The Enigmatic Blanket

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If virtue is knowledge as Socrates wants to suggest at the end of the *Protagoras*, then we must assume it is teachable. Or must we? Yet at the end of the *Meno*, doubt is cast on even this provisional conclusion of the *Protagoras* when Socrates says, ". . . since virtue cannot be taught, it cannot be knowledge." (99b)[1] Or can it? And, if by now, there is not enough uncertainty, we are told virtue will be acquired by divine dispensation BUT—there is an important exception. That exception is one who can create another like himself (100a).

We wonder at this point, whether we have caught Plato unable to make up his mind whether or not virtue is knowledge, giving Socrates contradictory positions while covering the contradiction over in an enigmatic blanket. In seeking to make sense of this apparent contradiction and frustrating riddle, we will have to follow a very stout thread through the Minoan maze until we reach the light of understanding. For as every reader of Plato knows, you can far more easily assume the world doesn't rotate on its axis than find Socrates has seriously contradicted himself. What then? The reader must instead suspect that while contradiction may appear on the surface, it is often because he or she has carelessly accepted the conventional understanding of words until brought up short by the juxtaposition of opposing claims.

This paper will attempt to make sense of these puzzling statements and in so doing try to clarify the nature of virtue bringing to light its relation to knowledge. Our main purpose will be to attempt to uncover some of the characteristics of knowledge and then address the question of whether or not it is teachable. Finally, we will be ready to entertain some possibilities as to the meaning (if any) of the exception mentioned above.

It is in the *Apology* that we find our first clue to virtue when Socrates finds fault with the Athenians, who because of their ignorance, care more about fortune and fame than for truth and wisdom. What should they concentrate their attention on that is of even greater value; it is goodness:

> For I spend all my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your first and chief concern, not for your bodies, nor for your possessions but for the highest welfare of your soul (302b).

Already we are aware that men, in pursuing the good are mistaken about what the good is (357d). Yet they are ignorant of their ignorance. The appeal to what men "think" to be the good is an appeal to popular opinion. Moreover, it is false opinion (358d). The world of Namos understands the good very differently than does Socrates. It equates pleasure

with the good (Cf. *Plato: The Man and His Work*, pg. 260). What gives pleasure is good and what gives pain is to be avoided. Yet mistaken as this view is, it attempts to pursue what it thinks the good is. It is what is called "right opinion," and most men live by it. The mistake is a costly one for it means that those who dwell at this level are less than human. If men don't understand the things of the soul, they don't qualify as men.[2] The main drawback of this "thinking" is that it won't stand up under scrutiny (97b-98a). If we can find a pleasurable thing that is bad or a painful thing that is good, we see that this position is untenable. Two examples might be: to smoke is pleasurable but it is bad for your health, and sugar is pleasurable but bad for you if you are a diabetic. On the other hand, taking medicine is not pleasurable but it is good for you.

If the meaning of who men are depends on how they understand virtue (opinion), then it would seem rather urgent to ask as our next question, "What is virtue?" This forms the central question of the *Meno*. And as is characteristic of Plato's antagonists, their answers are never completely wrong, so too with Meno. If at first Meno externalizes the question by suggesting that virtue is the governance of others, he is at least going in the right direction. He is right that virtue is rule, but not rule of others, rather it is the self that must be directed properly. This is made explicit in the Laws (2.653b):

> By education, then I mean goodness in the form in which it is first acquired by a child. In fact if pleasure and liking, pain and dislike, are formed in the soul on right lines before the age of understanding is reached,. . . these feelings are in concord with understanding, thanks to early discipline in appropriate habits–this concord, reguarded as a whole, is virtue.

Men have not always exhibited a love of self direction. Although men had long possessed technical skills for survival their lack of self discipline almost destroyed them according to the myth Protagoras tells (322b). Upon Zeus' intervention and at his interdiction men henceforth were to acquire virtues (only two were specified; "justice and respect for others") on pain of death. Socrates keeps justice but clarifies the vague "respect for others" by the addition of wisdom, temperance, courage and piety. He also provides a rational instead of mythological basis such as Protagoras chose.

But because these virtues are pursued in light of only right belief, they are considered separate from one another. We even think it possible to be pious but not just e.g., the slum lord who wouldn't miss a Sunday at church or the sober man who can't find the courage to speak out. We have difficulty in seeing that different virtues are parts of a whole; one can't be had apart from the others. Wisdom however, seems to be given the dominant role:

> If then virtue is an attribute of the soul, and one which cannot fail to be beneficial, it must be wisdom for all spiritual qualities in and by themselves are neither advantageous nor harmful, but become advantageous or harmful by the presence with them of wisdom or folly. If we accept this argument, then virtue, to be something advantageous, must be a sort of wisdom (88c).

