**Workshop Three:**

**Socratic Tactics in the *Meno —* Can We Learn to Be Good?**

**Out of the Cave : Education, Ancient and Modern**

**Pomona College — Spring 2021**

**time started: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**small group work: 1 hour & 45 mins**

**return by: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**(total workshop time: 2 hours & 40 minutes)**

**Part I: General Instructions & Introductions (10 minutes)**

For this workshop, you will be organized in a Zoom Breakout Room with a group of approximately four students. If you have any questions or concerns, please send a message via Zoom asking for help. I’ll join you as soon as possible.

Our schedule for today includes small group work, a seminar discussion, and two 10-minute breaks. Please note the start time of your small-group work and the time when we will reconvene.

Please begin today by checking in with one another and looking over the workshop. Appoint a timekeeper (you won’t need a scribe). Please do make notes of your responses to this workshop and watch the time: the last part of your small-group work will be important preparation for our reconvened discussion.

**PART II: Some Key Moments in the Dialogue(45 minutes)**

A. (15 minutes) Here is a reasonable account of Meno’s motivation at the very start of the dialogue. Meno is a stranger in town, a guest, and he is a great admirer, perhaps even a student, of the sophist, Gorgias. He seeks out the man he has heard is one of the most reputed sophists in Athens in order to see how he measures up to Gorgias. In order to make the comparison, he poses a typical “debater’s question” of the day, expecting Socrates to respond to it with a fancy speech: well crafted, persuasive, and eloquent. He will then be able to compare Socrates with Gorgias, and report the results home to his friends who have perhaps heard rumors of the Athenian, Socrates. The results will either enhance Gorgias’ reputation or Socrates’ reputation.

Read carefully the first few paragraphs of the *Meno*, (reproduced below), up to the place (71e) where Meno defines virtue.

MENO: Can you tell me, Socrates, can virtue be taught? Or is it not

teachable but the result of practice, or is it neither of these, but men possess it by nature or in some other way?

SOCRATES: Before now, Meno, Thessalians had a high reputation among the Greeks and were admired for their horsemanship and their wealth, but now, it seems to me, they are also admired for their wisdom, not least the fellow citizens of your friend Aristippus of Larissa. The responsibility for this reputation of yours lies with Gorgias, for when he came to your city he found that the leading Aleuadae, your lover Aristippus among them, loved him for his wisdom, and so did the other leading Thessalians.

In particular, he accustomed you to give a bold and grand answer to any question you may be asked, as experts are likely to do. Indeed, he himself was ready to answer any Greek who wished to question him, and every question was answered. But here in Athens, my dear Meno, the opposite is the case, as if there were a dearth of wisdom, and wisdom seems to have departed hence to go to you. If then you want to ask one of us that sort of question, everyone will laugh and say: "Good stranger, you must think me happy indeed if you think I know whether virtue can be taught or how it comes to be; I am so far from knowing whether virtue can be taught or not that I do not even have any knowledge of what virtue itself is.

I myself, Meno, am as poor as my fellow citizens in this matter, and I

blame myself for my complete ignorance about virtue. If I do not know what something is, how could I know what qualities it possesses? Or do you think that someone who does not know at all who Meno is could know whether he is good-looking or rich or well-born, or the opposite of these? Do you think that is possible?

MENO: I do not; but, Socrates, do you really not know what virtue is? Are we to report this to the folk back home about you?

SOCRATES: Not only that, my friend, but also that, as I believe, I have never yet met anyone else who did know.

MENO: How so? Did you not meet Gorgias when he was here?

SOCRATES: I did.

MENO: Did you then not think that he knew?

SOCRATES: I do not altogether remember, Meno, so that I cannot tell you now what I thought then. Perhaps he does know; you know what he used to say, so you remind me of what he said. You tell me yourself, if you are willing, for surely you share his views.

MENO: I do.

SOCRATES: Let us leave Gorgias out of it, since he is not here. But Meno, by the gods, what do you yourself say that virtue is? Speak and do not begrudge us, so that I may have spoken a most unfortunate untruth when I said that I had never met anyone who knew, if you and Gorgias are shown to know.

MENO: It is not hard to tell you, Socrates. First, if you want the virtue

of a man, it is easy to say that a man's virtue consists of being able to

manage public affairs and in so doing to benefit his friends and harm his enemies and to be careful that no harm comes to himself; if you want the virtue of a woman, it is not difficult to describe: she must manage the home well, preserve its possessions, and be submissive to her husband; the virtue of a child, whether male or female, is different again, and so is that of an elderly man, if you want that, or if you want that of a free man or a slave. And there are very many other virtues, so that one is not at a loss to say what virtue is. There is virtue for every action and every age, for every task of ours and every one of us-and Socrates, the same is true for wickedness.

1. What has happened? How has Socrates responded to Meno’s straightforward request?
2. Find and describe three specific “ploys,” “moves,” or “tactics” that Socrates uses in order to turn the conversation in a direction (or toward a purpose) different from the one Meno had in mind.
3. At 71b, Socrates says, as an example, “Or do you think that someone who does not know at all who Meno is could know whether he is good-looking or rich or well-born…” Do you think this example was chosen at random? What might be the possible impact of Socrates’ choice of that particular example?

