The Socratic Method in *Meno* by Jeff White

Introduction

The dialogue of *Meno* provides a prototype of Socrates at work to better the souls of men. Like any devoted craftsman, Socrates uses his tools to measure and hone the subject of his work, here the mind of Meno. These various tools in aggregate constitute the Socratic Method, which has been held by some as the highest form of teaching, and perhaps the only effective form of teaching philosophy (Nelson, L., 1949). Fundamental to the process is the dialectic, in which an exchange of conversation raises questions, proposes answers, and challenges with contradictions and counterexamples, as a journey ever driving toward an always elusive conclusion. Two essentials for the dialectic are the *elenchus*, wherein the interlocutor is forced into a rejection of a previously held belief or position, and the *aporia*, as the interlocutor then collapses into the frustration of seeing no workable answer to the question. In the end Socrates hopes to foster the birth of new realization, which he holds as like unto the work of a midwife – the *maieutics*. The effectiveness of the components of the Socratic Method has been called into question, and *Meno* in particular has been held as a study in its limitations [CITATION Nor13 \l 1033]. I conclude with a brief examination of those limitations.

The Dialectic

Socrates views conversation between individuals as much more than a social interaction. Rather, he uses conversational interchange as a tool in the search for truth and the teaching of philosophical principles. Terming it as the ability to “render and exact an account of opinions in discussion” (The Republic, 531e), Socrates uses the exchange of questions and answers as a method to a logical progression, moving in an ever tightening circle toward the way-stops of the *elenchus* and the *aporia*. There is little doubt that, like the chess master, Socrates is thinking several moves ahead of his interlocutors. And despite his professed ignorance, there is also little doubt that Socrates guides the questioning down a preconceived path to a preconceived end.

In *Meno*, Socrates allows his interlocutor to begin the exchange with the question as to whether virtue can be taught. Socrates replies with his own question, asking for a definition of virtue (*Meno*, 70a, 71c). This typifies the early stage of the dialectic, where a wide net is cast, often by requesting a definition, as part of the process of collection. The process of collection gathers a sense of the commonality of a series of diverse objects or ideas [CITATION Dav16 \l 1033]. Just as the early stages of a chess match may involve a feint, so here Socrates, nowhere near his ultimate goal, begins with a general move not necessarily directed toward it.

Later, Socrates employs a second technique of the dialectic, redirecting the original question of *Meno* into a hypothesis, in which he uses the dialectic technique to construct a deductive syllogism:

Premise 1: Virtue is a good.
Premise 2: Knowledge encompasses all that is good.
Conclusions: Virtue must be a form of knowledge (*Meno*, 87d).

The hypothesis forms a common tool of the Socratic dialectic, typically employed after reaching the terminus of the *elenchus* (Nelson, A. J., 2013). It is viewed as a logical and constructive adjunct to the destructive *elenchus* (ibid.). Socrates here turns Meno from a state of admitted unknowing toward a fresh attempt to reach the central question as to the nature of virtue.

The third main component of the dialectic is division [CITATION Hal12 \l 1033]. Reaching the termination of the exercise with Meno, Socrates combines a hypothesis structured as an inductive examination with a picking out of evidence from Anytus in order to attempt to define whether virtue may be a divisible form of knowledge:

Premise 1: Virtue may be a form of knowledge.
Premise 2: Knowledge must have teachers.
Premise 3: We have no evidence of teachers of Virtue.
Conclusion: Thus, Virtue may not be knowledge (*Meno* 89d-96c).

The *Elenchus*

The e*lenchus* is an intermediate way-point in the journey of the dialectic. It is the point at which firmly held beliefs have been found to be contradictory with a more evident truth or fundamentally stipulated principle. As Plato described it in the *Sophist*, it is when men “gather these beliefs together in conversation and place them side by side. And they show that these beliefs contradict each other…” (*Sophist* 230b). This method was held by Plato to be “the greatest and most efficacious of all purifications” (Sophist 230d).