Such a line as the last one of the above quote is designed to startle the reader, is also a signal to raise the question, "What does he mean by virtue. . . must be a *sort* of wisdom? " Either it is wisdom or it isn't. Jacob Klein's treatment of the matter in *Plato's Meno* may help us clarify the situation. He points out that Plato has shifted from *epistême* (knowledge) to *phronêsis:*

> Now, phronêsis, the exercise of wise judgment, although *not identical* with epistêmê, knowledge always appears *linked* with "knowledge." A man who judges people, situations, things wisely, so as to be able to counsel, to behave, or to act well, is a man not without "knowledge." In this sense, phronêsis may be said to be knowledge of some kind" (epistêmê tis). . . (pg. 125)

The signifigance of this shift Klein suggests, is to: ". . . permit Socrates to circumvent the problem of the whole that knowledge poses. The wisdom underlying the exercise of wise judgment is always present–although not manifestly so–as a 'whole'" (ibid, pg. 216-17).

However, if virtue is a "sort of wisdom," it follows from this that goodness is not innate but apprehended in some other way. The most obvious way is by teaching. The Sophists charged large fees for teaching virtue[3], so it is no wonder that the *Meno* opens not with a question concerning the nature of virtue, but a question about whether or not it can be taught, for which Socrates chides Meno. Yet our conventional beliefs seem to support such an assumption both in the family between parents and children and between the citizens and the state.

There is an assumption underlying this supposition. We know that virtue is knowledge and everyone knows that knowledge can be taught. Or can it? We are now ready to answer our first question. The answer is no. And we shall see why in a moment, but first we might imagine Meno countering with the following question of academicians: "What is your profession?" The answer they would have to give is that they are teachers. Meno would no doubt say: "We need go no further, here are teachers, virtue is knowledge and so it can be taught."

Meno would exemplify the misunderstanding that most of us have to some degree concerning knowledge, namely, that students are but empty vessels into which facts are poured; or even that its nature is that which we are most familiar, tradition or convention. But just suppose that knowledge is nothing of the sort, that there is something about knowledge that

we overlook because we hold views similar to those mentioned above.

What is needed is a kind of knowledge that goes beyond right opinion; one that would not only concern itself with a proper goal but one that had a proper method of apprehending such a goal. The failure of right opinion is that it accepts without question, basic assumptions without clarification rather than seeking the proper foundations on which they rest, i.e., the principles from which they emanate. It looks at particular instances without discovering what it is that these instances have in common, that is, what their essential nature is. Right opinion therefore settles for half truths or parts of things without understanding the whole.

Socrates compares right opinion to the statues of Daedalus which if not tied down run away (97d). To understand Socrates' point all we have to do is look at our experience with opinion which makes it seem as changeable as the direction of the wind, depending on the current powers of persuasion. The problem is that if the "right" of right opinion is subject to change in this manner, how can it be maintained as right opinion, since it is a mixture of some truth and the rest is bias of one kind or another. Doubt does seem to be cast on the ability to maintain right opinion under such circumstances, by the conditionality of Plato's phrase in 97b: "And as long as he has a correct opinion on the points about which the other has knowledge. . . ." As Klein points out on page 246 of *Plato's Meno*, Meno misses the conditionality of the phrase which supports his claim that ". . . the man of knowledge will always be successful. . . " (97c) and which point he too easily concedes.

Knowledge on the other hand is not so flighty or whimsical. "For to know something means to know what and *why* this something is what it is, and therefore this knowledge itself cannot be subject to change." (Cf. *Plato's Meno*, pg. 248). What true opinion lacked was not being "bound" or held fast by the mind. This binding consists in finding *reasons* for them (right opinions) in one's own thinking" *aitias logismôi*) (ibid). This important point will be returned to below. This is the whole aim of what Socrates calls recollection.

At first, the theory of recollection is told as a myth but by the end of the *Meno*, we find the analogy of true opinion to Daedalus's statue, the need for "binding" true opinion to the mind foreshadows[4] the Theory of Knowledge in Book Six and Seven of the *Republic*, specifically in connection with what will be called "Divine Knowledge." The "binding" we speak of is nothing other than *logos*.

In brief, the soul learns everything prior to its birth:

> So we need not be surprised if it can recall the knowledge of virtue or of anything else which, as we see, it once possessed. All nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, so that when a man recalled a single piece of knowledge–*learned* it, in ordinary language–there is no reason why he should not find out all the rest, if he keeps a stout heart and does not grow weary of the search, for seeking and learning are in fact nothing but recollection (81c-d).

Taken alone, this myth accounts for only part of the theory of recollection, for we cannot explain why we should have to search for knowledge and need the myth from the Phaedrus which explains that prior to being born, the soul circled the forms and became distracted by its desire to be closer to the forms and distracted in its competition with other souls, falls to earth. (247c-248d) and in the *Republic* (621a-b) we learn the soul drank too much of the river of forgetfulness in its lack of moderation. It would, however, be an injustice to leave the myth without "unpacking it further on a level other than the mythological.

The first significant information is the statement that "all nature is akin." The soul has a kinship with all things in that they are interconnected:

> By virtue of this assumption every thing, every bit the soul recollects can be understood as a "part" of a "whole" and can be traced back to a common origin. The word *physis* is attuned to the assumption of kinship, of a common ancestry (the syngeneia) of *all* that is. This assumption makes the world a "whole" (*Meno*, p. 96).

