

Virtue Cannot Be Taught

An interpretation of the argument Socrates presents in the “Meno”

1) Virtue (justice, honesty, moderation, courage) is a quality of character, expressed in the ways a person behaves.

2) Virtue can be taught if and only if virtue is knowledge of something. So: Is virtue knowledge?

3) Virtue is good all by itself, and a person’s possessing something good all by itself cannot but always benefit that person.

4) Any quality of character not guided by knowledge (understanding, wisdom) can be harmful. Thus, any quality of character not guided by knowledge is a quality of character not inevitably beneficial to the person who possesses it.

Take assiduity or commitment, for instance. A person of commitment who doesn’t understand his commitments or how best to serve them could well harm himself. Or beauty. A beautiful person who is also foolish can very easily come to grief through his beauty.

5) Since virtue is a quality of character that always benefits the person who possesses it, virtue must itself be knowledge of something.

6) Therefore, virtue is, in whole or part, knowledge.

7) Children do not act out of virtue. Virtuous adults were not virtuous as children.

8) Virtue, thus, does not emerge from that part of our character, our temperament, that we received from nature.

9) Therefore, whatever the knowledge is in which virtue consists, that knowledge is not a natural or innate knowledge, not even in those who eventually become virtuous.

10) Thus, those who acquire virtue acquire it by learning it.

11) If something can be acquired by learning, there will be people who can help one to learn it.

This might not be true when it comes to trivial things. But it is certainly true of important things, such as hunting and sailing and geometry and Homer. Virtue, of course, is one of the important things.

12) There must, then, be people who are teachers of virtue, people who are able to help their students to acquire whatever the knowledge is in which virtue consists.

These teachers might explicitly call themselves teachers of virtue or they might not. They might be professional teachers or they might not. Whatever—there must be people around who can and do teach virtue.

13) Perhaps the Sophists are teachers of virtue. No, the Sophists teach rhetoric and the other arts of persuasion, along with such things as household and business management. They are not concerned with the value of the ends to which the skills they teach are put.

14) Perhaps virtuous people are themselves the teachers of virtue, teaching informally by example and occasional explanations and pieces of advice. We acquire virtue through the example and wise words of our elders, just as they acquired it through the example and wise words of their elders.

15) But notice something strange: The sons of virtuous men are often not themselves virtuous. And occasionally we meet a virtuous man whose father and uncles are all rotters.

16) Virtuous men make sure that their sons are capable horsemen, hunters, and sailors, and that they know geometry and Homer, all very important things. Virtue is even more important than any of these things.

17) Since virtuous men make sure their sons acquire important skills and knowledge and virtue is the most important knowledge of all, virtuous men would certainly make sure their sons acquire virtue if they could.

18) But their sons don't acquire virtue, so the virtuous must not, after all, be teachers of virtue.

Consider Anytus, the scoundrel son of a virtuous man. Anytus's father, on the other hand, had only the example of an unimpressive father to follow and yet himself became a fine upstanding man. Or consider Alcibiades, raised in the house of Pericles himself.

19) There are no teachers of virtue, or so it would seem.

20) That there are no teachers of virtue threatens to contradict our thesis that virtue is knowledge. But what else could virtue be? Our argument for the hypothesis that virtue is knowledge appears sound, and we can think of no other hypothesis to investigate. Virtue is knowledge and yet there are no teachers of virtue—how can we resolve this paradox?

21) To know something is to be well justified in believing of some proposition that that proposition is true. That is, we know of a true proposition that that proposition is true when we are able to give an accurate account why or how that proposition is true.

Maybe we can discover a flaw in our argument that virtue is knowledge by considering more closely the concept of knowledge.

22) Suppose that while Glaucon knows that such-and-such is the quickest route to Larissa, Adiemantus merely believes truly that such-and-such is the quickest route to Larissa. Adiemantus, guided by his true belief, will arrive in Larissa just as quickly and surely as will Glaucon, who was guided by knowledge.

23) True belief, it seems, suffices for success no less than does knowledge.

24) So virtue need not be knowledge after all—it might merely be true belief.

25) Virtuous people might be virtuous not because they have knowledge of something, but rather simply because they have true beliefs about it. Though they have true beliefs, they lack knowledge, for they lack an account why or how their beliefs are true.

26) But in order to teach, one needs to have an account why or how what one is teaching is true. Otherwise, one's teaching will not take hold in one's student. For without an account, one cannot show the other that what one believes is true.

27) That virtuous people are virtuous out of mere true belief and not knowledge would explain well why virtuous men are unable to teach virtue even to their sons. They have no account to offer their students, no way to show to their students that their beliefs are true.

28) But, then, how have the virtuous acquired their virtue, if they were not taught it? They must have acquired it by accident. Through sheer luck they came to have correct beliefs about this most important of matters. This is incredible! Surely it is not by sheer luck that the virtuous are virtuous!

29) The advantage of knowledge over simple true belief is this: The person who believes truly but does not know can easily lose his true belief. He might misinterpret something as evidence against his belief. He might change his mind on the basis of the opinions of others. To know, though, is to have anchored one's true belief.

Glaucon, knowing the route to Larissa, will continue on the right path despite whatever hardships or contrary advice he might encounter; Adiemantus, though, might revise his true belief in response to hardship or to what others say and, so, fail to get to Larissa.

30) We should expect, then, since virtuous people are virtuous through true belief only and not through knowledge, that often they lose their virtue.

31) We do not find, though, that virtuous people lose their virtue easily. Indeed, the virtuous man remains virtuous through hardship and in the face of false opinion, even when a false opinion is the majority opinion.

32) We are, then, confronted by another puzzle: How do the virtuous manage to maintain their virtue through hardship and in the face of the majority when their virtue is simple true belief, not true belief anchored by an account?

33) The gods, we know, are necessarily virtuous. That implies that their true beliefs are anchored by an account. The knowledge, wisdom, or understanding of the gods encompasses virtue.

34) Perhaps, then, virtuous people are virtuous through inspiration. Their virtue is a gift from the gods. The gods have implanted in them true beliefs. The gods, being virtuous, would never take back a gift, and so they maintain in the virtuous the beliefs they have given them.

35) This hypothesis, that the virtuous are virtuous through being blessed by the gods with true

beliefs, explains well both the origin of virtue in people and the fact that virtuous people do not lose their virtue whatever happens to them.

36) We conclude, then, that virtue among people is true belief, true belief not acquired through teaching or anchored by an account but instilled and maintained in the virtuous by the gods.

37) Is our conclusion true? To know, we must work hard to understand a great many matters. We must come to know, for instance, whether virtue is one thing or many—whether, that is, justice, honesty, moderation, and courage are different things or instead different names or aspects of one thing. And, most of all, we need to know what virtue is. Virtue is knowledge— or, at least, is true belief—of what?