

Ankara Üniversitesi Açık Ders Notları

PHI 107 EPISTEMOLOGY I

TOPIC 2:

Plato, *Meno*

Meno Can you tell me, Socrates—does virtue come from teaching? Or does it come not from teaching but from practice? Or does it come to people neither from practice nor from being learnt, but by nature or in some other way?

Socrates Well, Meno, in the past it was for horsemanship and wealth that the Thessalians were famous among the Greeks and admired, but now, I think, it is for wisdom too, especially your friend Aristippus' fellow-citizens in Larisa. You owe all this to Gorgias. When he went to that city, he won over the most eminent people as lovers for his wisdom—both those within the Aleuad family (including your own lover Aristippus) and those among the other Thessalians. In particular he trained you in the habit of answering any questions anyone asks with the grand confidence that suits people with knowledge, just as he himself too volunteers to be asked anything that anyone in the Greek world may wish, and never leaves anyone unanswered. But here in Athens, my dear Meno, the opposite has happened. A sort of drought of wisdom has developed, and it seems that wisdom has left these parts for yours. At any rate, if you want to ask one of the people

here such a question there's no one who won't laugh and say: "Well, stranger, perhaps you think I'm some specially favoured person—I'd certainly need to be, to know whether virtue comes from teaching or in what way it does come—but in fact I'm so far from knowing whether it comes from teaching or not, that actually I don't even know at all what virtue itself is!"

And that's the situation I'm in too, Meno. I'm as impoverished as my fellowcitizens in this respect, and confess to my shame that I don't know about virtue at all. And if I don't know what something is, how could I know what that thing is like? Or do you think it possible, if someone doesn't know who Meno is at all, that this person should know whether he's beautiful or rich, or whether he's well-born, or whether he's the opposite of all these? Do you think that possible?

Meno No I don't. But is it really true about *you*, Socrates, that you don't even know what virtue is? Is this the report about you that we're to take home with us?

Soc. Not just that, my friend, but also that I don't think I've yet met anyone else who does, either.

Meno What? Didn't you meet Gorgias when he was here?

Soc. Yes I did.

Meno You mean you didn't think he knew?

Soc. I don't remember things very well, Meno, so I can't now say what I thought

about him then. But perhaps he does know, and perhaps you know what he used to say, so remind me what that was. Or if you like, *you* tell me yourself, for I expect you think the same as he does.

Meno Yes I do.

Soc. Well then, let's leave him out of it, since after all he isn't here—and Meno, by all the gods, what do you yourself say that virtue is? Tell me and don't keep it back. Make it a really lucky false statement I've uttered, if what comes to light is that you and Gorgias do know, all the time I've been saying I'd never yet met anyone who did.

Meno But it's not hard to tell you, Socrates. First, if it's virtue for a man you wish to know, that's easy: virtue for a man is the ability to conduct the city's affairs and, in so doing, to help his friends, hurt his foes, and take good care not to get hurt himself. Or if it's virtue for a woman you wish for, that's not hard to describe: she must run the home well, looking after everything in it and obeying her husband. And there is another virtue for a child, whether female or male, and another for an older man, free or slave, whichever you wish. And there are a great many other virtues, so that there's no perplexity about saying what virtue is. For there is virtue for every field of practice and time of life, in connection with every activity, and for every one of us; and vice too in the same way, I think, Socrates.

Soc. I seem to be having a lot of luck, Meno, if in searching for just one virtue

I've found a positive swarm of virtues in your possession. But Meno, to follow up

this metaphor of swarms: if I had asked about the nature of a bee and what that

is, and you had said that bees were many and varied, how would you answer me

if I then asked, "Do you say they are many and varied and different from one

another *in respect of being bees*? Or is it not at all in *this* respect that they differ,

but in some *other* respect, such as beauty or size or something else like that?" Tell

me, how would you answer if you were asked that?

Meno I would say that in respect of being bees they are no different from one

another.

Soc. Then if I said next, "Well, tell me then, Meno, what do you say this thing

itself is, in respect of which they are not different but all the same?", I expect you

would have an answer for me?

Meno Yes I would.

Soc. Then it's the same with the virtues too: even if they are many and various,

they must still all have one and the same form which makes them *virtues*.

Presumably it would be right to focus on this in one's answer and show the

questioner what virtue actually *is*. Or don't you understand what I mean?

Meno I think I understand. But I don't yet grasp the question quite as clearly as

I'd like to.

Soc. Well, is it only about virtue, Meno, that you think as you do—that there is one for a man, another for a woman, and so on—or do you think the same about health and size and strength too? Do you think there is one health for a man and another for a woman? Or is it the same form in every case, if it really *is* health, whether in a man or in anything else?

Meno With health, I think it is the same in both man and woman...