Knowledge therefore is "finding all the rest" or the interconnectedness of all things. As I pointed out earlier, the problem with right opinion was that it didn't bother to look for the rest. Certainly a kind of sight is required but seeing the interconnectedness of things is the work of the inner eye, or reason. Thus, "seeing" is the mind depicting similar structures or relatednesses, something they all have in common, including itself: a oneness. Knowledge then is not external and the soul is not an empty vessel, rather it contains knowledge within it, that is, within ourselves. It is not magic or mysticism but a kind of mystery we unravel by our own efforts. It does not come easily for we are tempted to settle for less in our laziness, although a "stout heart" is not all there is to a successful search. Knowledge does ". . . not come from teaching but from questioning" (85d). It comes from careful examination in which we ourselves are the instrument; we are our own teachers. In this sense no one can teach another about virtue.

We can now answer our first question with which we began. Yes, virtue is knowledge but we may NOT assume that it is teachable if what we

understand by knowledge is, not true belief, but true knowledge. If it is true knowledge it can't be taught but it is instead, recollected. True belief can be taught if what we mean by taught is rhetoric or the art of persuasion. If this kind of knowledge is what is meant then virtue can be taught. Our second question hinges on a linguistic misunderstanding as well. It is true that virtue cannot be taught, if by teaching we understand the world of convention and tradition or the art of persuasion. It cannot be knowledge of this kind. Whether or not this statement is true depends on what we understand by knowledge. Understood properly, there seems to be no contradiction between the two statements.

Now we must face our final obstacle, the "enigmatic blanket" as it has been refered to earlier. Our way has been made easier by the clarification of what is meant by knowledge. Our task remains to raise a question concerning recollection; for certainly left to their own devices, men would not know where or how to begin a search such as the one Socrates alludes to in the above myth.

If virtue is knowledge and knowledge can't be taught, yet men seem to be able to be virtuous both on the level of true belief and of true knowledge, how is this accomplished? It cannot be by nature because even if knowledge can't be taught it does involve reason rather than instinct. If men were instinctually good they would automatically "know" what the good is and be it or more to the point there would be no need for knowledge at all. Socrates instead suggests that it is a gift, but a strange one it is indeed, for it closely resembles divine possession and refers to statesmen and the charismatic nature of their speeches (99d) but no less do others who are virtuous besides the stateman act under divine auspices:

> . . . virtue will be acquired neither by nature nor by teaching. Whoever has it gets it by divine dispensation without taking thought, unless he be the kind of statesman who can create another like himself (99e-100a).

We have one more clue to our exception and that is he will be "like a solid reality." In Plato's terms this could only mean one who had achieved ". . . clear intellectual insight into fundamental moral principles. . . " (Cf. *Plato: The Man And His Work*, p. 144) and this means one whose soul actualized or made manifest the "kinship with all things." Taylor suggests it is the philosopher–king who will be able to distinguish between a lower kind of good and a higher kind:

> . . . that which the Republic calls the goodness of the philosopher and it is based upon certain and assured personal knowledge of the true scale of goods, and is therefore 'abiding.' The lower kind which is at best a shadow of true goodness, is based on "opinions" which are true, but are not true knowledge and therefore. . . not permanent; in fact it rests on acceptance of a sound tradition of living which has not been converted into personal insight into the scale of goods (ibid).

Socrates himself is such a paradigm. I would like to borrow Taylor's suggestion and say all the above of Socrates and push such a comparison a bit further by saying that the Socratic method of teaching did "create others like himself." That this method is as close as we can ever come to saying virtue can be taught. The method I am referring to occurs in the *Theaetetus* when Socrates describes himself as practicing the art of Midwifery. His art is the art of the "spiritual midwife" in helping others see the interconnectedness of all things and thus bear children (ideas) which are not Phantoms but "solid realities." This he does through dialogue which literally binds two or two are bound to search together for the unity of all things. How else can virtue be taught then to take apart, bring together and make such unity manifest. What else is knowledge but knowledge of the good. Thus does our enigmatic blanket dissolve.

NOTES

1. *Plato*, Huntington and Cairns, eds. All quotes concerning the dialogues are from this translation and will not be further identified.
2. Based on (38a). While Socrates admits that true opinion is "just as good a guide" as knowledge (97b) he is describing things as they are, as they presently exist in the state for those who are willing to exist in their ignorance. In (98a) Socrates does say knowledge is preferable. In the *Republic*, as Taylor points our: "There are two distinct levels of "goodness," one which will be sufficent for the ordinary good citizen. . . and a higher indispensible one for the statesmen who have to direct the whole of national life and determine its standard." (Cf. *Plato: The Man And His Work*, p. 131).
3. Although Gorgias is a Sophist, he does not claim to teach virtue.
4. In *Plato's Meno*, Klein states: "The theme of recollection reappears stripped of all mythical connotations. (p. 248)

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