and Meno to construct an agreed-upon, conclusive definition of virtue. Meno first claims it is a number of different traits in different individuals. He then suggests, erroneously, that virtue is the desire for beautiful things and the power to attain them. Lust for beauty and power are definitely not virtues for this era, although they may have been laudable goals in Plato's time. Socrates, in turn, pushes Meno to view virtue as an essential, central characteristic more akin to a type of knowledge or wisdom, which may be innate, even in part. Ultimately, they seem to agree on the surface that if virtue can be defined as a type of knowledge, it can be taught. While I arrive at a similar conclusion, I get there differently.

In 2020, using the Webster's definition, virtue is defined as morally good behavior or character. It's a fairly common meaning of virtue in our time, and certainly many religious groups and ethicists in today's world believe that moral goodness is incredibly teachable, and it is important to do so. Millions of religious and ethics-based schools and places of worship have been built since Plato's era in which to teach this definition of virtue. One of the reasons that Socrates and Meno seem to be struggling more than I am about the meaning of virtue, and whether it is teachable, is not only because I can research Webster's Dictionary on the internet and they couldn't, but also because the Greek word "Arete" also meant "excellence" back then. I can see how it would be harder to arrive at a conclusion as to whether innate excellence can be taught, rather than moral goodness.

How is virtue best taught? I feel it is really important for young children and adolescents to hear stories about goodness, charity and selflessness in others. We all need role models to show us how to be the best versions of ourselves, and to understand that virtuous behavior is rewarded by communities valuing those actions. The literal instruction process of having adults teaching younger members of society about how to be good, kind and virtuous in act and deed helps too, because in forming instruction groups, one is actually forming communities with those who prioritize virtue and moral goodness. Ultimately, the teaching of virtue is really important to undertake, even if Socrates's suspicions are correct that maybe one can't change what is innate in a human being. We must continue to try to create peace through a virtuous world, with the hope that successes will far outweigh the predictions of those who are less optimistic.