B. (10 mins.) Once Meno agrees to try to define virtue, he gives Socrates a list of virtues (71e). This list is basically a list of cultural values; it represents the common sense of the culture.

1. Why is Socrates not satisfied with a list (any list) for an answer?
2. How does the image of the swarm of bees (72a-b), (reproduced below), help Socrates get his objection across to Meno?

SOCRATES: I seem to be in great luck, Meno; while I am looking for one virtue, I have found you to have a whole swarm of them. But, Meno, to follow up the image of swarms, if I were asking you what is the nature of bees, and you said that they are many and of all kinds, what would you answer if I asked you: "Do you mean that they are many and varied and different from one another in so far as they are bees? Or are they no different in that regard, but in some other respect, in their beauty, for example, or their size or in some other such way?" Tell me, what would you answer if thus questioned?

1. Aside from the logical point Socrates is making, what else is suggested by a swarm of bees? What are the connotations (suggestive associations) of this image?

***Please take a 10-minute break now.***

C. (10 mins.) Socrates gets Meno to stick to his end of the deal and define virtue. Meno gives a poet’s answer (77b) and Socrates proceeds to show him, in a step-by-step fashion, the illogical consequences of his definition. The same thing happens after Meno changes his definition one or two more times (depending on how you count them). Socrates ends this sequence with a typical Socratic request: “Answer me again then from the beginning: what do you and your friend say that virtue is?” (79e) The work of inquiry is getting too hard for Meno and he wants to quit. First, he compares Socrates to a sting ray (“the broad torpedo fish” 80a) and then he presents as an objection to the inquiry, or to any inquiry: “How will you look for it Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is?” (80d). This is a crucial point in the dialogue, since Meno wants to quit, and, from Socrates’ point of view, they are still at the beginning.

1. What do you make of Socrates admission that he is like a sting ray — only if sting rays paralyze themselves too?
2. Socrates responds (at 80b) to Meno’s “accusing metaphor” by flirtatiously accusing Meno of flirting with *him*. What might be the effect of this tactic?

D. (10 mins.) The mini-dialogue within the Meno – between Socrates and the unnamed slave – has long been discussed by scholars as an iconic example of the Socratic method. The issue of slavery, which was an institution in ancient Athens, is generally ignored or glossed over. The exploitation of slaves (and women, who were not enfranchised citizens at Athens) allowed for the “great achievements” of the Athenians, from the building of the famed Acropolis to, arguably, the leisured practice of philosophy itself. How does the inclusion of the scene with the slave inform your understanding of Socrates’ method?

**PART III. Conclusions (30 min)**

1. (5 mins.) List 3 specific tactics (“ploys” or “moves”) that Socrates uses to try to get Meno to pursue a genuine intellectual inquiry.

2. (5 mins.) Considering these tactics as a whole, how would you characterize the “approach” Socrates is taking with Meno? Would you consider this approach a form of teaching?

3. (10 mins.) Socrates’ mode is sometimes considered a kind of seduction. Do you think the term “seduction” fits the process you have examined here or not? Explain.

4. (10 minutes) As we conclude this Workshop experience, let’s turn our focus to the form itself. In Finkel’s chapter, he presents Conceptual Workshops as a way to put the teacher’s thinking at the students’ disposal.

1. Is “thinking” what Socrates is teaching Meno — or Plato is teaching the reader — in the *Meno*?
2. Is the idea of teaching “thinking” similar to or different from what your classes have stated as their “learning outcomes” or “goals”?
3. What do you make of the aim of teaching thinking? Is this a valid aim of education? Why or why not?

5. (10 minutes) What struck you as interesting, important, or confusing about Finkel’s chapter on Conceptual Workshops? Please develop at least one question for discussion in our reconvened seminar.

**Please return to the main room and then take a 10-minute break. We will resume the workshop as a full seminar, after the break.**

**Part IV: Discussion (45 min)**

6. (15 minutes) First, let’s discuss your questions and thoughts (see III. 5) about Conceptual Workshops.

7. (30 mins.) The following questions could be discussed endlessly. To conclude our work today, we will discuss each for approximately 5 minutes. Please plan to participate and facilitate our large-group discussion in much the same way as you have in your small groups. Ideally, our conversation will be dialogic — not led exclusively by the faculty. So, be prepared to volunteer to be the timekeeper and to be engaged in our conversation not only by answering, but also by asking questions — including questions of your own, follow-ups to comments made by others, as well as the questions listed below.

1. What, if anything, did Meno learn from his conversation with Socrates?
2. Was there anything about **virtue** to be learned from the conversation as we find it in the text?
3. Do you think we can learn to be good?
4. Could anyone who behaved as Socrates does in this dialogue help you learn to become good?
5. Is “thinking” what Socrates is teaching Meno — or Plato is teaching the reader — in the *Meno*? (See III. 4. a)
6. And how might learning to \*think well\* connect to \*becoming good?\*