

Study Guide on Plato's *Meno*

"Answer me again then from the beginning . . ." (79e¹). Have the interlocutors accomplished anything by this point in the dialogue? If so, what has the progress been? (Remember Socrates' desire to make progress, expressed at 74b.)

What is virtue? Why, according to Socrates, must we answer this question first (71b)?

Evaluate the various definitions of virtue that are proposed. What progress is made in each new formulation, and how does it fall short? Consider these passages and the questions following:

- 73c: In what respect are all virtues the same?
- 73d: What is excluded from this definition? Why bring up shape (73e)?
- 77b: "to desire beautiful things and have the power to acquire them."

Why does Socrates spend so much time on the geometrical question? What is at stake in this exercise? Account for what gives rise to this part of the discussion.

Has Socrates taught the slave boy anything? (Notice the claims at 82e and 84d.)

Is questioning a form of teaching? Is it possible to teach only by asking questions?

Socrates says about the slave boy, "He will perform in the same way about all geometry, and all other knowledge" (85e). Consider the similarities and differences between geometry's demonstrative method and other methods of acquiring knowledge. Do certain methods lend themselves to teaching by questioning, and others not?

Outline the argument for recollection. What principles does Socrates assume as known, and how does he proceed from these? Consider the following passages:

¹ John M. Cooper, editor. *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1997. (All references in parentheses are to the standard Stephanus pagination for Plato's dialogues.)



- “They say the human soul is immortal” (81b).
- “There is nothing which it has not learned” (81c).
- “Searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection” (81d).

What is the difficulty in maintaining that virtue can be taught? Consider that if virtue is a kind of knowledge, then we would expect to find people who teach and people who learn virtue (89d). Evaluate the case for each of the following being teachers: the sophists (91b-c), Athenian gentlemen (92e), Themistocles, Aristides, Pericles (93c–94c).

Why does the discussion turn to knowledge and true opinion at the end of the dialogue?

- Why does Socrates bring up the statues of Daedalus (97d)?
- Socrates claims to know that “right opinion is a different thing from knowledge” (98b). What exactly does he mean? How does he support this belief?
- How can correct opinion guide action correctly (98b, 99a)? What is the significance of this relation in the dialogue?
- Consider Socrates’ claim that virtue is a “gift from the gods” (100b). Why does Socrates believe that? Is the claim true?

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Plato’s *Meno*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