However, the e*lenchus* is by its very nature a destructive process. It involves the relentless deconstruction of the position or proposition of the interlocutor. After going through a dialectic exercise of collection and division, Meno reaches a point at which his ideas of virtue as a pluralistic or contextual concept have been disavowed. He then explicitly complains of the destructive nature of the *elenchus*, stating “before I’d even met you, Socrates, I’d heard that all you do is infect other people with the bewilderment you suffer from yourself. And that seems to me to be what you’re doing now too…” (*Meno* 79e-80a).

Some authors hold that the *elenchus* also has a constructive aspect, in that it allows Socrates to positively present his own moral positions [CITATION Gre82 \l 1033]. This typically occurs as Socrates introduces the truths or principles which contradict the ultimately refuted position of the interlocutor (ibid.). In the exchanges with Meno this occurs as Socrates asserts that the explanation of virtue should lie in its “single characteristic” (*Meno* 72c), which he asserts as a point of “universal application” (*Meno* 73e). Inasmuch as these positions of Socrates may reflect

truths or an appreciation of the Forms, the destructive process of the *elenchus* in dismantling a false belief simultaneously constructively exposes the interlocutor to truth [CITATION Rob05 \l 1033].

The *Aporia*

The second way-point in the dialectic journey is the *aporia*. Typically occurring at the conclusion of the destruction wrought by the *elenchus*, the *aporia* is a state of subjugation and surrender, where the interlocutor stands devoid of his prior belief and without a sense of any way forward regarding the question at hand. Nelson termed this "a higher level of ignorance" (Nelson, L., 1949).

Meno reaches this point at the end of the *elenchus* when Socrates proposes a fresh examination of the nature of virtue, and Meno despairs:

> And how will you search for something, Socrates, when you don't know what it is at all? I mean, which of the things you don't know will you take in advance and search for, when you don't know what it is? Of even if you come right up against it, how will you know that it's the unknown thing you're looking for? (*Meno* 80e).

The *aporia* is the culmination of the destructive force of the *elenchus*. It, like the rubble produced by the wrecking ball, represents the destruction of an old order. But it also represents the potential for the construction of a new order. It allows the entry of the hypothesis and the testing of the new premises, perhaps with deduction and perhaps with induction, but unencumbered by prior dogma.

The Maieutics

Socrates was the son of a midwife, and he held his work to be like that of one attending a childbirth [CITATION Ann03 \l 1033], characterized as the *maieutics*. He described it in the *Theaetetus* – "not because they have ever learned anything from me, but because they have found in themselves many fair things and have brought them forth" (*Theaetatus*, 150d). This concept was closely related to that of the immortality of the soul and the doctrine of recollection. Socrates held that the knowledge being sought was already within the interlocutor, and required delivery with skilled assistance in an often difficult and discomforting process.

Socrates described this in *Meno* at the terminus of the demonstration with the slave. Here Socrates held that "if he were to be repeatedly asked the same question in a number of different ways, he'd certainly end up with knowledge of these matters that is as good and as accurate as anyone's" (*Meno*, 85c-d).

Conclusion

Meno exemplifies several of the shortcomings of the Socratic Method. The dialectic requires that the interlocutor reply truthfully, and there is no assurance that Meno in his often terse agreement with Socrates is truthful. Likewise, the method of the *elenchus* is destructive in its production of the *aporia*, but there is no assurance that from that point of destruction the *maieutics* will bring about a new realization. This is in part because the new start relies upon the use of an inductive hypothesis, which is at best an uncertain and inherently flawed tool. Taken together, we find in *Meno* an interlocutor who admits the limitations of his prior concepts of virtue, but is left at the point of *aporia*, with no convincing understanding to fill that void. In the end, Socrates is left to promise a further examination of the nature of virtue (*Meno*, 100b), and at the end of his dialectic journey finds himself not far from where he began.

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